

## Ukrainian Studies Today – State of the Art in Switzerland

**Veranstalter:** Ukrainian Research in Switzerland (URIS), Universität Basel, Departement Geschichte

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**Bericht von:** Alexandra Wedl, Osteuropäische Geschichte, Universität Basel

The network Ukrainian Research in Switzerland (URIS) marked its three-year anniversary with a conference in Basel. Bringing together the URIS fellowship programme scholars and numerous Switzerland-based projects, the objective was to discuss ongoing research and future perspectives. The broad range of topics from scholars with different academic backgrounds illustrated the dynamics of the still young field of Ukraine research in Switzerland as well as its growing international relevance in recent years.

In his welcome address, F. BENJAMIN SCHENK (Basel) introduced the URIS initiative, which is based at the University of Basel. Though established only three years ago, URIS has been able to have an impact on a growing number of students and to create a network of international scholars. Schenk extended an especially warm welcome to all six URIS fellows and the members of the URIS scientific board, and expressed the hope that the ongoing interest shown by students participating in courses and Ukrainian language classes was a promising sign of Ukraine's increasing visibility on the mental maps of European scholarship.

The keynote lecture supplied ample inspiration for the conference discussions. YAROSLAV HRYTSAK (L'viv) characterised the field of Ukraine studies as still focused on the nation as the central category, and proposed challenging this paradigm. Reflecting on 2019 as the year of global mass protests (Chile, Hong Kong, Lebanon), he argued that Euromaidan should be placed in a comparative perspective, as the protests share many similar features. Ukraine as a laboratory of modern history can thus be taken as an example for global developments. He concluded with a call for a global history and a return to a *longue durée* perspective, encouraging

young researchers to explore microhistories and biographies as well as more structural and economical approaches. In order to reform Ukraine studies, new institutions and more international research networks with a multilingual background like URIS were needed.

The first panel focused on new interpretations of post-1991 developments and particularly on interpretations of statehood. VALERIYA KORABLYOVA (Giessen) proposed an alternative reading of post-Soviet developments in Ukraine, shifting the focus from elites and institutions to people's agency and their mindsets. She sees an „ocular democracy“ on the rise, a form of political spectatorship that became evident in the 2019 presidential elections, when people invested trust and hopes in the personality of a leader.

Turning the focus back to institutions, MYKHAILO MINAKOV (Basel) analysed the creation of „de facto states“ after the dissolution of the USSR. He believes that stable non-recognised states such as the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics are part of an „extreme periphery“, a class of states that has to use extreme measures for survival. Furthermore, these states can be viewed as examples of the spread of alternative models of state-building across Europe.

In his comment, Ulrich Schmid (St. Gallen) pointed out how both papers operate with competing definitions of states and suggested viewing states in an etymological sense as well, as „states of mind“. One example of how Ukraine is currently trying to reach this state of mind by communicative means is the New Year's speech by President Zelensky.

The politics of history present another means of nation-building, and the second panel was dedicated to mnemonic conflicts in contemporary Ukraine. GEORGY KASIANOV (Kyiv) analysed the recent decommunisation efforts in Ukraine. Unlike Central Eastern Europe and the Baltic states, Ukraine did not have a systematic, nationwide decommunisation process until the Crimea and Donbas crisis in 2015. There was, however, no public consensus on the renaming of thousands of streets, squares and cities and the destruction of communist monuments. Kasianov also reflected critically on

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the role of Ukrainian research institutions in following the reestablishment of national narratives, and he pointed to the growing number of historians who see the discipline as an analytical tool and not a tool of political power.

OKSANA MYSHLOVSKA (Bern) explored mnemonic conflicts from the perspective of veteran and victims' organisations that represent victims of Soviet repression. She argued that by delegitimising Soviet rule by describing it as occupation, these organisations created limited ground for debate and reconciliation between the former conflict parties. Early civil society thus reconstructed the conflicts of the past without taking the complexity of memories into account.

Bringing the discussion to a European level, Thomas Grob (Basel) questioned in his comment the extent to which complex mnemonic landscapes can be reflected by legal and political institutions that are less diverse.

As one of the main goals of URIS is to strengthen future Ukraine expertise in Switzerland, students of the University of Basel presented the findings from Ukraine-related seminars in the poster session following the conference. The session opened perspectives on new research topics and a broad range of source material, addressing the challenge that Ukraine studies are often dealing with a „moving target“.

The following day began with a panel on territorialisation, population transfers and foreign occupation. In her current research project, JULIA RICHERS (BERN) is attempting to write an entangled history of the Carpathians, a region that experienced more border changes in the 20th century than any other region in Europe. Using a biographical approach, her research indicates that boundaries among the polyethnic population ran across different markers than expected, pointing to the fact that the history of the region cannot be written in national or imperial terms.

Historiographical challenges were also addressed by STEPHAN RINDLIBACHER (Frankfurt/Oder), who explored historical reinterpretations of the transfer of Crimea in 1954. The notion that the transfer was a „gift“ by Khrushchev to Ukraine became a com-

monly held misconception in a highly politicised field. Identifying and deconstructing such misperceptions, Rindlibacher argued, was one key task of professional historians.

The following discussion and comment by Korine Amacher (Geneva) reflected on alternatives to national discourses for regions such as the Carpathians and Crimea that have undergone multiple territorial revisions. As both presentations illustrated, family history and the history of ports represent promising approaches.

The fourth panel on national identities shifted the focus to the question of rural versus urban space. CARMEN SCHEIDE (Bern) presented her research project on the country town of Kobelyaki in Central Ukraine, which she uses as a lens to view lifeworlds and entanglements in a longue durée perspective. She underlined the necessity of rural studies – also in regard to the large amount of available source material – and asked why the countryside still struggles to find its place in academia.

TREVOR ERLACHER (Chapel Hill) provided insight into his work on the literary journal *Ukrains'ka khata* and the political implications of anti-Ukrainophilism. As the culmination and most radical expression of modernist trends in Ukrainian literature prior to the First World War, *khatianstvo* subordinated society to the right of self-expression. While this „aesthetisation of politics“ shared fascist features, Erlacher pointed out the danger in judging the journal on the basis of the later radicalisation of its contributors.

In his comment, Harald Binder (L'viv) suggested that future research should try to connect rural and urban intellectuals and reflect critically on the fact that historians, as urban intellectuals, have an inherent affinity to the city.

Minorities and transnational entanglements in early Soviet Ukraine were the subject of the fifth panel. OLENA PALKO (London) explored how the minorities question in Soviet Ukraine was a case of controlled ethnic diversity. Her research on censuses in the 1920s shows how ambiguous national identities were statistically turned into minorities, often using religion to determine nationality.

IRINA MATIASH (Kyiv) provided insight into a particular chapter of Ukrainian-Swiss relations. Her research on the Ukrainian Diplomatic Mission in Switzerland 1917–1926 illustrates how Ukrainian diplomats were extremely active in public relations, trying to convince not only Switzerland, but also Western Europe of the merit of their national projects. Matiash underscored the necessity of a separate study of the documents held in Swiss archives in order to explore the topic further.

In her comment, Charlotte Henze (Basel) suggested that another future research perspective might be an exploration of the relationship to anti-Bolshevik/anti-Communist discourse in Switzerland during the Civil War.

The following poster exhibition on Ukrainian-Swiss contacts in the (post-) empire era, presented by OLEKSANDR PAGIRIA (Kyiv), turned the focus to Swiss emigration to Ukraine. Jointly designed by the Embassy of Switzerland in Ukraine and the Historical Society of Diplomatic and International Relations in Kyiv, the exhibition featured posters on subjects ranging from the Swiss „colonisation“ of Southern Ukraine in the 19th century to Kyiv becoming a hub for Swiss entrepreneurs. As the exhibition draws on ongoing research, Pagiria extended an invitation to historians and students from Swiss universities to contribute.

In the panel on historicising the Black Sea region, BORIS BELGE (Basel) presented his research project on the port of Odessa (1794–1866), in which he explores the interrelation between port infrastructure and trade practices. With particular reference to the enlarging of the harbour basin, Belge illustrated how Odessa was part of a global increase in trade volume and international expert debates on port construction, though there was no successful outcome. The port's multi-layered history thus opens a window onto regional, imperial and global history.

LILIJA BILOUSOVA (Odessa) focused on Swiss emigration to the Black Sea region, which represents a vivid chapter in the multinational history of Southern Ukraine. Small though the Swiss community was, diplomats, architects and entrepreneurs left their mark on the region, for example as founders of

breweries or cafés. Bilousova emphasised that the Odessa State Archive holds valuable resources for researching family histories and personal biographies in particular.

F. Benjamin Schenk noted in his comment that both papers supported Hrytsak's thesis that the national paradigm should be overcome, as the history of the Black Sea region is intertwined with migration processes and knowledge transfer across imperial borders.

The last panel was centred on Kiev/Kyiv as imagined city and political centre. KATERYNA DYSA (Kyiv) presented her research on travel guides and their portrayal of Kyiv at the end of the 19th century. Her analysis of two major guides of this emerging genre, Baedeker and Murrays', illustrated how Kiev transformed from a provincial town into a modern urban centre worth visiting. For Western tourists, however, Kiev remained a stopover rather than a final destination, unlike imperial centres such as St. Petersburg, Moscow and Warsaw.

FABIAN BAUMANN (Basel) raised the question of how Kiev's Ukrainophile milieu dealt with repressions under the Ems Ukaz and whether this moderate milieu already contained the seeds of the repolitisation of the Ukrainian question from 1905 onwards. His research illustrates how a look at Ukrainophile activists' personal and private lives can provide valuable insight, as they were forced to retreat from public into private space. While the Ems Ukaz prevented the movement's open politicisation, the use of domestic space paradoxically politicised cultural work.

Andreas Kappeler (Vienna) highlighted in his comment the problem of source bias, as, for example, only few women of the Ukrainophile milieu left memoirs.

F. Benjamin Schenk wrapped up the conference by giving an outlook on future perspectives of Ukrainian research in Switzerland. Building on the network the initiative has been able to create over the past three years, URIS plans to explore new directions in its next funding period until summer 2021. In order to strengthen a comparative and interdisciplinary approach, URIS wants to focus thematically on placing Ukraine in a trans-regional and European perspective and to encourage more fellowship applications by

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candidates from disciplines outside of history. Study trips, summer schools and language classes will continue to be an important part of the programme, bringing students into contact with Ukraine and strengthening the cooperation with Ukrainian partner organisations. Finally, URIS plans to further collaborate with partners in Switzerland by organising joint workshops and assisting other academic centres in Ukraine-related research. As the conference illustrated, Ukraine studies in Switzerland are a young and yet vibrant research field, with still much potential for new questions that go beyond the national paradigm.

#### **Conference overview:**

##### *Welcome Addresses*

F. Benjamin Schenk (Head of URIS); Artem Rybchenko (Ambassador of Ukraine, Bern); Thomas Grob (Vice President for Education, Basel University); Jérôme Hügli (Project Manager, State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation)

##### *Panel I: New Interpretations of Post-1991 Developments*

Chair: Sophia Polek (Basel)

Valeriya Korablyova (Giessen): Ukraine After 1991 Between Citizenry and Spectatorship. From Mass Protests to Ocular Democracy

Mykhailo Minakov (Basel): The Status of Post-Soviet Non-Recognised States in the World-System

Discussant: Ulrich Schmid (St. Gallen)

##### *Panel II: Politics of History and Mnemonic Conflicts in Contemporary Ukraine*

Chair: Rhea Rieben (Basel)

Georgy Kasianov (Kyiv): Decommunisation in Ukraine after 2014. Narratives, Actions, Outcomes

Oksana Myshlovska (Bern): Civil Society, Mnemonic Conflicts and Dealing with the Grievances and Traumas of the Past in Ukraine. The Case of Veteran and Victims' Organisations

Discussant: Thomas Grob (Basel)

##### *Students' Poster Presentation*

##### *Keynote Lecture*

Yaroslav Hrytsak (L'viv): Non-Euclidian Nation. What and How We Write About Ukraine

##### *Panel III: Territorialisation, Population Transfers and Foreign Occupation*

Chair: Alexis Hofmeister (Basel)

Julia Richers (Bern): Carpatho-Ukrainian Border Biographies Amidst Multiple Territorial Revisions, 1919–1946

Stephan Rindlisbacher (Frankfurt/Oder): Khrushchev's Gift? Commemorating the Transfer of Crimea from the Russian SFSR to the Ukrainian SSR in 1954

Discussant: Korine Amacher (Geneva)

##### *Panel IV: National Identities in the Ukrainian-Polish-Russian Triangle*

Chair: Alexandra Wedl (Basel)

Carmen Scheide (Bern): Lifeworlds and Entanglements in Central Ukraine in the 20th Century. A Research Perspective

Trevor Erlacher (Chapel Hill): Ukrain's'ka Khata and the Political Implications of Anti-Ukrainophilism

Discussant: Harald Binder (L'viv)

##### *Panel V: Minorities and Transnational Entanglements in Early Soviet Ukraine*

Chair: Anne Hasselmann (Basel)

Olena Palko (London): The Minorities Question in Soviet Ukraine. Controlled Ethnic Diversity in the 1920s

Irina Matiash (Kyiv): Ukrainian-Swiss Relations in 1917–1926. Institutional History and Personalities

Discussant: Charlotte Henze (Basel)

##### *Presentation of the Poster Exhibition*

Oleksandr Pagiria (Kyiv): Ukrainian-Swiss Contacts in the (Post-)Empire Era

##### *Panel VI: Historicising the Black Sea Region*

Chair: Henning Lautenschläger (Basel)

Boris Belge (Basel): Building Infrastructures,

Increasing Trade. Port Construction and Expansion in Odessa (1794–1866)

Liliia Bilousova (Odessa): The Swiss Communities of Odessa, Shabou and Zurichstal Through the Records of the State Archives of Odessa Region. Sources, Database, Publication

Discussant: F. Benjamin Schenk (Basel)

*Panel VII: Kiev/Kyiv – Imagined City and Political Centre*

Chair: Laura Ritter (Basel)

Kateryna Dysa (Kyiv): Not the Final Destination. Kyiv in Western Travel Literature of the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

Fabian Baumann (Basel): Niche Nationalism. Kiev's Ukrainophile Milieu Under the Ems Ukaz

Discussant: Andreas Kappeler (Vienna)

*URIS: Future Perspectives*

F. Benjamin Schenk (Basel)

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