

only the Soviet and German states appear as historical agents, Liber also discusses the actions and aims of Ukrainian protagonists.

Minor points of critique refer to the chapter on World War II. Here the author sometimes tends to oversimplify German approaches and motifs with regard to Ukrainians and Ukrainian territories by explaining them mostly as a consequence of the perception of Slavs as *Untermenschen* (sub-humans) (214, 217). More importantly, when discussing the role and responsibility of the “Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists” (OUN) and the “Ukrainian Insurgent Army” (UPA) for the massacres of Poles in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia in 1943 and 1944, the author apparently relies mostly on some controversial Ukrainian literature, and only to a lesser degree on important Polish and other studies. The consequence is a narrative that tends to disconnect the attempt of “ethnic cleansing” of these regions’ Polish population from the Ukrainian radical nationalists’ ideology, but presents it rather as an unfortunate outcome of a Polish-Ukrainian territorial dispute that was fueled by brutal German measures of repression against the Polish and Ukrainian resistance (231–39).

In general, however, the book gives a clear, concise, and convincing account and is well documented by a wide range of English and Slavic-language literature. It is a valuable addition to synthesizing historical accounts on the history of Ukraine, such as Orest Subtelny’s *Ukraine: A History*, Paul Robert Magocsi’s *History of Ukraine*, or Serhii Plokhy’s *Gates of Europe*, because of its more detailed, basic introduction into an important, but in many respects also highly controversial period of Ukrainian history.

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Living Soviet in Ukraine from Stalin to Maidan: Under the Falling Red Star in

Kharkiv. By Michael T. Westrate. Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2016. xx, 229 pp. Appendixes. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Photographs. \$85.00, hard bound.

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This book prompts mixed reactions. For one thing, the writing leaves a lot to be desired and makes one wonder about the effectiveness of the copyeditor. A few examples will be provided below. There are more substantive problems pertaining to the underlying conception of the book. While the author has made a laudable effort to explain and justify his methodology (oral history using eighty interviews), the objectives of his undertaking are somewhat contradictory and unclear. To what extent is the study supposed to increase understanding of Soviet society as a whole, as distinct from being an exploration of the attitudes and beliefs of an interesting elite group, the faculty of the Higher Academy for Air Defense that used to be located in the Soviet Ukrainian city of Kharkov/Kharkiv?

The author avers that his project seeks to answer two questions: “What it was like to live Soviet [a recurring dubious locution] in Ukraine during the late Soviet (1960s–1991) and post-Soviet periods” (6). Originally conceived of “as representatives of the Soviet ‘middle strata,’” he subsequently realized that these military officers were an elite group, “paragons of Soviet values and personifications of the state” (xv). He also wrote: “As New Soviet Military Men, these officers were the living personifications of the Soviet Union, elite leaders who assisted with the indoctrination of millions of young Soviet conscripts—not just in how to defend their country, but also in how to export revolution abroad” (96). Not exactly a group whose life

and outlook had much in common with the vast majority of less privileged and less indoctrinated Soviet citizens. Apparently, the author could not quite make up his mind about the representativeness of this group, or give up his aspiration to make generalizations about Soviet society as a whole by studying it. Presumably, it was the uncertain premise concerning the matter of representativeness that led the author to consider this study “a ‘people history’ . . . a history from the bottom-up” (3–4). This is a dubious claim. A related dilemma the author could not quite resolve was whether or not to consider the Soviet system and society as “normal” or “abnormal.” He recommends what might be called a postmodern approach to historiography, including the study of repression:

“ . . . for many, if not most, of the 280 million-plus people who lived in the USSR in the late Soviet period, life, as they experienced it was neither bleak nor desperate. In speaking with the interviewees . . . I came to realize that . . . life in the Soviet Union was profoundly *normal*. Joy and heartbreak . . . daily life and professional lives, economic struggle and ever-present repression—these made up . . . daily, normal *Soviet* life. Through the process of interviewing . . . I came more fully to understand that historians should ask not whether a society is normal or abnormal, but rather *what that society understood* as normal or abnormal. “Normal” is a particularity. Following this conception, standing in line for meat can be understood as that which one normally does . . .” (179–180).

The quote further illustrates the gap between characteristics of his respondents and the generalizations based on them. Members of this politically-committed group had no reason to feel repressed or know anybody who had reason to feel repressed. Likewise, these high ranking officers, or rather their wives, could avoid standing in line for meat, which would have been abnormal for them. While oral history is a worthwhile undertaking, the reliability of the information it yields and its superiority over archival and other sources is not self-evident. Even if Soviet official documents are untrustworthy, subjective individual recollections and interpretations of past social-political conditions need not be more reliable or objective for different reasons. Problems of style include the awkward title “Living Soviet,” and the grammatically incorrect use of “strong,” as in: “the number of believers was . . . strong” (172, 182). “I watched in captivation . . .” (185) is a poor substitute for “I was captivated.” “Background” is a noun, not a verb (189).

Despite deficiencies of style and limitations of generalizability, this is a useful source of information about Soviet military elite attitudes and beliefs. It is organized in chapters dealing with the vocation of military service, the spouses of the military men, attitudes about ethnicity and nationality, and religion. Unexpectedly, two thirds of the respondents professed to be religious at the time of the interview, and half of them said that they had been since childhood (159). Less surprising but notable is that the respondents’ “first and most important social self-identification was not with the nation, but rather with the supranational Soviet state . . .” (136). Also of interest, that these officers correctly (and critically) considered Mikhail Gorbachev’s reforms and the associated erosion of the official ideology a major source of the collapse of the system (89). It is a strength of the volume that each chapter includes an informative survey of the existing literature, complementing the information obtained from the interviews. The book comes with a useful and extensive bibliography and the text of the interviews used.

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