

Harvard Papers in Ukrainian Studies

**MAKING  
UKRAINE,  
AND  
REMAKING IT**

The Petryshyn Memorial Lecture  
Harvard University, 14 April 2003

ALEXANDER J. MOTYL



The Ukrainian Research Institute  
Harvard University

HARVARD UKRAINIAN RESEARCH INSTITUTE  
*Cambridge, Massachusetts*

*Editorial Board*

Michael S. Flier  
George G. Grabowicz  
Lubomyr Hajda  
Edward L. Keenan  
Roman Szporluk

G. Patton Wright, *Manager of Publications*

Marika Whaley, *Editor*, HLEUL

Publication of this work has been made possible by the generous support for Ukrainian studies at Harvard University by Dr. Wolodymyr Petryshyn and his family, in memory of his parents Vasyl and Maria Petryshyn.

© 2003 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College  
All rights reserved

ISBN 0-916458-99-7 (pb.)

The Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute was established in 1973 as an integral part of Harvard University. It supports research associates and visiting scholars engaged in projects concerned with all aspects of Ukrainian studies. The Institute also works in close cooperation with the Committee on Ukrainian Studies, which coordinates the teaching of Ukrainian history, language, and literature at Harvard University.

## *Editorial Statement*

The Harvard Papers in Ukrainian Studies present occasional papers, reports, reprints, and articles that focus on Ukraine and its historical, cultural, linguistic, and political relations with its neighbors. Dedicated to promoting a broad vision of Ukraine, the series examines Ukraine in various contexts: as part of East Central Europe, the Black Sea littoral, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and as an independent state.

## Making Ukraine, and Remaking It

How odd it was to be writing about Ukraine in New York City this winter. The United States and the “old Europe” were at each other’s throats. A “new Europe” appeared to have emerged. The endlessly imminent war in Iraq finally broke out. Closer to home, New Yorkers were wondering, in their periodic bouts with panic, whether the terrorists would strike and, if so, just when and where.

Altogether missing from this avalanche of sensations was Ukraine. As a matter of fact, nothing seemed further from life than Ukraine. And nothing *seems* further from life, here and now, than Ukraine. For good reason: Ukraine *is* irrelevant to my concerns, or your concerns, about terrorism. There is nothing Ukraine can do or say to affect the likelihood of another attack in New York or Washington—or Boston.

But Ukraine has also made itself irrelevant. Europe seethes, Russia postures, America bristles—and Ukraine? Ukraine is silent, absent.

Ukraine could easily make itself heard. It is, after all, a country the size of France. It is located in a strategically important part of the world. Its population is both highly educated and articulate. And, in contrast to the past, when Soviet Ukraine barely existed in people’s consciousness, independent Ukraine is a material reality. Ukraine has only to speak—to say something *important*—to be heard. Ukraine’s elite could support the new Europe. Or it could support the old Europe. Or it could support Russia. Or it could even support the United States. Instead, Ukraine’s elite prefers not to make the choices that genuine voice entails. It prefers silence and absence. It prefers to hide.

This silence is unfortunate, but it is not surprising. After all, Ukraine’s current elite is for the most part an accidental elite. When Ukraine became independent, the elite happened

to be in the right place at the right time. They did not make Ukraine. Why should we expect them to remake the system that made them?

### *Conditions Disfavoring the Creation of Modern Ukraine*

Ukraine has come a long way in the last hundred years. From an idea shared by a handful of intellectuals Ukraine has become a state—a territorially bounded political entity struggling to control violence and administer, tax, and govern a population. And yet, given its recent history, Ukraine should not have become an independent state. That it did so is remarkable. That it even survived the twentieth century as a place with a distinct people is well-nigh miraculous.

Consider that just 150 years ago the region we now call Ukraine consisted primarily of illiterate peasant serfs. In the second half of the nineteenth century, these benighted people were subjected to the brutalizing dislocations we euphemistically call modernization, secularization, urbanization, and industrialization. They responded prosaically—by working, dying, fleeing, fighting, rioting, and killing. And, as if those wrenching changes were not enough, seven years of world war, civil war, and revolution broke out in 1914. A brief respite followed, only to be superseded by even more terrifying words—collectivization, famine, terror, and genocide in the east and repression, depression, and immiserization in the west. But the *real* troubles began in 1939 and 1941, when a devastating war with terrible consequences followed. After peace returned in 1945, life returned to “normal”—another eight years of famine, terror, and repression, this time in both east and west.

Ukraine’s patriots, nationalists, state builders, and nation builders had little chance against so overpowering a constellation of forces. The Ukrainian People’s Republic and the West Ukrainian People’s Republic made a valiant effort at transforming an ethnographic idea into a political reality, but were powerless in the face of war, revolution, and chaos. The National Communists could promote Ukrainization only by riding the wave of *korenizatsiia*—and, later, of de-Stalinization. The organized

Galician nationalists—whose great fortune was to have been spurned by Germany and thereby spared a collaborationist fate—could not overcome the Soviet armed forces and the geopolitics of the Cold War. The Soviet-era dissidents pursued human and national rights, bravely resisted totalitarianism, and, almost to a man and woman, were sooner or later confined in prisons and camps or exiled. Last but not least, émigrés waged a shadowy war against Soviet power from the early 1920s to 1991, but signally failed to return home in triumph.

### *The Making of Independent Ukraine*

Ukraine experienced some forty consecutive years of relentless death and destruction, starting in 1914 and ending in 1953. Over three decades of normal totalitarianism then followed. Everyday violence disappeared, and the death camps were disbanded, but totalitarianism as a system of rule remained. As such, it was an unmitigated disaster—for Ukraine as for all the other Soviet republics. Living standards improved, but no elements of democracy, the market, and civil society could emerge. Sixty years of intrusive party-state domination, irrational central planning, and stultifying ideological control produced both a passive mindset and a stable set of institutions and behaviors that reproduced totalitarian rule. In contrast to Nazi totalitarianism, Soviet totalitarianism actually managed to create a new type of civilization and, perhaps, a new type of human being. And in contrast to Nazi totalitarians, Soviet totalitarians—whether Ukrainian or non-Ukrainian—have yet to be brought to justice for their crimes against humanity.

But the Soviet experience, which decimated Ukraine and its people, also laid the foundations of Ukrainian statehood. The Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic was, like every other non-Russian republic and most other east central European satellites, a provincial outpost of an empire. Imperial status meant that Ukraine lacked an independent state and a skilled political elite. But Soviet nationality policy assigned territories with flags and bureaucrats and capital cities to populations with languages and cultures. As a result, imperial status also meant

that Ukraine became a symbolically sovereign administrative entity—something it had never been under tsarist rule.

The irony is obvious: it was not the patriots, nationalists, and state and nation builders who made independent Ukraine, but their enemies. Lenin created Soviet Ukraine as a republic. Stalin provided it with well-defined territorial boundaries by annexing Volhynia, Galicia, and Transcarpathia. Khrushchev permitted its political elite to survive physically. Brezhnev enabled them to thrive as stable cadres within their own imperial bailiwicks. And Gorbachev destroyed the totalitarian underpinnings of the empire and thus the empire, thereby enabling Brezhnev's loyal colonial administrators to don the mantle of national liberation and embrace the independence that was thrust upon them.

When Mikhail Gorbachev assumed control of the Soviet Union in 1985, totalitarianism was manifestly malfunctioning. A centrally planned economy is an intrinsically inefficient mechanism doomed to secular decline. A political system that prevents the emergence of autonomous political and civic forces—and, thus, of competition, contention, and innovation—is also doomed to mediocrity and decay. A morally criminal regime can enjoy popular support for some time, but it cannot sustain legitimacy in the long run—except perhaps in Western salons and cafes. The so-called era of stagnation that characterized Leonid Brezhnev's rule was typical of all communist states. Their attempts at self-regeneration could work only if totalitarianism were abolished, and, since that was impossible, reform necessarily failed and decline necessarily continued.

The USSR may have survived for another decade or two, but Gorbachev's endorsement of popular movements and assault on the Communist Party had the unintended effect of dissolving the one force that kept the empire together. In 1989, the east central European satellites successfully separated. In 1990, all the Soviet republics declared sovereignty. In 1991, when the party had become impotent, the economy had collapsed, and the imperial metropole had lost control over its provinces, the non-Russian republics became independent. Overnight, satraps became presidents, and soviets became parliaments.

Independent Ukraine was flawed from the very start. Like all postcolonial entities, it consisted of a territory, a population, and bureaucrats, but it lacked the institutions that transform a territory, population, and bureaucrats into a functioning economy, society, and state. Indeed, the behaviors, values, and institutions that survived Soviet collapse undermined genuine statehood, political contestation, economic entrepreneurship, and civic activity. Worse, Ukraine's catastrophic encounter with the twentieth century—the forty years of death and destruction I referred to above—did not help matters. Millions of deaths and widespread destruction do not build institutions. Instead, they force people to duck, to seek cover, to hide—to become silent and absent.

### *An Absence of Leadership*

Independent Ukraine was the unintended by-product of state failure and imperial collapse. And the terrified, incompetent, and morally tainted elite of a failed state, a failed society, and a failed economy was supposed to transform Ukraine into a successful and stable democracy, market economy, civil society, and rule-of-law state. It took the countries of Western Europe hundreds of bloody years and the systematic violation of human rights both at home and abroad to achieve these goals. The United States, which devastated its native population, instituted full civil rights for blacks only in the 1960s—almost two centuries after its war of independence. Ukraine's elite, like those of the other post-communist states, was advised to telescope these centuries into a magnificent great leap forward. It was the height of hubris for well-fed Westerners to dispense such advice; it was also a profoundly immoral and, I suspect, deeply cynical ploy at washing their hands of the mess that Western indifference to totalitarianism had helped sustain. Not surprisingly, some countries, such as Russia, leapt and fell; others, such as Ukraine, did not leap; and still others—those who did make a leap, such as Poland and Hungary—proved successful only because the distance they had to jump was, thanks to the reform-oriented courses they adopted in the 1950s, actually quite small.

Ukraine's initial failure to jump was understandable, even—I believe—correct. Ukraine's indecisiveness in the early 1990s accounts for the fact that it is stable and peaceful today. And it is anything but the unremittingly hopeless country depicted in the media. Ukraine has done far less well than Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia, but far better than Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Georgia. By any measure it is in fact doing about as well—or about as poorly—as Russia, Romania, and Serbia. Like so many of its post-Soviet neighbors, today's Ukraine is a quasi-authoritarian regime with elements of democracy and civil society and a quasi-market economy dominated by corrupt bureaucrats in cahoots with economic oligarchs. We know that parasitic authoritarian states such as Ukraine can be stable and grow. But we also know that such stability is fragile and that such growth invariably benefits a narrow elite. What we often fail to appreciate is that the real culprits are not so much the oligarchs as the parasitic state and its strategic elite. The deadening weight of such a state not only stifles society, the economy, and democracy, it also, ultimately, undermines the state itself. The irony is obvious: the longer such a state exists, the more irreversible its decline and the more fragile the position of its elite.

But while non-decisions are preferable to bad decisions—and the attempt to initiate a “big bang” would have been the worst of decisions—indecision is no long-term solution to the systemic ruin brought about by genocide and totalitarianism. At some point choices have to be made—especially choices that transcend the immediate personal gains of the ruling elite and address the future of Ukraine as well as its own future within that Ukraine. But the making of choices presupposes the ability to make them: it presupposes some vision, some boldness, some capacity to resist instant gratification, some willingness to take chances, and some understanding of the challenges facing Ukraine. It presupposes leadership.

Small wonder then that, as the world is in turmoil, as alignments and realignments are taking place with breathtaking speed, as everything seems possible and nothing seems impossible, at such a critical period in the history of the world, Ukraine's elite

stubbornly refrains from statecraft and stays silent. Their silence would be excusable if they were busy at work transforming Ukraine into Switzerland. Rather more likely is that they are busy at work transferring their assets from Ukraine to Switzerland.

### *Isolation or Integration?*

But the world is changing too rapidly for Ukraine's elite to ignore three challenges to its fecklessness. I consider them in ascending order of importance.

It is independent Ukraine's misfortune to be trapped in the no-man's land between Euroland and Russia. Euroland is that amorphous *Schlaraffenland* that consists of chunks of the European Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and the countries of the euro. Russia is an enormous state, one with a checkered imperial past, an increasingly authoritarian present, and an uncertain future. Euroland has no particular interest in its Ukrainian "neighbor." Indeed, we can well imagine what the European elite really thinks of the *dyke pole* beyond the Schengen Curtain if it considers Poles, Czechs, and Hungarians to be ill-bred children. Needless to say, Russia—or, more precisely, a certain Russian elite—does have an interest in its "younger brother."

Must not Ukraine choose between Europe or Russia? Must not Ukraine demonstrate that it is *really* European and *not really* Russian? Only if we assume that Ukraine must remain weak and that Euroland and Russia must become strong. But neither of these assumptions need hold. The European Union is in crisis. France and Germany have acquired all the features of the "hyper-power" they resent. They have, as a result, unwittingly jeopardized the deepening and broadening of the EU. Joining Europe just now—an utterly unrealistic prospect for Ukraine anyway—may therefore be more of a burden than a privilege. Russia—despite the appearance of a dynamism that enthralles otherwise liberally minded Western observers—is far too disorganized and will remain far too disorganized to engage in imperial or even integrationist projects for some time to come.

And Vladimir Putin's authoritarian approach to modernizing his country is almost sure to fail, succeeding only in setting Russia back. With the front lines perforated, the no-man's land is no longer such a terrible place to be—at least for the time being. Ukraine now has the luxury of being able to go about its own business. It can actually pursue its own interests without worrying excessively about what its neighbors will say.

One of those interests may be Ukraine's relationship with the United States. Until September 11, 2001, Ukraine could more or less legitimately call itself a strategic partner of the world's only superpower—the United States. But no more. Just as that date is supposed to have changed everything for America, so too it changed much for Ukraine. Once Washington embarked on a strategic rapprochement with Moscow in the war on terror, Ukraine was ipso facto demoted to a “non-strategic non-partner.” That need not have been the case. The Ukrainian policy and intellectual elite, like its Russian—or for that matter Uzbek—counterpart, could have seized the moment to ally itself with the United States. Indeed, in doing so they would only have been following in Moscow's footsteps. Ukraine had a second chance just this year when its east central European neighbors openly sided with America over Iraq. Ukraine may soon have a third chance, if Moscow's opposition to war in Iraq leads Washington to rethink Russia's value as an ally. Will Ukraine's elite rise to the occasion? Will they openly support the United States? Will they boldly side with the “old Europe”? Will they declare their solidarity with the “new Europe”? Or will they, like Ostap Vyshnia's *chukhryntsi*, just scratch their heads?

As dramatic as the first two issues appear to be, and are, it is the third that matters most. Ukraine confronts three sources of economic dynamism that threaten to leave it in the dust. The first is the European Union's growing economic integration, a process that will continue—without Ukraine—even if Europe's political integration falters. The second is Russia's increasingly natural-resource-driven economy. Although Russia's possible transformation into a petro-state bodes ill for its democracy, it also threatens to convert Ukraine into an economic appendage. Neither eventuality need happen, but only if

Ukraine's elite proves imaginative enough to take advantage of the third source of economic dynamism—globalization. Just as Finland, Hungary, and India were able to overcome their dependence on the Soviet Union and become, in the last decade, three of the world's most dynamic economies, so too Ukraine could—with its highly skilled and low-cost workforce, its entrepreneurial businessmen and businesswomen, and its excellent location—do the same. But only if its elite chooses to.

To embrace globalization, however, means to embrace the market—or, if you like, capitalism. It also means to recognize that Ukraine's state, economy, society, and democracy will never thrive without a business class committed to such prosaic things as capital formation and job creation. And it is here that Ukraine's intellectuals can make a difference. It is up to them to persuade their elite and public to think big—to grasp the big picture, to comprehend that, as terrible as globalization is for some, it is infinitely preferable to isolation, stagnation, and decay for all. But Ukraine's intellectuals must also learn to think big, and that means reconsidering their infatuation with elitism and their disdain for mass culture and consumer society. However tempting and understandable, such a stance amounts to little more than parochialism and self-marginalization. Worse, in reinforcing the wall between elite and masses, such a stance serves the reactionary interests of the parasitic authoritarians, undermines democracy, and promotes russification.

For better or for worse, the choice to join the world is exclusively Ukraine's. It is hard to choose Europe, if Europe despises you. It is almost as hard to choose America, if America ignores you. But the choice between isolation and integration is Ukraine's to make or not to make. Best of all, a dynamic, modern, and prosperous Ukraine need prove to no one that it is *really* European and *not really* Russian. Instead, Ukraine could just be itself—dynamic, modern, and prosperous. Ukraine could finally define itself in terms of itself.

And what if Ukraine's elite continues to hide from the world? Ukraine's most likely long-term fate is growing stagnation on the one hand and growing dependence on Russia on the other. The political elite will survive as an elite, but they will be tin-pot

rulers at best. The intellectual elite will either flee the country or join the ruling class. The business elite will either emigrate or atrophy. Ukraine itself will survive as a state, but it will not be dynamic, modern, and prosperous. Indeed, the type of state that has already emerged in Ukraine is all too reminiscent of postcolonial states in the third world. Let us not forget that, back in the 1950s and 1960s, most ex-colonies appeared to be destined for good things. It is only with time that stasis produced the decrepit systems we see today. Indeed, when one considers the condition of Ukraine's infrastructure, environment, and health—as you know, Ukraine may be poised to experience an exponential rise in AIDS and other infectious diseases—then its similarity to third world societies and states becomes too close for comfort.

### *The Ukrainian Diaspora*

Let me end on the following point. I have, so far, failed to mention the Ukrainian diaspora, for three reasons.

First, the Ukrainian émigré community has always been a bit player in the making of Ukraine and—despite its penchant for bravado and self-righteousness—it can be at best a bit player in the remaking of Ukraine. The Federal Republic of Germany annexed East Germany, disposed of its elite, and invested some \$150 billion a year for over a decade to transform its *Ostländer*—with mixed results. Ukrainians in the West should have no illusions about the extent of their influence on Ukraine. Nor should they have any illusions about the beneficence of their influence on Ukraine.

Second, as I noted at the outset of this talk, Ukraine is far from our day-to-day concerns. The fact of the matter is that we are here and Ukraine is there. And here is a place and now is a time in which Ukraine, frankly, can be a bit of a luxury. Where was Ukraine on the morning of September 11 as I crossed Sixth Avenue and noticed a gaping hole in one of the World Trade Center towers? Where was Ukraine when the towers fell? Where was Ukraine when a putrid stench hung over New York for several weeks? Well, Ukraine was in Ukraine, and if there was ever

any proof that Ukraine is not here and that we are not in Ukraine—that was it.

Which brings me to my third and final point. Independent Ukraine is for its Ukrainians to make or to remake, to win or to lose. It is, after all, their country, and they are neither ill-bred children nor younger brothers. We can tell them what we think, but we cannot tell them what to do. If they choose to win their country, that is their choice. If they choose to lose it, that is also their choice. If they choose to join the third world, that, too, is their choice.

What then should the diaspora do? People of Ukrainian descent can, in the final analysis, do only one thing—and that is just to be who they are. They can, simply by doing what they do where they do it, serve as a bridge between Ukraine and the world. Whether Ukraine crosses that bridge is a choice for its Ukrainians.

*Alexander J. Motyl* is Associate Professor of Political Science and Deputy Director of the Center for Global Change and Governance at Rutgers University-Newark. Until 1998, he served as Associate Director of the Harriman Institute at Columbia University, where he received his Ph.D. in political science in 1984. He is also currently a consultant for several institutions, including the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, and has received grants from the Fulbright, Rockefeller, and Carnegie Foundations. Professor Motyl's numerous publications on Ukraine and the former Soviet Union include *Imperial Ends: The Decay, Collapse, and Revival of Empires* (New York, 2001) and *Revolutions, Nations, Empires: Conceptual Limits and Theoretical Possibilities* (New York, 1999). He has also published extensively in academic journals as well as in the *New York Times* and *National Review*.