Ukraine: Between Empires and National Self-Determination

Olena Palko, in conversation with Manuel Férez Gil

Olena Palko is Assistant Professor at the University of Basel. She was awarded her Ph.D. from the University of East Anglia in 2017 and previously held a position of the Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at Birkbeck College, University of London. Her first book, Making Ukraine Soviet. Literature and Cultural Politics under Lenin and Stalin (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020) was awarded the Prize for the Best Book in the field of Ukrainian history, politics, language, literature and culture (2019–20) from the American Association for Ukrainian Studies. She is also a co-editor of an edited collection, Making Ukraine: Negotiating, Contesting, and Drawing Borders in Twentieth Century (McGill Queens University Press, 2022). Her research interests lie in the field of early Soviet cultural history and the interwar history of Eastern Europe.

Manuel Ferez: *Thank you so much for talking to us. Please tell us a little about yourself and your academic and professional career.*

Olena Palko: I was born in Ukraine, in the small town of Shepetivka, which up until 1939 was situated right on the Polish-Soviet border. I studied philosophy and political sciences at the Kyiv National Taras Shevchenko University, before embarking on a PhD programme in history at the University of East Anglia in Norwich. In 2018, I started my post-doctoral research at the Department of History, Classis and Archaeology at Birkbeck College, University of London, and a junior research fellow at the Polish Institute of Advanced Studies in Warsaw. My research was a comparative study of the Polish minority in Ukraine and the Ukrainian minority in Poland during the interwar period. Aside from this, I have been working on several projects examining Soviet Ukrainian culture, the formation of modern Ukraine's territorial borders, and the moderni-

sation of Soviet Union. Most of my studies, to date, have focused on these developments during the 1920s and 1930s.

M.F.: *Much has been said in recent weeks about Ukraine, its history and national identity. Beyond the political and ideological narratives, could you suggest a more scholarly reference from which to think about Ukraine and Ukrainian identity?*

O.P.: Much of what is being said about Ukraine is informed by current affairs. Observers try to understand the events of 2014, when Ukrainians took to the streets protesting the reversal of the country's foreign policy trajectory under the then President Viktor Yanukovych. Those protests, known as Euromaidan, forced Yanukovych to flee the country and a new pro-Ukrainian government was formed. Unfortunately, such developments did not satisfy Russia, since its government feared Kyiv would slip out of Moscow's sphere of influence. Russia used the momentum of the disruption in Kyiv and other Ukrainian cities to seize Crimea and occupy the eastern parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions. To understand these events, many foreign observers fell back on easy explanations of their actually being 'two Ukraines', based on a linguistic and regional divide, arguing that Russian-speakers in Ukraine's east and south are uniformly pro-Russia, while Ukrainian-speakers in Ukraine's west are uniformly pro-European.

Nonetheless, the subsequent political crisis and the on-going Russo-Ukrainian War have shown only too well that this simplistic binary of east verses west does not help us understand contemporary events, or Ukraine's history more generally. Despite its ethnic and cultural heterogeneity, Ukraine is united. As I write, the territories around Kyiv, Kharkiv, Sumy, Chernihiv, and the cities on the Black Sea coast are being bombed by Russian planes, even though these areas are predominantly Russian speaking. The intensity of resistance to the Russian invasion proves that the Ukrainian people, regardless of everyday language, are united in their desire for a strong, free, and democratic Ukraine. The Russian invasion will help solidify the Ukrainian nation even further leading to a new and inclusive understanding of national identity.

I would also like to mention that the Ukrainian lands have always been a meeting point of different cultures, traditions and religions. It is this ethnic, and religious heterogeneity which, I would claim, has served as the true foundation of the country's national identity. While ethnic Ukrainians constitute a majority of the population, numerous other communities, including Rus-

sians, Crimean Tatars, Jews, Poles, Hungarians, and Greeks, also call Ukraine their home. The Ukrainian lands also had a long history of division between three major continental empires – Imperial Russia, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire, each of which left its own legacy on Ukraine and its people. Many prominent and world-renown cultural figures were also born on the territories which now form modern Ukraine such as the writer Joseph Roth, the poet Paul Celane, and the painter Bruno Schulz. These names became part of the world cultural heritage, and Ukraine faces an equally important task of incorporating them into its national narrative too. That said, to understand Ukraine and its national identity, one ultimately has to refrain from the language of essentialist nationalism, which has informed and conditioned Ukrainian studies worldwide for decades.

M.F.: *Some essentialist narratives claim that, in reality, Ukrainians, Russians and Belarusians belong to the same people. What are these narratives corresponding to and how have they affected and conditioned the historical evolution of the Ukrainian state?*

O.P.: I am not sure what you mean by "essentialist narratives". The idea of a Great-Russian nation, to which Ukrainians, Russians, and Belarusians belong is a modern construct of Russian ideologists. It was first introduced by the official Russian historian Nikolai Karamzin. In his twelve-volume *History of the Russian State*, published between 1781 and 1826, Karamzin developed an argument according to which the history of Russia and Ukraine was that of one "slavic-Russian" people. This understanding of the Great-Russian nation as comprising three different peoples laid the foundation for Russia's unjustified claim over the Ukrainian past, its language and culture, and most recently, its future.

Ever since, Russian propaganda has insisted on this idea of "the same nation". The language argument is used to substantiate those claims. Under the Russian Empire, the Ukrainian language was defined as "a Little Russian vernacular". But even in such a diminished state, the tsarist authorities did everything they could to further limit the use of Ukrainian in the public sphere. For instance, the *Valuev Circular* of 1863 placed limits on Ukrainian-language publications, stating that "no separate Little Russian language ever existed, does not exist, and could not exist." The circular also banned the publication of all literature directed at the common people, while restricting its usage to fiction primarily. More restrictions were introduced under the 1876 *Ems Circular*, which reduced the use of the Ukrainian language to the private setting only. This decree remained in force until the first Russian Revolution of 1905. However, even

with the consolidation of Soviet rule in Ukraine, this state desire to assimilate and Russify the Ukrainian peoples remained. Apart from a short period in the 1920s, known as *korenizatsiia* (or indigenization), which is the focus of my 2021 book *Making Ukraine Soviet. Literature and Cultural Policies under Lenin and Stalin*, the tendency of the Soviet government was to enforce the dominance of the Russian language while seeking to diminish the status of Ukrainian. So, when the Russian president Vladimir Putin in 2022 says that no Ukrainian nation exists, he is simply reviving this earlier assimilationist imperial rhetoric.

M.F.: *The extent of a nation and the territory it claims as its homeland sometimes do not coincide. This often gives rise to debates about the limits of both nation and homeland. In the Ukrainian case, what would be its "borders"? Where do they connect and disconnect "the Ukrainian" with "the Russian"?*

O.P.: The process of constructing the Ukrainian nation and defining the geographical extend of its territory started in the mid-19th century, when ethnographers, historians, as well as statisticians and demographers began searching for specific characteristics to define "the Ukrainian nation" that they believed had been split between the two, or even three regional empires. That said, the first "Ethnographic map of Little Russia," dating back to 1862, demarcated a continuous territory populated by "Little Russians", which extended across the Habsburg, Romanov, and Ottoman empires. The ethnographic principle, which emphasizes commonality of language and its use in everyday life, allowed Ukrainian ethnographers and political geographers to lay claims for the vast territories often populated by ethnically ambiguous communities located in these border regions, who could not clearly define their ethnic belonging.

Let me give you an example. In 1871, the linguist Kostiantyn Mykhalchuk prepared a map outlining "the South-Russian dialects and vernaculars", which is widely regarded as the first ethnographic map to provide a scientific basis for the Ukrainian national space. At around the same time, in 1903, a linguist from Saint Petersburg Imperial University called Yefim Karskiy, created the *Ethnographic Map of the Belarusian People*, illustrating the area where the Belarusian language was spoken. If we compare these two ethnographic maps, we will see a significant overlap in the region of Polissia. In such a situation where identities were fluid, and no codified languages existed, it was up to these linguists and ethnographers to establish categories and define the ethnic belonging of heterogeneous and mixed local communities. With the demise of the

Russian Empire and the rise of national movements across its former western provinces, these two maps respectively laid the foundations for the future territorial claims of the Ukrainian and Belarusian People's Republics. The resultant Ukrainian-Belarusian border was officially agreed upon in 1919 by representatives of these two republics. As with most borderlines either in Eastern or Western Europe, this was always based on compromise.

If we turn our attention to the process of defining the Russo-Ukrainian border, a similar conflict of interest can be observed. The Ukrainian national government formed in March 1917 laid claim to the territories of Soviet Russia historically populated by Ukrainians, such as the Kuban, Voronezh, and Kursk provinces. If you consult the above-mentioned ethnographic maps of Ukraine, those areas were presented as part of the Ukrainian nation. It should also be noted that the Soviet Ukrainian government in Kharkiv, formed in 1919, made use of the same ethnographic considerations in order to appeal for these areas to be incorporated into Soviet Ukraine. While Soviet propaganda equally endorsed ethnographic knowledge and used it as a principle for its administrative reforms, the central Soviet government in Moscow was driven first by economic concerns, and the desire to maximise access to natural resources. The border negotiations between the Ukrainian and Russian governments lasted until 1929 with only minor alterations on both sides agreed.

As for the contemporary Russo-Ukrainian border, the demarcation line is based on the agreement on the Ukrainian-Russian state border, signed between Ukraine and the Russian Federation on January 28, 2003. It should be noted, however, that up until 2014, Ukraine's northern and eastern boundaries only existed on paper, hence the relative ease with which Russia could penetrate and annex parts of the country in 2014.

M.F.: *Along with Constantin Ardeleanu, you have also co-edited a volume of essay entitled "Making Ukraine. Negotiating, Contesting, and Drawing the Borders in the Twentieth Century". In the book, the various contributing authors re-examine Ukraine's territorial definitions and physical borders. Tell more about this project and how it helps us better understand the current crisis.*

O.P.: Ukraine has land border with seven countries, four of which (Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania) are members of the European Union. While Ukraine's border with three former Soviet republics (Russia, Belarus and Moldova) was a result of internal party negotiations during the 1920s, its western border came into existence in the aftermath of the Second World War

as a result of various diplomatic agreements among the then Great Powers. Since 1991, however, the borders of independent Ukraine have been confirmed by interstate agreements signed by Ukraine with each of its neighbours.

However, the illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and Russia's support for separatist groups in Donetsk and Luhansk has raised questions regarding the presumed longevity of these political borders. Such events showed that, like with the late-1930s, state boundaries are by no means primordial or fixed. It also led to the realization that even in a globalized age, where freedom of movement and mobility have become almost the norm, the unguardedness of state borders could become detrimental to a country's territorial integrity and national security.

Since 2014, Ukraine has fallen under the spotlight of Western media and scholarship. However, no comprehensive account of the processes of Ukrainian border-making across time and space existed up to that point. That was why Constantin and I invited various internationally renowned scholars from eleven countries, representing different academic traditions and disciplines, to provide specialized accounts on the history of Ukraine's border formation and offer detailed analysis on the processes of negotiation, delineation, and contestation that shaped the country's political boundaries during the past century.

The essays featured in this volume consider how, when, and under what conditions the borders that historically define the country of Ukraine were agreed upon. They cover a diverse set of (trans)national contexts, focusing mostly on, but not limited to, the critical period of 1917 to 1954 and are organized around three main themes. Section one comprises four essays investigating the impact of various peace treaties that resulted in the redrafting of Ukraine's borders: the Brest-Litovsk Peace Treaty of 1918, signed between the Ukrainian People's Republic and the Central Powers; the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, where the Ukrainian delegation presented their case for international recognition; the Polish-Soviet agreements of the Riga Peace Treaty of 1921; and the "Big Three Agreements", which were mostly reached towards the end of the Second World War. Section two examines the processes of border delineation between the western Soviet republics of Belarus, Russia, and Moldova, and has particular relevance to the situation currently facing present-day Ukraine. This includes the contentious issue of Crimea, as well as the various 'frozen' post-Soviet territorial disputes, particularly in the case of Moldova. Finally, section three investigates the inter-state contestations behind the formation of the western Ukrainian border, discussing the de-

marcation of Ukraine's boundaries with Poland and Romania, alongside the territorial delineation of the Transcarpathian region in the south-west.

While this volume provides invaluable insight into the process of border formation, it also suggests that conflict with Russia should not be seen as inevitable. In fact, the formation of each and every aspect of Ukraine's border occurred in a very similar context in which those tasked with demarcation had to contend with areas populated by ethnically and linguistically mixed communities. Hence, in order to understand the current war, we need to look more closely at Russia, rather than Ukraine. Russia's invasion reflects deeply rooted imperialistic tendencies within the Russia society which can affect every state and people that happened to be part of the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union.

M.F.: *The Soviet era and the transition to independence during the 1990s left dangerous legacies and resulted in debates about the territorial limits of some nations. How was Ukraine actually established during early Soviet times, including the incorporation of Crimea, Donbass, and Luhansk, and what sorts of obstacles has it had to face when trying to integrate these often culturally disparate and politically disputed regions as an independent country?*

O.P.: The Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic was established in 1919 and was a founding member of the Soviet Union in 1922. The decision to form a separate soviet republic was, however, a necessary compromise on the Bolshevik's part. If we look at Bolshevik propaganda during the Russian Civil War of 1917 to 1923, there is clear evidence to suggest that the Bolshevik wished to control all the territories of the former Russian Empire. Nevertheless, in the context of the civil war in Ukraine that lasted incessantly from 1917 and 1921, the Bolsheviks in Russia needed to incorporate a prevalent national discourse into their agenda and offer a viable alternative to the Ukrainian People's Republic, which proclaimed itself an independent state in November 1918.

There were also various foreign policy considerations for forming a separate Soviet Ukraine. Since late 1917, the weakened Russian government had been seeking separate peace negotiations with Imperial Germany and the other Central Powers in order to extrapolate Russia from its ongoing participation in the First World War. This was achieved in early March 1918 when the Bolshevik government signed a separate peace treaty in Brest-Litovsk. Within this agreement, Russia had pledged to respect the Ukrainian People's Republic, which in turn had already been recognized as an independent state

by the Central Powers. However, a puppet Soviet government in Ukraine could still engage in open war with the People's Republic without breaking any international agreements.

Although declared as an independent Soviet republic, the status of Soviet Ukraine was significantly undermined by the fact that the Communist Party of Ukraine's executive had acknowledged the authority of Moscow's leadership. In addition, the authority of the Ukrainian Soviet government was significantly limited. Indeed for "defence purposes", the most important ministries, or commissariats, in Soviet Ukraine, Belarus, as well Russia were unified and jointly controlled from Moscow. These included the ministries of war, national economy, railways, finance, and labor.

The regions of Luhansk and Donetsk were (and are) an integral part of Soviet Ukraine. Crimea, by contrast, was only transferred to Soviet Ukraine in 1954. Luhansk and Donetsk are also predominantly Russian speaking, while Crimea has, in addition, a mostly ethnic Russian population. The Russian character of these regions is itself an imperial legacy. Since the time of the tsars, Russian was the *lingua franca* of the cities, while the surrounding countryside was mostly Ukrainian speaking. This state of affairs was reinforced during Soviet times, when the regime encouraged migration between the different republics in order to limit the potential growth of Ukrainian nationalism with many Russians coming to live in Ukraine, and vice versa.

Let me give you an example of how this migration affected Crimea. Before the Second World War, 25 per cent of its population were Crimean Tatars, 10 per cent were Ukrainians, and 40 per cent were Russians. In 1944, almost 200,000 Crimean Tatars were deported from the peninsula, having been accused of collaboration with Nazi Germany during the Axis invasion of the Soviet Union. Instead, the Moscow authorities initiated the forced relocation of entire collective farms to Crimea from other regions of Soviet Ukraine and Russia. As a result, the ethnic composition of Crimea's population changed drastically. By 1959, the proportion of Russians accounted for 71 per cent of the population, with Ukrainians now comprising 22 per cent.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, people in all regions, regardless of their everyday language, overwhelmingly supported the independence of Ukraine. In Luhansk and Donetsk some 84 per cent of voters were recorded as having answered 'yes' to the question of whether they backed independence. Even in Crimea, where opposition was notably higher than the national average, support still stood at 54 per cent.

The reasons for the relative ease with which Russia was able to annexe Crimea can be found in the dominant role Russians have continued to play on the peninsula since 1991. Even after independence, there were still hardly any Ukrainian-language schools, while Ukrainian and expression of Ukrainian culture were almost completely absent from the public sphere. It is, therefore, unsurprising that the majority of people living on the peninsula have never felt part of Ukraine, did not feel engaged in Ukrainian national politics, and saw themselves as being ignored or viewed with contempt by successive Kyiv governments. Indeed, the most resolute support for Kyiv was observed among the Crimean Tatars, who had started to return after 1989. One must also look for economic and social reasons to explain the events in Ukraine's east. Much of the support for separatist militia groups came from people hoping that the areas in which they lived would also eventually become part of Russia, where pensions and other social benefits were believed to be higher than in Ukraine.

M.F.: *The Caucasus have also experienced Russian-led conflicts in Georgia's Abkhazia, Ossetia, and Adzharia provinces, as well as Moscow's ongoing involvement in Armenia and Azerbaijan's ongoing dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh. Additionally, besides Ukraine, several countries in Central Asia, most recently Kazakhstan, have been targeted by Vladimir Putin's foreign (and to some extent, domestic) policy. Tell us about these processes and conflicts and how you see them progressing in the future.*

O.P.: There are three equally important processes that inform Russia's regional foreign policy. The first one I would define as "war scare". Russia's propaganda machine hinges on the dichotomy of Russia versus the West (read, the United States). In this view, the US (and by extension NATO) poses a direct threat to Russia's sovereignty and integrity. To withstand this perceived challenge, Russia needs to continuously increase its military capacity. At the same time, most of the former Soviet republics cannot be permitted to join NATO since it would put Russia's security at immediate risk. Russia had little to say when the Baltic states, Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia, became members of NATO and the European Union. Nonetheless, there could be no doubt that Moscow would have remained silent had any other post-Soviet republics initiate conversations with Western partners.

Russia's disagreements with Ukraine's foreign policy always evolved around the latter's potential membership of NATO. For instance, Ukraine was promised an opportunity to join the organization back in 2008, but any such plans were shelved following the 2010 presidential elections, in which

the pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovych became president. Since 2014, Ukraine has restated its desire to join both NATO and the EU and even added these aspirations as clauses to its amended constitution. In Moscow's eyes, even the mere intention of the Ukrainian government seeking to join NATO in the distant future is deemed unacceptable since it would likely lead to the establishment of Alliance military bases on Russia's borders, as well as the loss of its former satellite. Hence, one of Putin's demands for bringing the current war to and end is a rewriting of the Ukrainian constitution and for Ukraine to declare itself fully neutral.

This scenario would be very similar to one enacted in Georgia in 2008, following Russia's military invasion, that resulted in the proclamation of the breakaway republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. By creating such destabilising enclaves, either in Georgia or Ukraine, Russia makes it impossible for these governments to even begin the procedure for NATO accession.

The second process underpinning Russia's foreign policy I would define as the "gendarme complex". This articulates Russia's desire to remain a regional leader and guarantor of security for the entire post-Soviet space. Such a consideration becomes most obvious when we speak of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan around Nagorno-Karabakh. Even in light of the current war in Ukraine, Armenia did not defy its long-standing Russian ally since it continues to provide military support to the Armenian government against Azerbaijan. In exchange for these security guarantees, Armenia must continue to allow for an extended Russian military presence within its own borders.

The third premise can be described as the "Crimea effect". The origins of Putin's regime can be found in the successful reinvasion of Chechnya in 1999, launched when he only recently become prime minister and was still a relatively unknown figure in Russian politics. Since then, there has existed a clear corelation between successful military interventions and the rise of public support for the Russian president. Popular support for Putin in Russia after the 2014 invasion and annexation of Crimea, for example, increased from 60 per cent to 80 per cent. One can assume that Putin expected the same to happen after he signed off on the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. While the occupation of Crimea happened "with no blood spilled", the latest fully-fledged invasion has already cost Russia some 12.000 casualties. All efforts are made to hide those numbers from the Russian population, including a nationwide ban on Facebook, Twitter, and other foreign-owned social media channels. Regardless of the number of casualties, it is telling that, according to official pollsters,

about 70 per cent of Russians still approve of the so-called "special military operation" in Ukraine, at the time of recording.

As for the future, everything of course depends on the outcome of the war in Ukraine. Already now we see a split among the former Soviet republic, with some providing Russia with open or tacit support, like Belarus and Armenia, while others, such as Kazakhstan, are attempting to mediate in order to end the war. The weaker Russia becomes as a result of this conflict, the more sovereignty each and every post-Soviet republic will enjoy in defining its foreign and internal affairs. Russia losing the war with Ukraine will ultimately represent the final nail in the coffin of its ambitions to recreate the Soviet Union, or even the Russian Empire. This collapse of its imperialist policies will provide unique opportunities for its neighbours to develop new political, economic, and military alliances, ensuring a greater security in the region by allowing each country an equal footing.

M.F.: *Finally, how far can Ukrainian nationalism be elastic and integrative? Ukraine is a country with significant ethnic diversity but also with strong Slavic (and even racist) tendencies. Is a more inclusive Ukrainian nationalism possible or are we heading towards a more essentialist and marginalizing one of differences?*

O.P.: Western views on Ukrainian nationalism originate in Russian propaganda. Of course, there is a radical far-right element, but this also exists in Spain, Germany, or indeed in Russia. Their influence on the political processes in Ukraine is marginal, however. Since 2014, no ultranationalist political party has achieved representation in the Ukrainian parliament. Moreover, Ukraine is a country where almost half of the population speaks Ukrainian, while the other half speaks Russian. Yet, in 2018, 73 per cent of Ukraine's population elected Volodymyr Zelensky, a Russian speaker of Jewish origin, as their president. How much more elastic and integrative can Ukrainian nationalism be?

It has become something of a norm to equate Ukrainians with nationalists, either in political or even in academic discourse with scholars who study and publish on Ukraine having to declare their orientation in order to not to be branded as apologists for "nationalism" and so on. Hardly any other scholarly community faces such a burden. Every time one poses a question on the prevalence of nationalistic discourse they play into Russia's hands.

It is in Russia's interest to call Ukraine "a fascist" state (their post 2014 rhetoric) or declare their aim being to "de-Nazify" the country (a new term

introduced in 2022). This is what feeds Russian propaganda. Instead, the post-Maidan political crisis and the on-going war with the Russian Federation has resulted in unifying Ukrainians regardless of language or ethnic origin. In fact, Ukraine is now witnessing the formation of a strong civic (rather than ethnic) identity, whereby loyalty to the state and its Western orientation brings more and more people together. So, it is high time to start seeing beyond the post-Cold War cliches and create a new narrative for Ukraine, its history, and its people.

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