

Kasianov, Georgiy; Ther, Philipp (Hrsg.): *A Laboratory of Transnational History. Ukraine and Recent Ukrainian Historiography*. Budapest: Central European University Press 2009. ISBN: 978-963-9776-43-2; 310 S.

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On the question as to whether Ukraine has a history, which Mark von Hagen discussed over 10 years ago in an article focusing on the absence of academic tradition of Ukrainian history in Northern America and Western Europe¹, this book presents a clear answer: yes, it does. Or, as von Hagen formulates in „Revisiting the Histories of Ukraine“, his contribution to this book: „If prior to Ukraine’s most recent independence in 1991 scholars involved in Ukrainian studies often regarded themselves as embattled or besieged [...], the fact of Ukraine’s existence is harder to deny today across a host of social-science and humanities disciplines“ (p. 41).

This book discusses and shows transnational approaches to Ukrainian history and presents a wide spectre of questions that are still to be researched. Scholars from Ukraine, Russia, North America and Western Europe attempt to give new impulses to the nationalizing historiography which is dominant in Ukraine today and which is mainly based on essentialisation and ethnocentrism and has served as a tool for the legitimization of the state since Ukrainian independence in 1991.

Essays in the first section of the book discuss national vs. transnational approaches to the history of Ukraine. Georgiy Kasianov focuses on national historiography in his essay „‘Nationalized’ History: Past Continuous, Present Perfect, Future...“. As he shows, national historiography is rooted in the mid-19th century and is linked to historians like Mykhailo Hrushevsky, one of the fathers of Ukrainian historiography and president of the Ukrainian People’s Republic (1918-20). This „first stage“ of national historiography lasted in Ukraine itself until the end of World War II and reemerged at the end of the 1980s. By the diaspora it was held over decades as a „cre-

do“ (p. 7). After Ukraine gained independence, diaspora historiography was transferred back to Ukraine and came to have „considerable influence“ (p. 13) on Ukrainian historians. Today’s Ukrainian national historiography is „supported morally, politically, and materially by the state“ (p. 11).

Andreas Kappeler argues in his essay „From an Ethnonational to a Multiethnic to a Transnational Ukrainian History“ that there are „competing or even exclusive national narratives and collective memories pertaining to the history of Ukraine“ (p. 54). As an example for contradictory interpretations of the past he gives quotations from Israeli, Soviet, Ukrainian, German and émigré Canadian encyclopedias about the Cossack hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky. The battle of Pereiaslav in 1648 was, from the Ukrainian perspective a „glorious liberation of the Orthodox from the rule of the Polish Catholic nobility“, but for Eastern European Jews „their first great persecution“ (p. 52). From Russian and Soviet perspectives Khmelnytsky has „a positive connotation as initiator[...] of the so-called reunion of Ukraine with Russia“ (p. 53). Kappeler says that „divided memory is a reality in today’s Ukraine“ and that „there seems to be no common history of Ukraine“ (p. 56). Referring to von Hagen, he says that the question as to what should be considered Ukrainian history, still „remains open“ (p. 56). Should it be the national Ukrainian narrative, or the history of the multiethnic population of the whole territory from ancient times on?

In addition to von Hagen and Kappeler, Philipp Ther also stresses in „The Transnational Paradigm of Historiography and Its Potential for Ukrainian History“ the importance of multiethnicity and multiconfessionality for Ukrainian history. He speaks of a „simultaneous existence of several national and religious movements and empires or, to be even more general, cultures and societies“ (p. 82), to which an adequate approach would be through a transnational perspective. The term transnational means for him a „new paradigm [that] concentrates on relations between cultures, societies, or groups of societies and deliberately transcends the boundaries of one cul-

¹Mark von Hagen, Does Ukraine Have a History?, in: *Slavic Review* 54 (1995) 3, pp. 658-673.

ture or coun-try“ (p. 86). The term should be understood in its potential to „demonstrate the connectedness and hybridity of European cultures“. Ther also gives a short outline of comparative history, transfer history and histoire croisée and thereby lays out approaches that could be extremely use-ful for students that want to work in the field of Ukrainian transnational history.

The second part of the book contains empirical research on a broad spectrum of central topics. Alexei Miller and Oksana Ostapchuk’s essay is about the Latin and Cyrillic alphabets that were used for Ukrainian language and that result from Ukraine being at the junction of Slavia Latina and Slavia Orthodoxa. The authors describe the politicization of the alphabet in the Habsburg Monarchy and the Russian Empire and also give insights into the „language building“ of the Ukrainian SSR that, among other things, created a single orthography. John-Paul Himka’s essay deals with the North American Ukrainian diaspora’s collective memory of World War II and contains an exemplary examination of a recent documentary film on this subject. Himka shows how a victimization-narrative is being constructed and that Ukrainian collaboration in mass murders against Jews is not mentioned, and calls for „reexamination“. Other essays are about the names of Ukrainian territories (Natalia Yakovenko), narratives about Ukrainian history in the early 19th century (Oleksiy Tolochko), nationalism as well as nationalism studies in the case of contemporary Ukraine (Yaroslav Hrytsak), and the historical juncture when empires had to deal with nationalism and the beginning of modern nation-building (Roman Szporluk).

In summary, this is a commendable, inspiring book that every historian working on Ukraine should consider. In addition, it should serve as a valuable stimulus for anyone dealing with Ukraine in other fields of the humanities. Also, readers of the non-scientific community who want to inform themselves thoroughly about Ukrainian history will find this book extremely helpful. The editors call the book an „alternative reader of Ukrainian history“ (p. 4), but it goes further than that: it presents a whole array of interesting topics that must be understood as an invitati-

on to work on these fields. Several repetitions of themes in different essays, such as „the ‘return’ of the diasporic historiography after 1991“ do not reduce the value of this book.

Yaroslav Hrytsak gives a quite pictorial answer to the question of Ukraine’s existence and history. He quotes the words of a former British ambassador in Kyiv concerning the „bumblebee paradox“: „an engineer of aerodynamics will tell you that a bumblebee cannot fly, but it does“; Hrytsak then adds, concerning the obvious failure of some theories of nationalism in the case of Ukraine: „If, according to some theories, Ukraine cannot and should not exist, yet in fact it can and does, then the ‘bumblebee’ probably is not to blame. Evidently, there is something wrong with the laws of aerodynamics“ (p. 230).

Jenny Marietta Alwart über Kasianov, Georgiy; Ther, Philipp (Hrsg.): *A Laboratory of Transnational History. Ukraine and Recent Ukrainian Historiography*. Budapest 2009, in: H-Soz-Kult 11.09.2009.