

R E C E N Z J E ,    O M Ó W I E N I A

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DID DNIPRO “FINISH” ITS HISTORICAL ENTANGLEMENT IN 2022?  
ON THE MONOGRAPH OF DNIPRO CITY’S HISTORY BY ANDRII PORTNOV

It is rare to find a book title more apt than the one selected by Andrii Portnov for his monograph *Dnipro. An Entangled History of a European City*.<sup>1</sup> The reason I claim so is not the fact that he holds the office of the Chair of Entangled History of Ukraine at the Europa Universität Viadrina Frankfurt (Oder) or that he heads the Prisma Ukraïna Forum Transregionale Studien program in Berlin, both of which occupy an important place on the map of contemporary Eastern Europe research centres in Germany. Nor is it due to the seminars he has been conducting for many years, promoting an approach to Ukraine through the prism of *entangled history*. Primarily, I claim so because Portnov, in publishing the first English-language monograph on the history of Katerynoslav (1776–1926), then Dnipropet-

rovska (1926–2016), and now Dnipro (since 2016), today the fourth largest city in Ukraine by population, has expertly demonstrated how to apply this approach to the past in practice.

The term *entangled history* (*histoire croisée*) refers to a transcultural alternative to a history that simultaneously essentialises the past, enabling it to be appropriated by a community with a defined identity, and legitimises the contemporary nation, providing it with the exclusive right to rule over a specific territory. According to Hans Henning Hahn and Robert Traba,<sup>2</sup> the precursor to this alternative was the German historian Klaus Zernack, who in the 1970s proposed the idea of *Beziehungsgeschichte* (*relationship history*).<sup>3</sup> However, while Zernack

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<sup>1</sup>Academic Studies Press, Boston 2022, 376 pp. [numbers of cited pages in the body text, in brackets].

<sup>2</sup>Hans H. Hahn, Robert Traba, O czym (nie) opowiadają polsko-niemieckie miejsca pamięci, in: Robert Traba, Hans H. Hahn (ed.), *Polsko-niemieckie miejsca pamięci*, vol. 1, Scholar, Warszawa 2015, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup>Klaus Zernack, Das Jahrtausend deutsch-polnischer Beziehungsgeschichte als Problemfeld und Forschungsaufgabe, in: Wolfgang

was interested in a transcultural approach to history focusing on the relationship between two neighbouring nations, the researchers advancing the concept of *entangled* history have elaborated on his idea to extend its range of application to every neighbourhood constellation — not just nations, and not just bilateral relations.<sup>4</sup>

This is the path chosen by Portnov. He portrays the history of his home city from two perspectives: the crossing of different cultural influences within it, and attempts to involve it in grand political and identity projects. The book then tells the story not of the history of a part of the Ukrainian nation, but rather of the histories of Cossacks, Ukrainians, Russians, Jews, Germans, Poles and Tatars, as well as eastern Christians, Judaists, Catholics, Protestants and Muslims, and at the same time of the transformations of the societal space to which they all contributed. Portnov also combines “the general (total) history approach with the microhistory of one location” (p. 9). The former is composed of processes and phenomena both of a global character — such as building an empire, colonisation of the Wild Field (the idea of *the frontier*), industrialisation, revolution, class and national ideologies — and regional, such as the Russian “Enlightened Police State” in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Ukrainian national project of local intelligentsia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, or the Bolsheviks’ policy of indigenisation towards non-Russians (*korenizatsiia*) in the USSR in the 1920s. The author paints a picture of modern-day Dnipro as a result of the influence of numerous projects, none of which has been

H. Fritze, Władysław Filipowiak (ed.), *Grundfragen der geschichtlichen Beziehungen zwischen Deutschen, Polaben und Polen*, Berlin 1976, pp. 3–46.

<sup>4</sup>See Michael G. Müller, *Historia narodowa, historia wzajemnych oddziaływań i (po)dzielone miejsca pamięci. Tradycje i wyzwania metodologiczne*, in: Robert Traba, Hans H. Hahn (ed.), *Polsko-niemieckie miejsca pamięci*, vol. 4, Scholar, Warszawa 2013.

completed (*the unfinished city*). He describes a society that never had “a single national majority, well-established self-identification, or a broadly recognized mythology” (*ibidem*). As is revealed in the book’s Epilogue, the people of Dnipro only recently made their most significant identity choice: in the face of the Russian invasion in 2014, unlike the nearby Donetsk, they resisted being drawn into a revolt against Kyiv and took a stand on the side of Ukraine.

In the city’s history there have been attempts to accomplish three great projects, which were interrupted first by the petering out of Russia’s territorial expansion at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, then by the revolution of 1917–21, the Second World War in 1941–45 and the fall of the USSR in 1991. These events demarcate the turning points in Portnov’s monograph, which is arranged chronologically and comprises an Introduction, six chapters, and an Epilogue.

The first of these projects was borne of an idea by Catherine II (Empress of Russia 1762–1796) and her favourite Prince Grigory Potemkin, triumphant general in the wars against the Ottoman Empire and general-governor of Novorossia in 1775–91. Construction had begun in 1776 of Katerynoslav (the city of Catherine’s glory) on the banks of the Dnipro in the Zaporizhia region, where Russia had just razed the Cossack Sich to the ground. In Sankt Petersburg, the “northern capital”, it was even rumoured that it was to become the “southern capital” of the Russian Empire. Construction was also guided by the idea of building a “new Athens”, part of the Greek project of retaking from the Turks the northern and western coasts of the Black Sea all the way to Constantinople, and the restoration of the Byzantine Empire. Ultimately, this Russian project fell short of its goal, while the city itself bore the costs of the excessive scale of investment and the unfocused efforts of the authorities. Subsequently it was meant to be located in two different places, the reasons including the transportation diffi-

culties incurred by crossing the rapids of the Dnipro river (in Ukrainian called *porohy*). It turned out that the role of “southern capital” was vied for more effectively by the ports built near the mouths of the Dnipro and the Dniester — Kherson, Mykolaiv and Odessa. While the city was briefly animated in 1787, when it was officially visited by the Empress, it remained a small local hub, and it merely subsisted until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The second project for the development of Katerynoslav was the result of significant foreign capital investments in metallurgy after the discovery of iron ore in the nearby Kryvyi Rih and the city’s connection to the empire’s rail network. Until 1917 the region accounted for around half of Russia’s production of steel goods. Portnov weaves his tale of the highs and lows of industrialisation in the “southern Manchester”, depicting the lack of concern among the authorities for the social consequences of capitalist development. According to the imperial census of 1897, in Katerynoslav the Russian (Great Russian) language was used by 41.7% of the population, Yiddish by 35.4%, and Ukrainian (Little Russian) by 15.7%. He covers extensively the life of the city’s Jewish community — from their share in the ownership of the means of production and the functioning of the kahal self-governing community, to the Zionist and socialist ideas after the anti-Jewish pogroms, which occurred in the city three times: in 1883, during the revolution of 1905, and after the arrival of General Denikin’s army in 1919. He emphasises the role of the state, which secretly stoked antisemitic moods and delayed the usage of force to quell the violent outbursts. He describes the nation-building efforts of the Ukrainian intelligentsia to anchor the popular consciousness in Cossack traditions, but notes that until 1917 these were successful in the surrounding villages but not in the city itself. Ultimately, he interprets the Katerynoslav of that epoch as “an example of *imperial multiculturalism*”. A point of reference for the city is,

for Portnov, industrial Łódź in the Kingdom of Poland. It was better known in Europe, partially thanks to literary descriptions at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which portrayed “a new type of person — *Lodzermensch*, a product of transnational industrial culture” (p. 121).

The period most vividly depicted in Portnov’s history of Katerynoslav is the revolution of 1917–21. The city was at that point subjected to as many as twenty transitions of power, nearly all of which entailed robberies, rapes and the loss of life. The Bolsheviks, who ultimately emerged victorious from this confrontation, only succeeded in taking a firm hold on the seventh attempt. The Ukrainian People’s Republic — the state whose successor modern Ukraine considers itself — only extended control over Katerynoslav in April of 1918 and January of 1919. Numerous troops operating in the area carried out anti-Jewish pogroms, which became a kind of legitimising ritual meant to demonstrate the capabilities and ruthlessness of the new authorities. Portnov is again primarily interested in the point of view of the ordinary participants of those events. He draws heavily from the observations of princess Vera Urusova, a Russian aristocrat, who described the warring parties from a reserved perspective. He analyses the sources of popular support for, on the one hand, Hetman Skoropadsky’s Ukrainian State, and on the other — the peasant army of Nestor Makhno. Both of these projects are interpreted in contemporary Ukrainian historiography as more or less national. As demonstrated by Portnov, this is fairly accurate for the former, although in practice it relied on secret cooperation with the Russian elites. When it comes to the latter, it was in fact indifferent towards the national question, and based its popularity on the individual charisma of its leader, along with the peasants’ need for retaliation against the cities they identified as the source of the rural oppression.

After the revolution, the “southern Manchester” was the most devastated city in Ukraine. Although its dynamic growth waned

in the 1920s, during the Stalinist modernisation of the next decade the authorities carried out grand investment plans in the city, as transpired following the “Ukrainisation” language experiment and Sovietisation of the symbolic space. Portnov interprets the former as a political instrument meant to garner the support of the Ukrainian peasantry, which became unnecessary once agricultural collectivisation was introduced. He also maintains a critical stance towards the overall approach to the national question in the USSR itself, which on the one hand categorised the identity of citizens along ethnic lines, while on the other blocking the establishing of nations as political communities. An expression of the Sovietisation was the renaming of the city in 1926 to Dnipropetrovsk after the famous Bolshevik Hryhorii Petrovsky, the chairman of Ukraine’s Central Executive Committee at the time. This figure has proved to be similarly divisive in regard to the stances and identifications of the inhabitants of the city he was active in before the revolution. On the one hand an apparatchik loyal to Stalin, on the other — an official trying to defend the interests of the Ukrainian SSR from the central authorities who lost his post during the Great Purge. In writing of the transformations of the 1930s, the author omits none of the authorities’ crimes, while at the same time avoiding popular interpretative patterns — that of totalitarianism with regard to the regime, and that of genocide with regard to the Great Hunger. According to Portnov, the feeling of the contemporaneous residents of the city of taking part in something perpetually “unfinished” was best expressed by the local writer Victor Petrov (Domontovych) in the novel *Without Foundation* (*Без ґрунту*).

The scale of the devastation wrought in occupied Dnipropetrovsk by the Second World War is seen most starkly in the change in population. Before the invasion by the Third Reich in June 1941, the city’s population numbered 560,000; by the time the Red Army returned in October 1943, it was only 1–

–3,000, but as a consequence of the rapid post-war rebuilding it had already risen to 600,000 by 1954. The ethnic composition of the city was also fundamentally altered. While in 1933 Ukrainians accounted for 36% of the population, with Jews at 26%, by the end of 1941 the former had risen to as much as 70%, and the latter had dropped to only 0.4%. 30,000 Jews who had not fled following the invasion had died, of whom as many as 11,000 in a single massacre perpetrated by the *Einsatzkommando 6* on 13–14 October 1941. The war, as portrayed by Portnov, favoured neither of the projects. The populace generally stuck to a wait-and-see strategy. The Soviet underground was weak in comparison with northern Ukraine, and the emissaries of the covert Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists sent from Galicia and Volhynia failed to find a common language with the people of the eastern part of the country. The Germans, while they recruited as many as 76,000 *Volksdeutsche* in the entire oblast and permitted the organisation of Ukrainian cultural and religious activity, in fact generally pursued a colonial policy, seen in, among other things, the archaeological, geological and population research they conducted. Some Jews returned to Dnipropetrovsk after the German retreat. Antisemitic sentiments rose after the war, sparked by disputes over the ownership of property seized during the occupation. It was most probably only the unexpected death of Stalin in 1953 that led the authorities to abandon their plan to deport Jews from the European part of the country to Siberia.

From the 1950s, however, the wheel of fortune was turning once again — and Dnipropetrovsk became the stage of the third grand project in its history. It was selected to be a hub of physics and Soviet ballistic missile production, which elevated it to the role of one of the most important places in the world during the Cold War. Around half of the city’s population of 1 million was involved in this industry, and the conditions for science

were better there than in Kyiv, the capital of the Ukrainian SSR. The city's position as the "rocket city" was so high that in the decade around the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its founding, celebrated in 1976, it was unofficially considered the third city in the Soviet hierarchy — after Moscow and Leningrad. It enjoyed the protection of Leonid Brezhnev, the leader of the USSR in 1964–82, whose party career had begun in the nearby Dniprodzerzhynsk. Dnipropetrovsk was among the highest earning and best supplied hubs in the USSR, but it paid for its success with the status of a partially closed city; its arms production was classified, and it was off-limits to foreigners — even from other communist states. Portnov paints a vivid picture of the transformations in culture and identity from 1960 to 1980. On the one hand there was a rise in the domination of the Russian language, while on the other a movement emerged for the protection of human rights and Ukrainian cultural heritage in the face of progressing unification and technicisation of life, as well as environmental pollution. Dnipropetrovsk was included in the operations of this movement primarily due to the resurgence of interest in the Zaporizhyan Cossacks. The preservation of this legacy was called for even by members of the republican elite Petro Shelest, First Secretary of the Communist Party of Ukraine (CPU; 1963–72), and Oles Honchar, head of the Union of Writers of Ukraine, author of the novel *A Cathedral (Sobor)*. The authorities could no longer turn back the tide of this social Cossackophilia, and only tried to interpret the historical Cossacks as a movement of class struggle and for Ukraine's unification with Russia.

Dnipropetrovsk did not play a key role in the transformations of the *perestroika* period or in Ukraine gaining independence in 1991. In the eyes of the country's population it appeared to be a source of (post)nomenklatura leaders, who built oligarchic governments in the capital. Both Volodymyr Schcherbytsky, First Secretary of the CPU (1972–89), and Leonid Kuchma,

the president of Ukraine (1994–2004), came from the city. The "Dnipropetrovsk clan" did, however, lose its influence over the state as a consequence of the Orange revolution in 2004, and were outcompeted by the rival "Donetsk clan" after Volodymyr Yanukovych took office as president in 2010.

Rapid deindustrialisation and the loss of the "special" city status paved the way to shifts in the symbolic space. Portnov describes both the unrealised idea of rewinding the official genealogy of the city as far back as the Cossack hamlet of Samar founded in 1524, as well as the completed revival of Jewish life due to the establishing of Menorah, the largest cultural and spiritual centre in Ukraine, in 2012. Let us quote in full his opinion with regard to the contemporary approach to the past in three large Ukrainian cities:

"If post-Soviet Lviv looked for its 'golden age' in the times when this city was part of the Austrian Empire, and post-Soviet Odessa — to its history as part of the Russian Empire, then post-Soviet Dnipropetrovsk found its heyday in the times of Brezhnev" (p. 320).

The author argues that Brezhnev's "golden age" mythology preserved in the city after 1991 "rested on its ideological uncertainty and amorphousness" (p. 321). It was in itself an expression of nostalgia for the lost metropolis status and "did not restore Soviet ideologemes, but adapted their selective fragment to a different context and, simultaneously, contributed to the neutralization of the Soviet past as a topic that potentially had political relevance" (*ibidem*). That he is right in denying this memory the potential for political mobilisation is proved by the unambiguous stance of the local elites and society towards the Russian military intervention in Ukraine in 2014. The regional administration was headed by a banker, industrial and media baron, the oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky, who identifies with the Jewish community in Ukraine. The city became the

centre of personnel, material and hospital reserves for the front in Donbas. In social awareness it “moved” from the East to the Centre, and even became known as a barricade that “saved Ukraine” with its determination.

However, today the most interesting research issue appears to be the degree to which Portnov’s observations of the locals’ memory will endure after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Will the view that the city’s population needs no unified narrative of the past to remain united in building the future still be an accurate assessment? After the breakthrough in Kyiv in 2014, on the one hand they spontaneously honoured the heroes and victims of the Euromaidan, with groups of activists toppling statues of Lenin and Petrovsky, on the other — the city council mounted a cunning resistance to executing the 2015 decommunization bill. They proposed leaving the name Dnipropetrovsk, arguing that the second part of the name would no longer derive from Petrovsky’s surname, but from the name of St Peter! Meanwhile the proponents of far-reaching change pushed for the name Sicheslav, harkening back to the tradition of the Zaporizhyan Sich. Ultimately in 2016 the Verkhovna Rada in Kyiv, exposed to multiple different proposals, chose the name Dnipro, which — as symbolically neutral — was supported by the greatest number of inhabitants. Nevertheless, the decommunization of public space in 2014–22 has fundamentally altered the face of the city. Street names have been changed not to those from before Sovietisation, but to ones expressing symbols of the Ukrainian national canon. The main arteries took the names of the people who had done the most for the city and for Ukraine. Karl Marx street was renamed after Dmytro Yavornytsky, a historian of the Cossacks and long-time director of the local museum, while Sergei Kirov street — after Oleksandr Pol’, a geologist and archaeologist, discoverer of local iron ore deposits. Even before 24 February 2002, streets in Dnipro already bore — as in

many cities across the country — the names of emblematic representatives of the nationalistic movement in World War II, Roman Shukhevych and Dmytro Dontsov.

Portnov, in keeping with the rules of the historian’s practice, did not include the period after the invasion in the book. It should be noted that this period has brought a new wave of change to the city, this time in the form of an unambiguous de-russification policy. The question as to what has ultimately been struck from Ukraine’s history in its current identity project, and whether its implementation in Dnipro will afford the city’s symbolic space a finally “finished” character, can only be answered by the author of the next study.

In any case, Portnov’s historical tale of Katerynoslav / Dnipropetrovsk / Dnipro faithfully and consequently reflects the *entangled* character of the city’s history. What is still up for discussion, and which I will only manage to briefly outline here, is the meaning of the second part of the title: a *European City*. The image of the multicultural Dnipro corresponds to the images of cities in Western Europe, teeming with cultures from around the world. Yet the latter only started to become such cities in the 1960s; before that, they went through almost a century of class and symbolical unification conducted by the governments of the *nationalising nation-states*. A similar experience was shared by the cities of Central Europe, even up until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In comparison with them, as well as with cities in Western Ukraine after the elimination of the Jews and the departure of the Poles during World War II, Dnipro remains an unusual city. It still bears fresh post-imperial scars, unexperienced in other parts of Europe, or experienced, but so long ago that they have become completely covered with successive cultural layers. Will the integration of Ukraine into the EU contribute to making Dnipro a new kind of city in the European palette, one that did not require cultural unification to create its own identity? For the answer to this question we will have to ask Andrii Portnov in about a decade.