

# Integrating Scholarship on Ukraine into Classroom Syllabi

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In her keynote address on April 8, 2022, at the British Association for Slavonic and East European Studies (BASEES) conference, Dr. Olesya Khromeychuk – noted historian of Ukraine – asked those in attendance to consider where Ukraine was on their mental maps. The surprisingly difficult question she posed was a reminder about the chronic lack of visibility of Europe’s largest country and its 40 million citizens. The talk was more than just an encouragement to know and learn about Ukraine, it was an academic call to arms that tasked Western academics with confronting their own biases toward Ukrainian history, language, and culture. The continued risk of neglecting Ukraine, she warned, was that “If Ukraine does not exist on these mental maps, its existence on the actual map of the world will continue to be at risk.”<sup>1</sup>

The threat of erasing Ukraine from maps, both mental and literal, became real once again on February 24, 2022, when Russia renewed its years-long war against Ukraine by dropping bombs and launching ground attacks across the country. The war has highlighted the crisis of Ukraine’s representation in college and university classrooms in the West, causing many academics to reconsider what they know about Ukraine and how they teach about the country – if they teach about it at all. For too long, Western academia put Ukraine on the periphery, preferring to engage with histories of Moscow instead of Kyiv. In language departments, Russian language courses are privileged over Ukrainian ones. And “great” Russian writers like Dostoevsky and Tolstoy continue to be taught while Franko and Shevchenko remain shelved.

As we look ahead to the next academic year and begin to construct syllabi, we need to ask ourselves, “Can Ukraine speak?” This question borrows from the thinking of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who asked what powers and voice colonial populations have under the foot of empires and imperial rule. In many ways, Ukraine has been treated as a colony of Russia throughout its history. The

late historian Tony Judt wrote in his monumental tome *Postwar* that “For much of its history as a Soviet republic, Ukraine was treated as an internal colony.”<sup>2</sup> Today, Ukraine remains free and independent, even as it fights against Russian colonial ambitions and Vladimir Putin’s dictatorial efforts to exert control over its land.

What is the responsibility of instructors and professors in all of this? Simply put, we need to let Ukraine speak.

The colonial privileging of Russia is a problem that the academy in the West has been slow to acknowledge. Many historians of the Soviet Union, for example, built careers around being “Russianists” despite the geographical makeup of the Soviet Union consisting of fifteen different republics. Some have started to interrogate this tendency. Dr. Lewis Siegelbaum’s recent essay on his career as a Russian historian, “Bumping Up Against Ukraine as a Historian of Russia,” is one example. Despite Siegelbaum’s best intentions, scholars of Ukraine have read his piece against the grain, noting that it standardizes a belated treatment of Ukraine. The piece unintentionally forefronts the problem of non-Ukrainians suddenly becoming “experts” on a country that others have studied for their entire careers. Historians of Ukraine know all too well that it has been, in fact, them who have been “bumping up against Russia” for much of their careers. A determined group of scholars around the world have long advocated for the importance of Ukrainian studies. This essay introduces scholarship by experts on Ukraine to college and university instructors who are not Ukraine specialists but seek to more fully include Ukraine in various courses. This article offers suggestions for integrating scholarship about Ukraine into your syllabi for the coming year. By including works on Ukraine, you will help elevate knowledge about the country in your classrooms and become an active participant in helping students put Ukraine on their mental maps.

## Where to Begin? Putting Ukraine on Students’ Mental Maps

Regardless of what subject you are teaching, I suggest beginning any discussion of Ukraine with Olesya Khromeychuk’s article “Where is Ukraine? How a western outlook perpetuates myths about Europe’s largest country.” This piece is adapted from Khromeychuk’s keynote lecture at the 2022 BASEES conference.<sup>3</sup> This reading lends itself to reflective discussions with students about their perceptions and understanding of Ukraine. This reading could facilitate an in-class icebreaker activity or be used for a take home assignment in which

students are given time to write a short reflection about how they understand Ukraine and where they see it physically in the world. The reading would also pair nicely with a quick map exercise where students are handed a blank map of Europe and asked to mark all those countries that they think are part of Europe, leading to a discussion about what “counts” as Europe and what does not. Map exercises on the first day of class can be an effective way to challenge students’ understanding of geography and to acquaint them with areas and countries that they will encounter later in the semester.

If you’re digitally inclined, I suggest using the *MAPA: Digital Atlas of Ukraine* tool from the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute.<sup>4</sup> The interactive and multi-layered map can be configured by users to address themes of history, language, culture, population, religion, and statistics. This cross-disciplinary tool can be used in courses ranging from GIS and geography to digital humanities and allows students to work with Ukrainian topics in an interactive and engaging format.

For scholarship that expounds on the complex history of cartography and Ukrainian borders, look to Dr. Steven Seegel. His first book, *Ukraine under Western Eyes: The Bohdan and Neonila Krawciw Ucrainica Map Collection*, contains nearly 100 maps that will be useful for those interested in cartographic representations of Ukraine. His other two books, *Mapping Europe’s Borderlands: Russian Cartography in the Age of Empire* and *Map Men: Transnational Lives and Deaths of Geographers in the Making of East Central Europe* will also be of interest to those wishing to learn more about maps and the people behind them. Kate Brown’s *A Biography of No Place: From Ethnic Borderland to Soviet Heartland* is a must-read book about shifting borderlands and the people who inhabit them, and works well in lower and upper-level undergraduate classrooms.

## General Historical Overviews of Ukraine

In July 2021, Putin crafted a historically distorted and incorrect essay titled “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians” that asserted Russians and Ukrainians are one people.<sup>5</sup> The essay was a justification for existing Russian attitudes and actions toward Ukraine, and it served as a precursor for another speech he made on February 21, 2022, that presented Russia’s argument for an all-out invasion on February 24. In linking the histories of Russia and Ukraine, Putin denied Ukrainian history and nationhood. However, Ukraine has its own history that is different, and separate from, that of Russia’s. The following rec-

ommendations will help you and your students understand this history more comprehensively.

To help orient your students with the history of Ukraine, start with Mark von Hagen's provocatively titled article, "Does Ukraine Have a History?" in the journal *Slavic Review*. After that, turn to Serhy Yekelchuk's *Ukraine: Birth of a Modern Nation*, which is a highly readable history of Ukraine that is broken into eleven convenient chapters that each cover a specific period of Ukraine's history. No matter the time period you teach, this book offers short, digestible chapters that cover everything from Kyivan Rus (beginning in the late 9th century) to independence (1991). All of these will work well with undergraduate students.

If you are teaching more advanced courses, you can assign Serhii Plokhy's *Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine*, which offers a comprehensive overview of Ukraine's history in a longer format. This book may be better suited for an upper-level undergraduate course or graduate seminar where students have time to take a deep-dive into Ukrainian history and politics. Another possibility is Faith Hillis' *Children of Rus': Right-Bank Ukraine and the Invention of a Russian Nation*. This book is best suited for graduate seminars on nationalism, Russia, Ukraine, and eastern Europe.

Another solid overview of Ukrainian history is Ivan L. Rudnytsky's *Essays in Modern Ukrainian History*. This collection is particularly well suited for assigning short reading excerpts to students. For an example, see how Professor Timothy Snyder of Yale University utilized the collection in his class called "The Making of Modern Ukraine."<sup>6</sup> Snyder's own work, *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999*, offers a valuable assessment of Ukrainian history from 1569 to 1981 in about 100 pages in part two of the book. This, too, can be broken up into weekly readings for students. I also recommend Paul Robert Magocsi's *A History of Ukraine: The Land and its Peoples* and Orest Subtelny's book by the same name for further overviews of Ukrainian history.

## Understanding Russia's War on Ukraine in Historical and Contemporary Perspective

With the ongoing war, it seems necessary to read Ukraine's history closely and in connection to contemporary events. Serhy Yekelchuk helps link past and present in the revised and updated second edition of his book, now titled *Ukraine: What Everyone Needs to Know*. If you are looking to assign shorter opin-

ion pieces that speak to these same issues, try this one from *The New Yorker*, “Vladimir Putin’s Revisionist History of Russia and Ukraine,” where Serhii Plokhy breaks down critical moments in Ukraine’s history in a discussion with journalist Isaac Chotiner.<sup>7</sup> For a discussion about the importance of Ukraine and its history in a global context, use Ukrainian historian Yaroslav Hrytsak’s opinion piece, “Putin Made a Profound Miscalculation on Ukraine,” in the *New York Times*.<sup>8</sup> This piece from NPR, “From Stalin to Putin, Ukraine is still trying to break free from Moscow,” succinctly puts Ukraine’s struggle with Russia into a longer historical perspective.<sup>9</sup>

Courses on contemporary history or international relations, as well as courses that use a now/then lens will especially want to include works that address what is happening in Ukraine today. Political scientist Paul D’anieri’s *Ukraine and Russia: From Civilized Divorce to Uncivil War* is very useful for understanding Russian-Ukrainian relations since the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is especially relevant for instructors of political science, international relations, diplomacy, and recent history. You might also consider utilizing the podcast “The history and evolution of Ukrainian national identity” produced by *The Conversation* that examines the history and evolution of Ukrainian national identity by Ukraine experts Dominique Arel, Olga Onuch, and Volodymyr Kulyk.<sup>10</sup>

It will be important to remind your students that February 24, 2022, was not the start of Russia’s war on Ukraine; rather, it was a violent uptick in a war that has been raging for more than eight years. Essays from *The War in Ukraine’s Donbas: Origins, Contexts, and the Future*, edited by David Marples, elaborate on the history of the war in Ukraine’s east. For a short, but personal, account of the war from a female and civilian perspective, I highly recommend Olesya Khromeychuk’s *A Loss: The Story of a Dead Soldier Told by His Sister*. This book is an excellent addition to any syllabus that addresses Ukraine since 2014 because of its short length and highly readable prose.

Finally, I recommend works of fiction that are set in Ukraine since 2014. Try Andrey Kurkov’s *Grey Bees*, which is a story of about Russia’s war on Ukraine as experienced by a beekeeper in the war’s grey zone. I also suggest Serhiy Zhadan’s *The Orphanage*. The book follows a Ukrainian language teacher who sets off through the war zone to get to his nephew who lives in an orphanage in occupied territory. Both books make the war in Ukraine palpable to students and expose them to Ukrainian literature.

## Highlighting 20th Century Ukraine in European History Courses

This section provides readings about Ukraine that can be incorporated into classes, both lower- and upper-division, on 20th-century Europe. The sections below cover events such as Ukraine's 1917, the 1932–33 Holodomor and the wider interwar period, WWII, and the postwar period through independence.

### Ukraine's 1917 and the Formation of the Soviet Union

Students are often introduced to this period through the 1917 Russian Revolution, with Ukraine left out of the narrative. In reality, Ukraine experienced its own version of this revolution, and the repercussions of these events led to the Ukrainian War of Independence that lasted from 1917 to 1921. To learn more about this period, I suggest assigning chapter three from George Liber's *Total Wars and the Making of Modern Ukraine, 1914–1954*. Liber provides a detailed overview of this period that highlights the main points of 1917 and its impact on Ukraine through WWII. Other accessible options include Mark von Hagen's essay "The Ukrainian Revolution of 1917 and why it matters for historians of the Russian revolution(s)" in the online journal *EuroMaidan Press*,<sup>11</sup> and Serhii Plokhyy's "Ukraine in the Flames: '1917 in Kyiv,'"<sup>12</sup> a short essay on the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute's website.

### The Interwar Period

This section covers the major events that took place in the interwar period in Soviet Ukraine. The paragraphs below offer suggested readings that cover contested nationalities policies, language, and culture. Especially important is the last part of this section that discusses the 1932–33 famine, now known commonly as the Holodomor, that killed millions of Ukrainians in only two years.

A process called *korenizatsiia* (indigenization or nativization) sought to integrate diverse, non-Russian national cultures into their respective Soviet republics in an attempt to reverse a longer trend of Russification. The larger aim was to appeal to different nationalities and offer them buy-in to the idea of a greater Soviet identity, which leaders hoped would take precedent over national interests and allow them to strengthen Soviet power. For a good overview of the incorporation of nationalities in the Soviet Union, look to Fran Hirsch's *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*, which is broken up into three parts that could be easily assigned as excerpts. Matthew

Pauly's book, *Breaking the Tongue: Language, Education, and Power in Soviet Ukraine, 1923–1934*, details the complexity of *korenizatsiia* in Ukrainian-language schooling. You can also watch an interview with Matthew Pauly about his book,<sup>13</sup> and listen to a podcast about the book on the New Books Network.<sup>14</sup>

If an article-length piece is more accessible for your students, try George Liber's article, "Korenizatsiia: Restructuring Soviet nationality policy in the 1920s."

Other valuable works on Soviet Ukraine and the cultural politics and history of this period are available from Olena Palko and Mayhill Fowler. Palko's *Making Ukraine Soviet: Literature and Cultural Politics under Lenin and Stalin* challenges center-periphery dynamics by focusing on the development of Ukraine's cultural projects. Fowler's *Beau Monde on Empire's Edge: State and Stage in Soviet Ukraine* is a cultural history of theater and the arts in Soviet Ukraine. You can watch her speak about her book at the HURI Seminar in Ukrainian Studies,<sup>15</sup> and you can read an interview I did with her about her work on Ukraine on H-Ukraine.<sup>16</sup>

The interwar period in Soviet Ukraine was also marked by periods of extreme violence, famine, and genocide. Perhaps the most significant event in this period was the 1932–1933 man-made famine known as the Holodomor (meaning "death by hunger"), which was accompanied by the destruction and suppression of Ukrainian language, culture, and religion by the Soviets in what is now considered by many experts to be an act of genocide against Ukraine. The literature on the topic is vast, so I recommend utilizing the resources from the Holodomor Research and Education Consortium,<sup>17</sup> which has put together a list of translated sources and articles on the topic that privilege Ukrainian voices.<sup>18</sup>

I also suggest using Norman Naimark's very student-friendly book, *Stalin's Genocides*. Chapter four is a short overview that works well with undergraduate students. Stanislav Kulchytsky's *The Famine of 1932–1933 in Ukraine: An Anatomy of the Holodomor* is an important book on the subject by a leading Ukrainian expert who brings together thirty years of research into a short, accessible volume. The Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press at the University of Alberta has published a number of short, edited volumes on the Holodomor; selected chapters are available on the Internet.<sup>19</sup> *The Holodomor Reader*, a collection of primary sources in English translation, may be especially useful in history courses. For instructors who like to utilize different forms of texts, including comics and illustrations, consider assigning part one of Igor's *The Ukrainian and Russian Notebooks: Life and Death under Soviet Rule*. Finally, Anne Applebaum's *Red Famine*

and the intro chapter of Timothy Snyder's *Bloodlands* are useful for upper-level courses as they offer extensive secondary treatment of the famine.

For transnational histories of Ukraine in the interwar period, look to Nadia Zavorotna's *Scholars in Exile: The Ukrainian Intellectual World in Interwar Czechoslovakia*, which details the lives of the Ukrainian intelligentsia abroad. Those who are interested in architecture, design, and industrialization projects in the Soviet Union will enjoy Christina Crawford's recent book about the Kharkiv Tractor Plant (among other Soviet industrial sites) and its transnational connections, entitled *Spatial Revolution: Architecture and Planning in the Early Soviet Union*, and see my short interview with her about her work on H-Ukraine.<sup>20</sup>

## WWII, the German Occupation, and the Holocaust

WWII and the Holocaust are subjects often taught from a Western perspective that leaves little room to understand the experience of those in the East. Although many books have been published on the Soviet Union and the war that foreground Russia, there were millions of Ukrainians who served in the Red Army and millions of Ukrainians died during the German occupation of Ukraine in the 1940s. The first phase of the Holocaust, known as the "Holocaust by Bullets," was carried out in Ukrainian lands, therefore it is crucial to integrate Ukrainian experiences and narratives into courses on this subject.

Jennifer Popowycz penned a compelling overview of the "Holocaust by Bullets" in Ukraine on the website of The National WWII Museum in New Orleans. It describes how mobile killing units, made up of the German SS, German army, and local collaborators, murdered Jews in Ukraine. This piece introduces students to a perspective of the Holocaust that is taught less often. For more extensive treatment, see Wendy Lower's *Nazi Empire-Building and the Holocaust in Ukraine* and *The Ravine: A Family, A Photograph, A Holocaust Massacre Revealed* or Karel C. Berkhoff's *Harvest of Despair: Life and Death in Ukraine under Nazi Rule*.

The literature on the Jewish experience in Ukraine during this time period is extensive and offers unsettling accounts of violence, collaboration, and mass killing. Jeffrey Veidlinger's brief history of Babi Yar in *The Conversation* is a useful overview of the horrid killing that took place in the center of Kyiv in September 1941.<sup>21</sup> Veidlinger's most recent book, *In the Midst of Civilized Europe: The Pogroms of 1918–1921 and the Onset of the Holocaust*, gives a valuable pretext that helps articulate the earlier killing of Jews by peasants in Ukraine, and could serve as an optional reading for your syllabus. His earlier work, *In the Shadow*

of the *Shtetl: Small-Town Jewish Life in Soviet Ukraine*, may also be of interest due to the author's use of oral history that recounts the Jewish experience of returning home after WWII. Ola Hnatiuk's *Courage and Fear* works well in an upper-level classes as an insightful account of WWII experiences among Jewish, Polish, and Ukrainian populations in Lviv. Other relevant titles include Amelia Glaser's *Jews and Ukrainians in Russia's Literary Borderlands: From the Shtetl Fair to the Petersburg Bookshop* and A. Anatoli (Kuznetsov's) *Babi Yar: A Document in the Form of a Novel*, which documents Kuznetsov's witnessing of Nazi war crimes in Kyiv.

An assessment of this period is incomplete without a discussion of collaboration between some Ukrainians and German occupiers. Useful works to consult on this difficult topic are John-Paul Himka's *Ukrainian Nationalists and the Holocausts: OUN and UPA's Participation in the Destruction of Ukrainian Jewry, 1941–1944* and Tarik Cyril Amar's *The Paradox of Ukrainian Lviv: A Borderland City between Stalinists, Nazis, and Nationalists*. For a shorter account of this history, look to Masha Gessen's article in *The New Yorker*.<sup>22</sup>

Another WWII event that often escapes WWII coverage in the classroom is the 1944 deportation of the Crimean Tatars, which resulted in ethnic cleansing and cultural genocide. An article on Al Jazeera gives a good overview of the deportation and the meaning it embodied when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014.<sup>23</sup> Karina Korostelina elaborates further on the same topic and addresses attempts to repatriate Crimean Tatars and the continued discrimination they face. To explore how poetry and literature helped break the silence surrounding the deportation of Crimean Tatars, consider Rory Finnin's recent book, *Blood of Others: Stalin's Crimean Atrocity and the Poetics of Solidarity*.

## Postwar Ukraine and Chornobyl

Two important works highlight the effects of WWII that lingered long after the war. Oksana Kis's *Survival as Victory: Ukrainian Women in the Gulag* is an anthropological study that privileges Ukrainian women's voices and details the experience of life in Soviet forced labor camps of the 1940s and 1950s. Filip Slavesski's *Remaking Ukraine after World War II: The Clash of Local and Central Soviet Power* explores local Ukrainian populations fighting back against Stalinist practices after the war.

One of the better-known events in Soviet Ukraine's history is the Chornobyl nuclear disaster that occurred in April 1986. The HBO series *Chernobyl* that debuted in 2019 reinigorated the public's interest in this dark event, and it

brought widespread attention to Ukraine.<sup>24</sup> Students often express strong interest in this topic and there are multiple excellent readings to choose from. Kate Brown's *Manual for Survival: An Environmental History of the Chernobyl Disaster* is part history, part ethnography, and part detective story. It is a gripping read that students will not want to put down. Serhii Plokhy's *Chernobyl: The History of a Nuclear Catastrophe* is another historical account of the subject that is worth considering for its minute-by-minute recounting of the history of the nuclear disaster. No reading list on Chornobyl would be complete without Svetlana Aleksievich's *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* Picador, which highlights the human aspect of the nuclear disaster. This can pair well with either Brown or Plokhy.

## Independence

Any of the readings on the Chornobyl disaster pair well with Serhy Yekelchyk's chapter "From Chernobyl to the Soviet Collapse" in *Ukraine: Birth of a Modern Nation*, which can be used to teach students about the demise of the Soviet Union and Ukraine's independence in 1991. Selections from Tamara Hunderova's *The Post-Chornobyl Library: Ukrainian Postmodernism of the 1990s* are also very useful for understanding decolonization in Ukraine and the efforts of Ukrainians to liberate themselves from a Soviet past.

## Understanding 21st Century Ukraine

New scholarship on a variety of Ukrainian topics have highlighted feminist and queer perspectives, race, and music, while others have addressed the Revolution of Dignity. World history courses or contemporary events classes should include the 2013–2014 Revolution of Dignity (also known as Euromaidan). One option is to have students read an entry in the online edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* to get familiar with the revolution,<sup>25</sup> and pair it with selections from either Marci Shore's *The Ukrainian Night: An Intimate History of Revolution* or Mychailo Wynnnykij's *Ukraine's Maidan, Russia's War: A Chronicle and Analysis of the Revolution of Dignity*, which provide different scholarly analyses of the revolution.

A variety of university courses will benefit from recent works that address topics ranging from LGBTQ, feminist and human rights in Ukraine, to drug use and disease, to music, culture, and race. Emily Channell-Justice's edited collection, *Decolonizing Queer Experience: LGBT+ Narratives from Eastern Europe and*

*Eurasia*, contains essays on activism, resistance, and resilience in post-socialist spaces, including one chapter on Ukraine. Jessica Zychowicz's *Superfluous Women: Art, Feminism, and Revolution in Twenty-First Century Ukraine* is a more extensive treatment of the experiences of artists, feminists, and queer activists in Ukraine. This book could be used in courses on activism/social movements, human rights, or the history of revolutions.

Other studies focus on subjects such as drug use, music, and race. Jennifer Carroll's remarkable study of drug use in Ukraine, *Narkomania: Drugs, HIV, and Citizenship in Ukraine*, is a must-read for anyone studying or teaching about substance use, HIV, and citizenship in post-Soviet spaces. On the subject of music, Maria Sonevytsky's new book, *Wild Music: Sound and Sovereignty in Ukraine*, is a beautiful ethnography about the ways that various forms of music in Ukraine contribute to, and re-imagine, Ukrainian culture. Adriana Helbig's *Hip Hop Ukraine: Music, Race, and African Migration* reveals interracial encounters among African students, migrants, and workers in Ukraine. Pair this book with more recent events surrounding the treatment of Africans in Ukraine as a result of the current war. Char Adams discusses African students' efforts to organize their own war relief efforts<sup>26</sup> and Monika Pronczuk addresses the barriers that many Africans faced when trying to flee the war in Ukraine.<sup>27</sup>

## Further Resources in Lieu of a Conclusion

If you find only one thing in this article that works for your future classes, it will be significant because you are working to let Ukraine speak. The recommendations in this article represent a small fraction of what is available.

In addition, consider the following resources:

- The Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute has a very helpful guide titled "Teaching and Studying Ukraine: List of Resources".<sup>28</sup> Emily Channell-Justice and I contributed to this resource compilation during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic to provide online tools to help instructors teach about Ukraine.
- For podcasts on books in Ukrainian studies, turn to New Books Network and their section on Ukraine.<sup>29</sup> Experts in the field interview authors whose books are about Ukrainian topics, and these audio resources are useful for keeping up with new literature in the field and hearing directly from authors themselves.

- H-Ukraine (part of the larger H-Net platform) shares and collects recent scholarship, teaching resources, interviews, and other material related to the academic study of Ukraine. It is free to subscribe to H-Ukraine, and announcements get sent directly to your inbox.<sup>30</sup>

Thank you for reading this guide. I appreciate your efforts to make Ukraine visible in your classes and put the country on students' mental maps. Studying Ukraine is more important than ever.

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## Notes

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