

The Postcolonial Is Not Enough

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In my opinion, there are two possible approaches to engaging in a discussion with Timothy Snyder's thoughtful and suggestive text. The first is to continue his general line of emphasis on the validity of the postcolonial paradigm. I do sympathize with this approach, though I cannot claim to be an expert.¹ Still, to evaluate a new paradigm's validity, apart from its advantages one also has to see its limitations. When it comes to the Ukrainian case, I see several caveats.

First, one has to be rather cautious when applying the term *colony* to the Ukrainian territories under the Russian empire or Soviet Union. As it was explained in the pages of this journal over fifty years ago, in a discussion of Ukraine's role in modern history, the Russian and Soviet administrations saw Ukraine as belonging to the imperial core—contrary to, say, Transcaucasia or Turkestan.² This applies to both the economic and ideological dimensions. Economically, the industrialization of southern and eastern Ukrainian *gubernii* was faster than that of the Russian ethnic core. Ideologically, Kyiv and central Ukraine were seen as the core of “Russian lands,” in opposition not so much to growing Ukrainian nationalism but to local Polish elites who saw these regions as part of “historical Poland.” Ironically, in this Russian-Polish rivalry, local Ukrainian patriots were not particularly willing to take an independent stance as a “third actor” and often took the Russian side—which implies that they were at least partially accepting of the idea of a Russian core.

The 1917 Revolution and its aftermath largely invalidated these discourses. They brought the Ukrainian issue to the fore. In many ways, what was going on in interwar Soviet Ukraine had a crucial impact on the Soviet Union. It was exactly at that time that the idea of Ukraine as a “Russian colony” was being publically articulated by some Soviet Ukrainian leaders to defend their autonomous rights to rule their republic. Their resistance together with their colonial discourse was trampled. The situation then took another turn after World War II and the death of Iosif Stalin, when a unified and placated Ukraine was granted the role of a “younger brother” to Russians in the administration of the Soviet Union. Various results included the transfer of Crimea from the Russian Soviet republic to Soviet Ukraine. But the most important fact was probably this: during the last decades of the Soviet Union, the core of the ruling elites in Moscow was made up of the Dnepropetrovsk group, with Leonid Brezhnev as its top representative (which gave birth to a joke that the history of Russia is divided into three periods: pre-Petrine, Petrine, and “Dnepro-Petrine”).

1. Here I would like to draw attention to another thoughtful paper, written by Ilya Gerasimov, that directly addresses the recent Ukrainian revolution: “Ukraine 2014: The First Postcolonial Revolution. Introduction to the Forum,” *Ab Imperio* 15, no. 3 (2014): 22–44.

2. Ivan L. Rudnytsky, “The Role of Ukraine in Modern History” and “Reply,” *Slavic Review* 22, no. 2 (June 1963): 199–216, 256–62.

These facts are well known. Still, it makes sense to recall them when it comes to applying the postcolonial paradigm to the Ukrainian case. Within the Russian empire and the Soviet Union, Ukraine was more core than colony. *Colony* fits the Ukrainian lands of the Habsburg monarchy better. From Vienna's perspective, these lands were political and economical backwaters. In contrast to their compatriots in the Russian empire, local Ukrainians (Ruthenians) were never offered the status of partners—neither in Vienna nor in their respective provinces. Paradoxically, they enjoyed much more extensive political rights than Russian Ukrainians. This together with the necessity of meeting the challenges of rival Polish nationalism turned Habsburg Galicia into a hothouse of Ukrainian nationalism: by the end of the nineteenth century, it found shelter there after recurrent repressions in the Russian empire. On the eve of 1914, Galicia rose to the status of *casus belli* between the Habsburg and Romanov monarchies, second only to the Balkans: Petersburg blamed the Habsburgs for breeding Polish and Ukrainian nationalisms that threatened the integrity of the Russian empire and therefore was determined to destroy this nest of separatisms.³ A bitter irony is that during World War I, Ukrainians from the Habsburg lands, which in many ways may be regarded as an *Austrian* colony, were fighting to liberate Ukrainians from Russian Ukraine, which it was hard to call a colony in a strict sense.

The Ukrainian case represents a wide variety of colonial experiences that are hard to group together under the umbrella of postcolonial theory. In my understanding, one of the most productive approaches is to apply the concept of *internal colonization*, or rather “modernization with internal colonization.” And this is exactly what Snyder does. Still, he limits his approach mostly to the postwar period. One may, however, extend it to the interwar period—most importantly, to Soviet collectivization, which was largely the internal colonization of peasants. The strength of Ukrainian peasants' revolt against collectivization was unparalleled in the Union; only Central Asia came close in the size and gravity of its disturbances. What makes the Ukrainian case distinctive is also the fact that it had an explicit national dimension: Ukrainian peasants, especially in the regions that bordered Poland (western Ukraine), called for a “free Ukraine” or an “independent Ukraine.”⁴ One may be tempted to say that it was the strength of Ukrainian peasant resistance that made Stalin choose Ukraine as a special target for repressions. This together with other factors may help us understand the emergence of the Ukrainian famine—undoubtedly, one of the greatest and the most tragic moments in Ukrainian history that, very much like the Holocaust, is still the subject of academic and political controversies.⁵

In any case, Ukraine's two roles—as the core of the Russian and Soviet projects, on the one hand, and as the center of anti-imperial and anti-Soviet

3. Klaus Bachmann, *Ein Herd der Feindschaft gegen Rußland: Galizien als Krisenherd in den Beziehungen der Donaumonarchie mit Rußland (1907–1914)* (Munich, 2001).

4. See Lynne Viola, *Peasant Rebels under Stalin: Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance* (Oxford, 1996).

5. See Andrea Graziosi, “The Soviet 1931–1933 Famines and the Ukrainian Holodomor: Is a New Interpretation Possible, and What Would Its Consequences Be?,” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 27, nos. 1–4 (2004–05): 97–115.

resistance, on the other—represent two opposite extremes in the varieties of Ukrainian colonial experiences. Ukraine's two roles under Russian and Soviet rule represent these two opposites, while the Habsburg case would fall somewhere in between.⁶ And yet each of these cases in one way or another defies the dichotomies of center/periphery, colonial/colonialized, colonizer/colonized, oppressor/victim, modernized/backward. We may treat Ukraine as a *Sonderkolonie*. One wonders, however, what academic value such a label might add to what we already know.

And here I want to enter the second avenue of approach in engaging with Timothy Snyder. I will start with a digression. Snyder states—and rightly so—that “during the years 1933–45, Ukraine was the most dangerous place in the world.” Still, this statement may be extended to earlier periods. Say, if you were a Jew born by the turn of the twentieth century, Ukraine in 1917–20 was an extremely dangerous place to live as well, given several waves of anti-semitic pogroms that swept over Ukrainian territory. If you were not a Jew, your chances of survival might be higher—but not as high as in, say, the core of the (former) Austro-Hungarian or Russian empires. One example will suffice: while in the imperial cores there were two to four power changes in 1917–20, in the Ukrainian lands the changes numbered six or more.⁷ Kyiv, which became the Ukrainian capital in 1917, witnessed eleven turnovers; L'viv—the capital of the West Ukrainian People's Republic in 1918–19—experienced seven political regime changes. And in a remote railway station in the Donbass, power changed hands twenty-seven times during just the first half of 1919.

The frequency of these power changes reflects Ukraine's special status: it was not just a colony (if it was one!), it was a contested borderlands. Beginning in 1917, it was caught in the middle of several conflicts—the final phase of WWI, the Russian revolution and civil war, the postwar Entente invasion, the military confrontation between Ukrainian nationalism and its rivals, a local civil war between Ukrainian Reds and Whites, and the mass peasant “green” movement, which had both national and social dimensions—that turned into a kind of a Hobbesian war of “all against all.” In many ways, what happened to Ukrainians in 1933–45 was a continuation of the story of 1917–20. Therefore, there seems to be no sufficient grounds to disconnect what happened after 1933 from the things that occurred earlier.

One must, however, ponder where to set the beginning of that story. There are many good reasons to believe that the starting point was not 1919, nor even 1917, but 1914. WWI triggered the processes that brought the “peasants into a nation” and turned them into political actors.⁸ This and the next world war destroyed the traditional worlds of the Ukrainian village and Jewish shtetl, brought about the deportation of Poles and Crimean Tatars, and created a

6. See *Postcolonial Galicia: Prospects and Possibilities*, ed. Klemens Kaps and Jan Surman, special issue of *Historyka* 42 (2012).

7. See the map in Igor Narskii, *Zhizn' v katastrofe: Budni naseleniia Urala v 1917–1922 gg.* (Moscow, 2001), 576.

8. This is the persuasive interpretation that Mark von Hagen has developed in the last decades. See his “On a Post-anti-colonial Reading of Ukraine's History” (paper presented at the conference “Quo Vadis Ukrainian History?,” Ukrainian Research Institute, Harvard University, November 19–20, 2013).

more ethnically homogenized (though bilingual) and overwhelmingly urban community—in short, a modern Ukrainian nation. One may presume that this nation building would have occurred anyway, even without the war and related violence. But then it would most probably have taken much longer.

Here, one could take a step further—or rather back. The whole concept of Ukraine as a nation—even though in its early modern (Cossack) form—emerged during the Khmel'nyts'ki uprising and its aftermath.⁹ The uprising started in the same year the seventeenth-century Thirty Years' War (1618–48) ended. These two events were connected by the religious factor—the rivalry between the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, which affected, among others, eastern Polish borderlands and the local Orthodox Church.

The symbol of Ukrainian identity was the Cossacks. They were not a uniquely Ukrainian phenomenon—we have Russian Cossacks, too. Still, as a Russian-Ukrainian journalist put it, one can narrate Russian history without mentioning Cossacks, but one cannot imagine Ukrainian history without Cossacks.¹⁰ Nationalizing Ukrainian Cossacks was a part of a long-term process that was related to the transformation in Catholic Europe, very much like the Thirty Years' War and the Khmel'nyts'ki uprising were.¹¹ True, the worlds of western and eastern Christianity were entangled long before the Cossacks and their uprisings, and Kievan Rus' was part and parcel of medieval Europe.¹² Still, when it came to nation building, Rus' seemed to lack *l'outillage mental* (book production above all) to imagine itself as a nation.¹³

It took the intensification of west-east encounters to turn Cossacks into Ukrainians. In many ways, this intensification came as a result of the first wave of globalization that started with Christopher Columbus and his discoveries. It triggered the large-scale and interconnected processes of globalization, modernization, and westernization.¹⁴ Coincidentally, 1492 marks the first historical record of Ukrainian Cossacks. Ukraine came into existence as a result of an encounter between these two worlds: the world of Columbus and the world of the Cossacks, the latter a distant and contested borderland in the eastern part of the European continent.

Some intrinsic connections seem to exist between the great European transformations and the making of the Ukrainian nation—be it 1492, 1618–48,

9. Frank E. Sysyn, "The Khmelnytsky Uprising and Ukrainian Nation-Building," *Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 17, nos. 1–2 (Summer–Winter 1992): 141–70.

10. Anatolii Streliaanyi, as quoted in Dmitrii Shurkhalo, "Iubilei samodentifikatsii," Comments.UA, December 18, 2007, at comments.ua/politics/28574-YUibiley-samoidentifikatsii.html (last accessed July 15, 2015).

11. Serhii Plokyh, *The Cossacks and Religion in Early Modern Ukraine* (Oxford, 2001).

12. Christian Raffensperger, *Reimagining Europe: Kievan Rus' in the Medieval World* (Cambridge, Mass., 2012).

13. Markus Osterrieder, "Von der Sakralgemeinschaft zur modernen Nation: Die Entstehung eines Nationalbewußtsein unter Russen, Ukrainern und Weißrussen im Lichte der Thesen Benedict Andersons," in Eva Schmidt-Hartmann, ed., *Formen der nationalen Bewußtsein im Lichte zeitgenössischer Nationalismustheorien: Vorträge der Tagung des Collegium Carolinum in Bad Wiessee vom 31. Oktober bis 3. November 1991* (Munich, 1994), 197–232; Francis J. Thomson, *The Reception of Byzantine Culture in Mediaeval Russia* (Burlington, 1999).

14. Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *1492: The Year the World Began* (New York, 2009).

1914–44, or post-1989/–’91. Modern Ukraine, as has often been said, was born in the baptismal fire of wars and revolutions. This metaphor reveals a certain pattern that puts violence at the center of modernization. Therefore, the history of modern Ukraine provides us with a good opportunity to revise what modernity was. Certainly, colonization involved violence and domination, regardless of whether it was physical or symbolic. Still, as much as they are aspects of modernity, we cannot reduce modernization to violence and domination only. In the same vein, there are “global moments” in modern Ukrainian history that cannot be reduced to relations between core, periphery, and colony.

In my opinion, one may rethink Ukraine globally along other lines. Here I mean a large field of academic production that is related to the so-called great divergence debate, or rethinking the rise of the west. Professional historians rarely walk into this field: they shy away from general explanations and largely abandon the search for long-term origins. In the words of one such professional historian, “What we used to call the *longue durée* has collapsed like a tidied-away telescope.”¹⁵ Still—or luckily enough—economists and political and social scientists have seemed to be less burdened by such considerations. Daron Acemoğlu, Ronald Inglehart, Angus Maddison, Douglass North, and Robert Putnam—to name a few—do use large historical perspectives and reveal that “history matters.” Very much like the postcolonial paradigm, they do revise modernization theories. But unlike this paradigm, their explanations move beyond the relations between core and periphery. Rather, they focus on internal conditions and circumstances by exploring such subjects as social capital, values, and cultural institutions and their (subjects’) impact on the political and economic performance of various states and societies.

I mention these works because they are now widely read and discussed by think tanks working on strategy for Ukrainian reforms. Since I am a member of one such a think tank, I know this from personal experience.¹⁶ From 2010 on, I, together with my colleagues, have been saying that contrary to Belarus and Russia, the authoritarian regime in Ukraine did not have a chance of survival. I was among those who early on (in February 2012) wrote that revolution was in the air. In the spring of 2013, I predicted that it could happen within several months. Our conclusions about an imminent revolution in Ukraine were not drawn from wishful thinking but based on data and analysis from the World Values Survey.¹⁷ The survey on Ukraine revealed, among other findings, that in the aughts Ukrainian society has seen a shift toward self-expression values. Once such a shift occurs, democracy becomes increasingly likely to prevail over authoritarian regimes.¹⁸ There are two main groups that

15. *Ibid.*, 315. For an alternative view, see, most recently, Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge, Eng., 2014).

16. I am a member of Nestoriv’s ka grupa, at nestorgroup.org (last accessed July 15, 2015). For a similar group, Nova Ukraina, see novaukraina.org (last accessed July 15, 2015).

17. See the World Values Survey, at www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp (last accessed August 7, 2015).

18. Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence* (Cambridge, Eng., 2005).

embody these values: the new middle class that arose in the postindustrial (service) economy, and the younger generation that emerged in conditions of relative democracy post-2004. To a large extent, the Euromaidan was their revolution. It belongs to the same category of social phenomena as the Occupy movement, Bolotnaia Square in Moscow, Taksim Square in Turkey, and student protests in Bulgaria and Hong Kong.

Our analysis differs radically from those interpretations that rely on a postcolonial paradigm. The latter focus on the field of cultural production and ultimately reduce cultural dominance and differentiation to the language issue.¹⁹ As interesting as these interpretations sound, they seem to be of little relevance in terms of explaining what is going on in Ukraine. For instance, in a piece on the 2014 fighting around the Donetsk airport, *Los Angeles Times* correspondent Sergei Loiko noted that inside the airport, Ukrainian military forces used exclusively Russian as their operative language and Ukrainian was nowhere to be heard. What struck him the most was how pure, cultured, and almost literary their Russian was.²⁰

To conclude, I deeply sympathize and solidarize with Snyder's suggestion that we, both Ukrainian historians and historians of Ukraine, "go global." I do not necessarily see, however, the postcolonial paradigm as the only or even the most efficient one to help bring the Ukrainian past and present into the global context.

19. See Mykola Riabchuk, *Vid Malorosii do Ukriany: Paradoksy zapizniloho natsietvorennya* (Kyiv, 2000), and *Dvi Ukrainy: Real' i mezhi, virtual' ni viiny* (Kyiv, 2003). For a critique, see my *Strasti za natsionalizmom: Istroychni esei* (Kyiv, 2004).

20. See "Zapreshennyi v Rossii efir 'Ekha Moskvyy' ob aeroporte: 'Zdes' dobro srazaetsia s orkami," Tsenzop.net, November 1, 2014, at censor.net.ua/resonance/309821/zapreshennyi_v_rossii_efir_eha_moskvyy_ob_aeroporte_zdes_dobro_srazaetsya_s_orkami (last accessed July 15, 2015).