

Ukrainian Historical Review /  
Український історичний огляд  
Issue 4 / Вип. 4 (2025) 249–254.  
DOI: 10.47632/2786-717X-2025-4-249-254  
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## FROM THE LESS PREDICTABLE PAST TO A MORE PREDICTABLE FUTURE

Review of: *The Unpredictable Past? Reshaping Russian, Ukrainian, and East European Studies* / ed. by Volodymyr Kravchenko and Marko Robert Stech. Edmonton and Toronto: CIUS Press 2024, 462 p.

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## ВІД МЕНШ ПЕРЕДБАЧУВАНОВОГО МИНУЛОГО ДО БІЛЬШ ПЕРЕДБАЧУВАНОВОГО МАЙБУТНЬОГО

Рецензія на: *The Unpredictable Past? Reshaping Russian, Ukrainian, and East European Studies* / ed. by Volodymyr Kravchenko and Marko Robert Stech. Edmonton and Toronto: CIUS Press 2024, 462 p.

The Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies published a timely and valuable book partly based on the materials of the academic symposium held in Edmonton and Banff in May 2023, one year after the Russian all-out invasion of Ukraine that turned almost instantly into a genocidal war. The book has the eponymous title of the aforementioned symposium – *The Unpredictable Past? Reshaping Russian, Ukrainian, and East European Studies*. The title hints at a cynical joke that emerged in the Soviet Union during Gorbachev's *glasnost*, when the piles of proscribed documents and historical facts began to challenge and overthrow the broadly established views and interpretations of past events. The catchy phrase might be misleading, however, since we do not expect any radical breakthrough in our current awareness of the past, nor is the book actually dealing so much

with the ‘past.’ Instead, it focuses mainly on the actual state of the art in the field and its (desirable) prospects, as the book’s subtitle unambiguously suggests.

The primary goal of its editors (and the symposium organizers) was to respond to multiple challenges, primarily epistemic but also ethical and political, that the Russian war has shockingly brought into their professional realm. The very fact that the scale of invasion and ensuing atrocities was unpredictable and unimaginable even for seasoned ‘Eurasia’ experts indicates that something was fundamentally wrong in their knowledge of Russia and its relations with neighbors. Deficiencies of that “knowledge” have been further exposed by Ukraine’s unexpected resilience and ability to fight back, astounding national unity, and civic mobilization. The nation whose very existence had been denied for years and still is dismissed by staunch Russophiles and *Putinverstehers* as a “non-place, a fiction, an invention of Ukrainian nationalists” [Zayarniuk, 421], came to the fore of the current world history as a major defender of international order, liberal democracy, and human dignity and civility.

Besides the soul-searching and chest-beating that throngs of Western scholars and politicians should have definitely engaged in, the more general and profound question that stems from this situation is why and how all this ignorance, blindness, and attachment to stereotypes could have emerged and, worse, penetrated and distorted significantly the academic field. The symposium organizers broke down these questions into several more specific points, asking selected experts what is wrong with the system of knowledge production and dissemination, what should be done to revise and fix it, what are the blind spots in the field, are the frameworks and terminology adequate, are colonial / postcolonial paradigms suitable in this case, which historical legacies should be deconstructed and demythologized, how to assess the “imperial turn” in historical studies, and what is the role and responsibility of historians.

The last question appeared to be the easiest since most experts agreed that historians’ responsibility is very high because “bad history” has always been instrumentalized by rogue regimes for all kinds of political manipulation, and now, as is graphically exemplified by Putin, is employed for a flagrant justification of war and genocide. As Yaroslav Hrytsak argues in his passionate defense of the classical Braudelian *longue durée* approach against the alleged epistemological cynicism of postmodernists, historians cannot predict the future in exact terms, but “they can identify long-term historical tendencies and weigh their plausible impact on the present. In other words, they can predict probabilities” [118].

All other questions, being apparently more complex, are addressed quite variously (or sometimes omitted) by the volume’s contributors. The most consensual answer probably comes to the first question – about the glaring deficiencies in the system of knowledge production and dissemination. As the book’s co-editor Marko Stech recognizes,

one of the most evident flaws in the field's conceptual approach to Eastern Europe... is that the majority of Western specialists, and especially Russia experts, have relied exclusively on a one-dimensional Russocentric perception of the region's past and present and thus have been proven wrong in their theories. Most of these scholars not only have focused almost entirely on the study of Russia (and not of its neighbours, particularly Ukraine), but have conditioned themselves to *perceive and interpret Russia through the prism of Russia's subjective view of itself*. They study primarily Russian sources; they depend mainly on the fundamental concepts developed by Russian or Russian-born scholars; they have embraced, without significant doubts, the Russian imperial interpretation of the history of Eastern Europe and have accepted many other Russian nationalist beliefs; and they even (far too often) internalize and repurpose and/or regurgitate in their own writings multiplex narratives of the current Russian propaganda [31–32, italics mine – M. R.]

While Russia's image in these projections, like in *laterna magica*, was overblown, extolled, and ennobled according to Russians' own suggestions and guidelines, Ukraine's image within the same epistemic-cum-propagandistic framework was belittled, obscured, and variously defamed. As Stech further maintains,

Ukraine has been interpreted by these academics as a state with an ambiguous national identity, apparently deeply rooted in the 'Russian and Soviet past.' Moreover, Ukraine has been viewed (in keeping with the guidelines of Russian propaganda) as a corrupt and largely dysfunctional state that is highly polarized politically and is fully dependent on Russia in the spheres of economy, politics, culture, and even public opinion—in short, the type of “not quite real” state that could never be expected to mobilize its resources and population to the point of being able to withstand a full-scale invasion by “one of the world's military superpowers” [33].

In sum, “given this Russocentric focus, it is no wonder, then, that the bulk of Western scholars have totally overestimated the power and influence of the Russian Federation while at the same time underestimating, and even dismissing, the weight and significance of Ukraine” [33]. As a notable though anecdotal evidence, Serhii Plokhii recalls experts' webinars held shortly before the all-out Russian invasion: “When the military aspect was discussed, the participants were knowledgeable only about the Russian army. The impression one got from such webinars was that Ukrainian society and especially the Ukrainian armed forces did not exist” [208]. This can be said not only about Ukrainian society or armed forces but virtually about all things Ukrainian. Ukraine's “non-existence” in different fields and, more generally, on mental maps of most international experts can be partly explained by its protracted historical absence on real maps overshadowed by the dominant empires. But the last of them, “Soviet Union,” was long gone, yet little has changed since then.

There are quite a few nations on the globe of which we know little or nothing; the ignorance might be forgivable if it is not demonstrated by the people who deal specifically with the region and are supposed to be well-informed about its peculiarities, including such a conspicuous trifle as Ukraine. And this is the point: what we see in a bulk of writings about Ukraine is not *a lack of knowledge but a very peculiar kind of knowledge that fills the gap and substitutes for systemic and diligent study of the Ukrainian language, culture, history, politics, social relations*, and the most important Ukraine-related debates. This ready-made substitute comes from a predictable source – Russian centuries-long narratives about Ukraine as “a non-place, a fiction, an invention of Ukrainian nationalists,” something that starkly resembles “Ukraine” from Putin’s “historical” exercises [Zayarniuk, 421].

At the heart of this “knowledge,” as several contributors to the reviewed collection contend, is the Russian imperial scheme of history that had been uncritically accepted, institutionalized, and normalized in the West for more than two hundred years and transformed into unquestionable (until recently) common wisdom. Its central tenets, the most relevant (and the most harmful) for Ukraine, boil down to a series of discursive inventions and appropriations, with far-reaching political and ideological consequences. In a nutshell, it was the renaming of Muscovy into Rus-sia (Latinized form of Rus’) and therefore the equation of two very different (and distant) historical and political entities. Thus, the imaginary political continuity between the 12<sup>th</sup>-century Kyiv and 17<sup>th</sup>-century Moscow was established, and a marginal Moscow Principality subsequently appropriated the entire Rus’ history, territory, and identity. There was no room in this scheme for Ukrainians and Belarusians, who actually made up the core of historical Rus’ and considered themselves Rusyn/Rusych (Ruthenian) but never Muscovite. They were downgraded to the sheer regional subgroups of the Moscow-turned-Russian people, redefined as a minor historical accident, a regrettable deviation.

This scheme was canonized in the Russian Empire and accepted abroad as presumably scientific and comprehensive. In the West, according to Frank Sysyn [292], the large emigration of Russian historians reinforced the traditional Russian paradigm and further marginalized any interest in Ukraine and Ukrainians: their history “was treated in some way as Russian history, but those who delved too deeply into it were seen as too marginal or—if they were of Ukrainian extraction—too nationalistic to be Russian historians.” Even today, Marko Stech [37] complains, a great majority of scholars

accept the imperial concept of a ‘Russia’ that has a continuous state (and even ethnic) history extending back to the Middle Ages and incorporating ‘stages of its historical development’ that include Kyivan Rus’ (often misleadingly labelled ‘Kievan Russia’), the Principality of Moscow and the Muscovite Tsardom, and (from the eighteenth century) the Russian Empire, followed

by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (still at times carelessly called ‘Russia’ in the West) and, finally, the Russian Federation.

The back side of the Western narratives on Russian history is colonial narratives on the history of Ukraine. First, as Serhy Yekelchuk aptly denotes,

Ukrainian history is typically presented in connection to Russian history, portraying it as the tale of a wayward younger sibling, sometimes abused by the elder but forever linked to that sibling’s ‘mother’ state, which, unlike Ukraine, is fully legitimate as a successor of a ‘great’ empire. Second, Russia is often regarded as a regional power, if not a great power, that is entitled to its sphere of influence. In this case, there is an acceptance of cognitive imperialism, as well as political, economic, and cultural imperialism. The agency of the Ukrainian people is suppressed, rendering what they want and are willing to fight for as irrelevant... Third, Ukrainians are often depicted as a young, socially incomplete, and politically immature nation. It emerged ‘only’ in 1991, in contrast to the Russian Federation....All three points share a common unspoken postulation: that Ukraine is not a ‘real’ nation and that someone is acting on its behalf, whether it be the West or ‘nationalists’ [398–9].

The most damaging political implications of the imperial scheme came to the fore nowadays as it underpins “the narrative structure upon which Putin, his chosen writers and advisors, and most Russian nationalist and fascist ideologues have fashioned their current—even more crude and flagrantly unscientific—visions of ‘a millennium of Russia’s glorious history;’ of ‘Russia’s historical right to primordial Russian lands’ throughout Eastern Europe; and the like” [Stech, 42].

Against all these developments, Hiroyuki Kuromiya expresses bewilderment that the field of Russian studies has only now begun to speak of “decolonizing” the discipline. “It is never too late”, he nods acerbically, “but this only emphasizes both the complacency with which the field has operated until now and the persistent imperialistic outlook that Russia and the Soviet Union have imposed on the discipline over the last century...It appears that the field has consciously or unconsciously swallowed entire Russian imperialist propaganda without even being aware of the biases and falsehoods in its narrative” [146].

And this brings us to the principal question: why and how Western scholars, otherwise well-informed and quite critical vis-à-vis ideological mythmaking, took all the Russian self-aggrandizing narratives, all historical fantasies, invented traditions, and imaginary successions at face value? Why and how the Russian “imperial knowledge” – a system of narratives that gentrify and extol the empire, on the one hand, and play down and dismiss the subalterns, on the other hand – became uncritically accepted and normalized as allegedly “scientific” in both international academia and mass consciousness? Why, in the end, has this toxic, heavily ideological “knowledge” not been revised or even considered alongside many other imperial “knowledges” – British, French, German, American – that have ultimately undergone the due postcolonial revision and deconstruction?

Not all authors consider this question timely and topical, likely because it was not clearly featured on the symposium list. Some suggest that the coercive power of the Russian Empire (and eventually of the Soviet Union), supplemented with bribery, blackmail, and co-optation, and the capacity to suppress alternative voices, facilitated the canonization of the “imperial knowledge” as the only truthful and undeniable, scientific and authoritative. Western scholars might have been seduced by the ostensible clarity and purported integrity of the proposed scheme; Russian émigré scholars, Russian culture, and the Russian church have also enhanced the credibility of imperial myths; state-led bribery, co-optation, and, more generally, soft power have also played a role.

Other authors suggest that the imperial affinity between the Russian and Western Empires may have been decisive in the uncritical acceptance of Russian historical myths by Western academicians. This was particularly true in the 18<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> centuries, when Russian imperial narratives aggressively entered the international (Western, in fact) ideological market. “Political realism,” which is still influential today, was the dominant school of political thought at the time; seeing the globe in terms of spheres of influence was quite normal, “non-historical” nation was an acceptable term, and the agency of Ukrainians or Slovaks bothered historians probably not much more than the agency of American Indians.

We must also recognize that the linguistic manipulation with terms and names, specifically renaming Muscovy into “Russia” and equating it thereby with Rus’, was so tricky and whimsical that very few people without due training in language(s) and history(ies) could discern the hoax and properly comprehend its consequences. This may explain not only why the Russian historical scheme (and “imperial knowledge” more generally) was accepted uncritically in the West in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but also why it survived several global waves of decolonization: institutional stickiness, sabotage of stakeholders, their mental inertia (or laziness), and self-reproduction of the established tropes and practices prevented any effective revision of the Russian “thousand-year-old” history, where everything looked so simple and clear. There was still no room for Ukraine, whose role was reduced to the story of “ultra-nationalism,” “anti-Semitism,” and “Nazi collaboration,” promoted ardently by the KGB and fully capitalized nowadays by Putin.

The authors of the reviewed book explored many puzzles of Ukraine’s history and Ukraine-related historiography. Perhaps the ultimate effort is needed now to collect all these puzzles together, producing a single, holistic, and comprehensive picture.