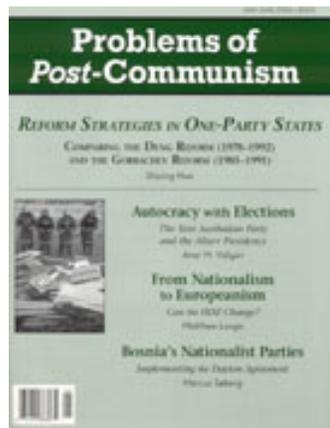


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Alexander J. Motyl ^a

^a Rutgers University Newark

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Can Ukraine Have a History?

Alexander J. Motyl

Ukraine's emerging national narratives, like those of other newly independent states, need to find their place among and within other, sometimes conflicting, established narratives.

WRITING in 1995, Mark von Hagen posed a provocative question: "Does Ukraine Have a History?" The present essay explores the logical consequences for and compatibility with existing non-Ukrainian historical narratives of independent Ukraine's emerging historical narratives.¹ I construct a set of "ideal-type" narratives—Soviet, Russian, Polish, Jewish, and Western—and investigate the degree to which they are or are not compatible with ideal-type Ukrainian national narratives. Most of the contemporary conflicts over history in Ukraine are the result of logical incompatibilities between national narratives, and a common narrative is possible only between logically compatible narratives. Ukraine can therefore have a history only in the context of logically compatible non-Ukrainian historical narratives.

Historical Controversies in Ukraine

The past three years have witnessed four major historical controversies in Ukraine—two surrounding leaders of the organized Ukrainian nationalist movement, Roman Shukhevych and Stepan Bandera, one surrounding the hetman, Ivan Mazepa, and one involving the Great Famine of 1932–33, known as the *Holodomor*. In each case, the Ukrainian state—or, more exactly, then-president Viktor Yushchenko—organized official commemorations. Although Yushchenko was widely identified with these issues, his commemorations actually drew from extensive historical research and writing by Ukrainian scholars and publicists who attempted to incorporate these individuals and events into emergent Ukrainian national narratives. These attempts at incorporation invariably

ALEXANDER J. MOTYL is a professor of political science at Rutgers University Newark. He is the author of six books, including *Revolutions, Nations, Empires: Conceptual Limits and Theoretical Possibilities* (Columbia University Press, 1999) and *Imperial Ends: The Decline, Collapse, and Revival of Empires* (Columbia University Press, 2001).



Ukrainian hetman Ivan Mazepa appears on the 10-hryvna banknote. Ukraine and Russia are at odds over Mazepa's legacy, with Moscow calling him a traitor to Tsar Peter the Great and Kyiv honoring him as a fighter for independence. (AP Photo/Sergei Chuzavkov)

produced howls of protest from neighboring states and non-Ukrainian historians, who usually viewed them as nefarious, hyper-nationalist endeavors to promote a narrow Ukrainian nationalism and reject existing understandings of history. Russia and Russian historians responded violently to all four commemorations, as did pro-Soviet Ukrainians. Poland and Polish historians, as well as Israel and Israeli/Jewish historians, took umbrage with the treatment of Shukhevych and Bandera, viewing their historical incorporation as an attempt to justify, whitewash, or ignore the Ukrainian nationalist movement's anti-Polish and anti-Jewish activities.

The fact that these incorporations—like similar incorporations of individuals and events in the Baltic states and other non-Russian republics—followed identical trajectories and provoked identical outcries suggests that the controversies were not the handiwork of the hyper-nationalist mastermind Yushchenko but, rather, symptoms of deeper tendencies within the logics of the emergent historical narratives of these countries. The protests were not serendipitous responses to serendipitous events, but logically predetermined responses to logically predetermined events. A closer look at history and at national narratives explains this point in detail.

What Is History?

I adopt the view of history developed by Arthur C. Danto in *Narration and Knowledge*.² In this view, there is and can be no perfect and complete “ideal chronicle” (*pace* Leopold von Ranke's *wie es eigentlich gewesen sei*—“the way it actually was”), as a chronicle of every single historical fact would just amount to an infinite collection of facts. In reality, all historians always and everywhere write imperfect and incomplete narratives that make

sense for historians writing from particular perspectives and vantage points reflective of their place in time. Every history is therefore partial, and every history is therefore “slanted.”

Although Danto's view of history may, at first glance, appear to coincide with possible postmodernist claims about indeterminacy, meaninglessness, subjectivism, and relativism, it is actually rooted in traditional understandings of history. Facts exist in Danto's reading, and historians are able to determine what they are. Historians must therefore pay obeisance to chronological time, they must produce coherent narratives, and they must demonstrate that the facts they claim as facts are indeed facts—that is, supported by persuasive evidence. Histories can therefore be “objective” accounts of what happened, but they can never be full or final accounts produced from some transcendental point of view. Multiple histories of anything are as inevitable and unavoidable as multiple lines intersecting one single point. Thus, a feminist history can be as good, or as bad, as an anti- or non-feminist history. A nationalist or national history can, by the same logic, be as good, or as bad, as an anti-nationalist or non-national history.

If this view of history is persuasive, then it follows that prevalent or dominant—or hegemonic—historical narratives are histories that correspond to, reflect, embody, or incorporate certain present-day concerns. Such narratives may or may not be better as coherently organized chronological arrangements of facts, but they appear to be better because we—or, more precisely, historians and reading publics—deem them better. *Ceteris paribus*, certain histories strike us as “better” than others, not because they offer intrinsically better narratives of facts as facts, but because they are more relevant to present-day concerns. Thus, a feminist history may strike us as a better reading of something than a non-feminist history, but—*ceteris paribus*—that is so, not so much because “the way it actually was” is demonstrably feminist, as because, inspired by feminism, we look for, and find, feminist facts in “the way it actually was.”

The inevitability of dominant narratives invariably transforms nondominant narratives into challengers that rock the boat. New nondominant narratives will, from the viewpoint of existing dominant narratives, always appear as upstarts—revisionists that threaten to upend the right and established way of seeing things. Feminist history was treated in just this manner until it finally became part of the mainstream. Similarly, every formerly colonized nation has had to assert itself historically in the face of the existing dominant narrative, which, unsurprisingly, has usually

been formed by the former empire of elites, groups, or professions with established historical narratives.

National Narratives: State, People, or Territory

There is no necessary reason to write “national narratives”—one can, after all, write the history of salt, sex, celebrities, unknown toilers, and so on—but for better or worse, many, if not most, histories are written in this manner. Thus, there are histories of France, Russia, England, Italy, Japan, Brazil, the United States, and every other country, and there are histories of bits and pieces of the general histories of France, Russia, England, Italy, Japan, Brazil, the United States, and every other country. Unsurprisingly, newly independent nations and states have a proclivity for these types of narratives, because independence both creates a particular perspective or vantage point for history writing and arguably demands that national narratives emerge to provide legitimacy for the new nations and states.

There are three imaginable types of such national narratives. Consider a newly independent state called Slobbovia. First, one can write a history of the Slobbovian *state*. That would entail tracing all the political formations that somehow contributed to the emergence and consolidation of the administrative and coercive apparatus known as the State of Slobbovia. Second, one can write a history of the Slobbovian *people*, or nation. That would entail tracing all the social, economic, political, and cultural developments that led to the emergence and consolidation of a self-conscious ethno-cultural community called the Slobbovians. Third, one can write a history of the *territory* of Slobbovia. That would entail tracing all the relationships between and among all the people and peoples inhabiting the territory of Slobbovia. Obviously, historians may write narratives that try to combine all three strands. Just as obviously, the historians who write these narratives may or may not be native Slobbovians.

Which of these narratives is better or best? The answer is that, *ceteris paribus*, they are all equally good or all equally bad. If the historians do their homework, act with integrity, and arrange genuine facts in logically coherent chronological narratives, then each resulting narrative is valid. Obviously, if the historian’s perspective is statehood, the history of the Slobbovian state is the way to go. If the historian is interested in the nation, then the history of the Slobbovian people is the optimal approach. And if the historian is interested in the territory, then the history of the Slobbovian territory and its peoples is preferable. Combining all

three strands into one narrative is not necessarily better—or worse—than any of these three alternatives. A mega-narrative may look better because it is more comprehensive, but we know from Danto that comprehensiveness is arguably an elusive goal. Similarly, a mega-narrative could actually be incoherent and thereby violate one of the historian’s key goals—to produce a coherent narrative.

Let us now engage in two intellectual experiments regarding the relationship between dominant narratives and emergent national narratives. As noted above, narratives will be equally good or equally bad precisely because I have appended the *ceteris paribus* clause to my argument. That is, I am excluding from consideration, by definition, any and all narratives that are purposely and consciously written to advance certain ideological, political, or other agendas. The historians in this intellectual experiment are honest historians interested only in presenting a chronologically coherent narrative of some state, nation, or territory. They have no axes to grind, but wish only to tell the story. If I can show that dominant and emergent historical narratives will, even under such ideal-type conditions, be compatible or incompatible, then the inclusion of politics and ideology will, of course, only deepen the compatibilities or incompatibilities.

Narratives About Ukraine

Although Ukrainian historians have produced histories since at least the nineteenth century—the works of Mykola Kostomarov, Mykola Drahomanov, Mykhaylo Hrushevskyi, and Vyacheslav Lypynskyi come to mind—they have never had the status of dominant narratives, except perhaps among Ukrainian émigrés in Western Europe or North America. As a result, Ukraine became independent in 1991 within the historical and historiographic setting of already existing, and, for the most part, non-Ukrainian, narratives about its state, nation, and territory. These already existing narratives formed a set of dominant, if not indeed hegemonic, views about Ukraine—not because, to repeat, they were more correct or more persuasive intrinsically, but simply because they had existed and been institutionalized for several decades or, possibly, even centuries. The emergent Ukrainian national narratives thus challenged the primacy of the historical status quo represented by Soviet, Russian imperial, Russian national, Polish national, Jewish Zionist, Jewish Bundist, and Western narratives.

Logically, the emergent Ukrainian historical narratives had to correspond with the above three ideal types of national narratives emphasizing state, nation, or terri-



A photographer takes a photo of three volunteers placing their heads in holes of a big poster depicting soldiers of the anti-Soviet Ukrainian Insurgent Army, in Kyiv. On March 5, 2010, Ukrainians marked the sixtieth anniversary of the death of Roman Shukhevych, the leader of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army. Shukhevych died in combat with Soviet special interior units near Ukraine's western city of Lviv. In 2007, he was posthumously awarded the title "Hero of Ukraine," the country's highest honor. (AP Photo/Efrem Lukatsky)

tory. Thus, a Ukrainian *state* narrative would necessarily begin Ukraine's history in Rus; carry it through the Cossack rebellions of, especially, Bohdan Khmelnytskyi and Ivan Mazepa, the failed attempt to build a state in 1917–21, and the activities of the integral nationalists of the interwar period and World War II; and conclude with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the role therein of Ukrainian dissidents. Honest historians concerned with the history of the Ukrainian state could not fail to include all these entities, individuals, and events in a state narrative. They might disagree on the relative importance of entities, individuals, and events, and they might evaluate them differently, but they could not fail to conclude that all these entities, individuals, and events must be included in a state narrative.

A Ukrainian *people* narrative would have the same historical sweep as the state narrative, while focusing on how state building, together with developments in the

society, culture, and economy, led to the emergence of nationally conscious Ukrainians (in particular, self-styled nationalists) and, eventually, a distinctly Ukrainian nation. Here, too, honest historians could not ignore states, elites, state builders, and nationalists, even though they might disagree on how to evaluate them.

Finally, a Ukrainian *territory* narrative would tell the story of relations between and among peasants, landlords, merchants, Ukrainians, Russians, Poles, Jews, Ruthenians, Catholics, the Orthodox, and so on. Honest historians could probably downplay Ukrainian state-building processes, but they could not ignore nation building and nationalism in general, social and economic relations, cultural tensions, and the like—between and among all these nations, peoples, classes, and groups.

A Soviet narrative, like its twin Russian imperial narrative, contradicts the state and nation versions of the Ukrainian national narrative and is compatible only with the

Table 1

Relations Between Ukrainian and Non-Ukrainian Narratives

Ukrainian narrative	Soviet/Russian imperial narrative	Russian/Polish national narrative	Jewish Zionist narrative	Jewish Bundist narrative	Western narrative
Ukrainian state	Incompatible	Compatible	Incompatible	Compatible	Compatible
Ukrainian nation	Incompatible	Compatible	Incompatible	Compatible	Compatible
Ukrainian territory	Compatible	Compatible	Incompatible	Compatible	Compatible

territory version. Thus, according to the Soviet/Russian imperial version, especially if practiced by honest historians with no axes to grind, Rus is either non-Ukrainian, Russian, or at best multinational; the Cossacks (with the sole exception of Khmelnytskyi, who wisely opted for union with Russia) are either troublemakers or traitors; the Ukrainian nationalists of both the World War I and World War II periods are German puppets or fascists; and the collapse of the Soviet Union is, in Vladimir Putin's words, "a great tragedy." On the other hand, the Soviet and Russian imperial narratives can both easily accommodate Ukraine as a territory with many diverse peoples, especially if it can be shown that they yearn for Russian overlordship.

In contrast, any distinctly Russian national narrative—one that focuses on the Russian state as it currently exists or on the Russian people or the territory of Russia—can easily coexist with any Ukrainian national narrative. There will, of course, be points of contention, because Russia's relations with Ukraine, in any of the three imaginable versions, involve conflict and bloodshed, but none of these contentious issues necessarily undermines the logically compatible historical narratives of the Russian and Ukrainian states, nations, or territories. The same logic applies to the relationship between any Polish historical narrative and any Ukrainian one. If the former is imperial, then incompatibilities are inevitable. If it is national, points of disagreement will exist, but they will not necessarily mar the logical compatibility of the narrative.

In contrast to the logically harmonious relationship between Russian/Polish and Ukrainian national narratives, the relationship between a Jewish national narrative and a Ukrainian national narrative is intrinsically conflictual if the former is "Zionist" and potentially compatible if it is "Bundist." A Zionist narrative presents the history of Jews in Ukraine as a history of anti-Semitism and pogroms. From that point of view, every possible Ukrainian narrative is necessarily only a chapter in the history of violence perpetrated by Ukrainians against Jews and teleologically culminating in the Holocaust. In contrast, a Bundist nar-

rative, emphasizing relations between Ukrainians and Jews in a territory called Ukraine, can be compatible—but if and only if these relations are viewed in all their complexity and multidimensionality, and binaries (such as evil Ukrainians and good Jews or evil Jews and good Ukrainians) are eschewed.

Prevailing Western narratives can easily accommodate any Ukrainian narrative, at least in principle, as the overriding reality of Western narratives is that they resoundingly ignore Ukraine as a state, nation, or even territory. In this sense, although introducing Ukraine into Western narratives will obviously take time, because converting a nothing into a something is intrinsically difficult, there is no reason that Ukraine cannot coexist as state, nation, or territory with the national narratives of Germany, France, the United States, and other countries.

Can Common Narratives Be Forged?

Obviously, common narratives—even assuming such a thing is possible in Arthur Danto's view of history—between some Ukrainian and some non-Ukrainian narratives can arise only if the narratives are compatible. As Table 1 suggests, such a project is theoretically possible in most cases. Whether it is also practically possible is another issue.

Soviet and Russian imperial narratives can coexist with a Ukrainian territory narrative. For better or for worse, however, Ukrainians committed to state- or nation-building projects generally find this solution unacceptable. In contrast, Ukrainian and Polish historians, like Ukrainian and Polish policymakers, have been able to forge something resembling a "common narrative" without too much difficulty. Sticking points remain—such as the anti-Polish activities of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army before and during World War II—but they are flies in the ointment precisely because narrative compatibility exists across the board.

There is, according to this logic, no way for any

Ukrainian narrative to be reconciled with a Zionist narrative. If Ukrainians are state and nation builders and can coexist with other peoples in a territory, they cannot just be represented as vicious anti-Semites preparing for the Holocaust. And if Jews are only victims of age-old Ukrainian anti-Semitism, they cannot coexist with Ukrainian attempts at building a state or nation or, for that matter, even exist. A Bundist narrative that views Jews and Ukrainians as neighbors—albeit frequently hostile neighbors—can coexist with any Ukrainian narrative. A story of good and bad Ukrainians interacting with good and bad Jews can be constructed as long as both sides are willing to admit the possibility of good and evil in their national narratives.

Last but not least, there is no logical reason that Ukraine cannot be included in Western narratives. Inclusion will be difficult for the simple reason that Western historians and Western publics are astoundingly ignorant of Ukraine and thus, for the most part, unaware of the need for a common narrative.

Consider in this light the Great Famine of 1932–33. Ukrainian state and nation narratives generally treat the *Holodomor* as a genocide—which makes perfect narrative sense in the story of Ukraine's emergence as a state and Ukrainians' emergence as a nation. The *Holodomor* as a genocide, however, is necessarily incompatible with Soviet and Russian imperial narratives. The *Holodomor* can be accommodated by these narratives only if it is reduced to a *holod*, or famine, that affected all nations more or less equally. In contrast, the Great Famine can, as a Ukrainian genocide, fit perfectly with a Russian national narrative that posits its own famine-genocide, one directed at Russians by a Soviet or imperial regime. The *Holodomor* as genocide threatens Zionist narratives that insist on the uniqueness of the Holocaust and view any comparison as an attempt to relativize the Holocaust and thus to promote anti-Semitism. In contrast, the *Holodomor* as genocide can easily coexist with Bundist narratives, as long as they consider how Jews and Ukrainians interacted at the time of the Famine. Finally, there is no barrier, besides ignorance, to including the *Holodomor* as genocide in Western narratives.

Can Ukraine Have a History?

Unsurprisingly, Ukrainians are writing their own historical narratives, precisely because the writing of emergent national narratives is typical of the people of all just-established independent states—whether the United States in the nineteenth century or more recently the

former colonies of Latin America, Asia, or Africa. Similar narrative-writing trends exist in all the former Soviet republics and ex-communist states of Eastern Europe. Although attempts to write, or rewrite, history are often viewed as attempts to justify nationalist excesses or Nazi collaboration, the reality is that they are, above all, just attempts to write national histories and produce national narratives. There is nothing intrinsically sinister in such an endeavor, even if such efforts do appear suspect from the viewpoint of already established dominant narratives. If Soviet, Russian imperial, Russian and Polish national, Zionist and Bundist, and Western narratives may exist, then so too may Ukrainian and Estonian and Kazakh and Georgian national narratives. For better or worse, however, the rise of the latter will inevitably lead to friction with the former, even if all the narratives are produced by impeccably honest historians with absolutely no ideological or political axes to grind.

As I have argued, it is simply impossible to ignore Mazepa, Shukhevych, and Bandera in the writing of any kind of Ukrainian national narrative. Whatever their moral, political, or other failings, they played critically important—and arguably constructive—roles in the twin projects of Ukrainian state- and nation-building. Mazepa's role in a Ukrainian territorial history is positive or neutral with respect to Poles and negative or neutral with respect to Russians, while Shukhevych's and Bandera's roles are unquestionably negative with respect to Russians, Poles, and Jews. To incorporate Bandera and Shukhevych in state- and nation-building histories is not to whitewash their behavior vis-à-vis Poles, Jews, and Russians. It is only to construct different historical narratives, the logic of which highlights state and nation, and downplays inter-ethnic relations. Americans, for instance, cannot avoid treating Thomas Jefferson as a Founding Father of both state and nation, even though his place in a territorial narrative is surely marred by his ownership of slaves. Harry Truman helped make the United States a great power and a strong, self-confident nation, even though the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was arguably an atrocity against the Japanese civilian population.

State and nation narratives are no better and no worse than territorial ones; they are simply different. However, as repertoires in the construction of national narratives, they are certain to appear, and controversy is, thus, inevitable. Such friction cannot be overcome by admonitions to Ukrainians and non-Russians to produce historical narratives compatible with hegemonic worldviews. Incompatibilities can be overcome only in two ways that do not entail state intervention and coercion. First, common

narratives can be constructed only based on the compatible versions illustrated in Table 1. No amount of goodwill can force two incompatible versions to coexist. Second, it is likely that in time some versions will disappear or lose their hegemonic status. The more the Soviet experience recedes into history, the less persuasive Soviet narratives will appear. The longer the Russian Federation exists as a national state, the less attractive the Russian imperial narrative will be. The longer Ukrainian-Jewish relations appear to be “normal,” the more the Bundist version will appear more plausible than the Zionist version. The longer Ukraine and other post-Soviet states exist as independent states, the more likely it becomes that Western narratives will begin to incorporate them. In turn, Ukrainian national

narratives will develop—inevitably and unavoidably—as long as Ukraine exists as an independent state.

Can Ukraine therefore have a history? Yes, but only in the context of logically compatible non-Ukrainian historical narratives.

Notes

1. Mark von Hagen, “Does Ukraine Have a History?” *Slavic Review* 54, no. 3 (autumn 1995): 658–73.

2. Arthur Danto, *Narration and Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

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