

Marieluise Beck, ed., **Ukraine verstehen: Auf den Spuren von Terror und Gewalt.** Stuttgart: ibidem, 2021. 148 pages. ISBN 978-3-8382-1773-4.

The book *Ukraine verstehen: Auf den Spuren von Terror und Gewalt* [Understanding Ukraine: Tracing the Roots of Terror and Violence] was published in 2021 as a German-language edited volume by the ibidem publishers. It was edited by Marieluise Beck and curated by her and her colleagues at LibMod – the Zentrum Liberale Moderne, a Berlin-based political think-tank and debating platform that focuses on topics of liberal democracy in Eastern Europe. It was published as part of the series *Ukrainian Voices*, which is a series of books that aims to introduce Western and other audiences to Ukrainian debates, interpretations, and explorations of historical and current Ukrainian and international affairs. The series' goal is to familiarize non-Ukrainian readers with how select prominent Ukrainians approach, assess, and view Ukraine's development and position on the global stage. *Ukraine verstehen* follows this pattern. It is designed to enrich the current German discourse on Ukraine and add necessary context and a Ukrainian perspective to it.

In the book's prologue, Dmytro Kuleba, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, states that the book is intended to "provide an authentic look at the history of the Ukrainian people, which are an important part of the historical mosaic of Europe. Ukrainian tragedies should be seen as part of the common pain" (p. 11). Kuleba argues that with its independence in 1991, Ukraine deserves a right accorded to every other sovereign nation, namely the right to what he calls its own "historical memory." Throughout the book, the reader is made aware that Ukraine's history is one of colonization, and that with colonization came not only a loss of sovereignty over its territory, people and national heritage, but also over its own voice and historical narrative. Several of the contributing authors note that especially from a German perspective, Ukraine is often to this day perceived not as an equal partner among global actors like the United States of America or Russia, but merely as a geopolitical stage on which those players interact. This book attempts to recenter the global narrative about Ukraine by amplifying Ukrainian voices, perspectives and topics, and making them part of a bigger process in which Ukrainians are fighting for the right to speak for themselves.

The book is composed of contributions by 26 authors, the majority of whom are Ukrainians; however, it also has several German authors who contribute to the discussion by providing a different perspective, especially in the chapters that concern the Nazi occupation of Ukraine. Some noted international scholars, such as Timothy Snyder and Anne Applebaum, also contributed to the volume. Almost all of the authors are historians or journalists. They work either as academics at institutions of higher education or at leading newspapers and think-tanks.

The book is split into three main parts. The first is entitled "Stalinist Repressions" and provides historical context for the repression of Ukrainians during the years of the early Soviet Union under Stalin. It especially shines light on the genocidal aspect of Soviet

Russian colonialism at the time. It explains the interaction of different repressive strategies, such as the artificially created famine known as the Holodomor (Anne Applebaum, Serhii Plokhii), targeted oppression of Ukrainian intellectual elites aimed at eradicating Ukraine as a nation (Volodymyr Yermolenko), and persecution and deportation of specific ethnic groups from Ukraine, such as its ethnic German population and the Crimean Tatars (Oksana Grytsenko, Viktoria Savchuk). The book showcases a multitude of interconnected traumas perpetrated in the first half of the twentieth century at the hands of the Soviet leadership. These traumas still reverberate to this day, for example in the political discourse surrounding the attempted annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014.

The second part of the book is “Occupying Powers in World War II.” Although this part mainly focuses on the Nazi German occupation of modern-day Ukrainian territory, it begins by highlighting the historical themes of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and of Ukraine as a pawn in the hands of the powerful (Jan Claas Behrends). The authors debunk some common modern-day Russian propaganda myths about World War II that understate the multiethnic composition of the Red Army, downplay the early alliance between Nazi Germany and the USSR, and exaggerate the collaboration of Ukrainians and Poles with the Wehrmacht. The contributions in this part carefully reconstruct some of the gravest atrocities committed by the Nazis and their local proxies, and the cooperation in them of the Romanian regime under Ion Antonescu in Ukraine. Remembrances of the “forgotten massacre” of Koryukivka and the involvement of Romanian troops in the Holocaust are important contributions to this book (Christoph Brumme, Ottmar Trașcă). Furthermore, the involvement of “regular” German police officers who participated in the “Holocaust by bullets” in Ukraine, but never faced any legal consequences for it, is exemplified by a case study of the Bremen police force (Klaus Wolschner). Finally, the longest contribution in the book is a comprehensive reconstruction and, most importantly, debunking, of myths surrounding the leader of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), Stepan Bandera, addressing both historical fact and modern symbolism (Wilfried Jilge).

Lastly, the third part of the book is entitled “Remembrance and Responsibility.” Whereas the first two parts were relatively separate discussions of the relationship between Ukraine and Germany and between Ukraine and the USSR and Russia, this last part discusses both issues. It advances the argument that Ukraine was colonized by both Nazi Germany and Russia at different points in its history. Heretofore, the concept of *Binnenkolonialismus*, a type of colonialism that did not take place overseas but by expanding an empire’s borders into neighboring territories, has received little to no attention in German public discourse. Therefore, this book’s perspective is an interesting contribution to German understanding of Ukraine’s history. The concept of Russia and the USSR as colonial powers, let alone the notion of the Third Reich as yet another colonizer, is relatively new to German public discourse (Gerhard Simon, Timothy Snyder). The first four essays examine the current *Erinnerungskultur* in Germany when it comes to Ukrainian suffering during the Second World War, not only in terms of the Holocaust, but also the abduction of Ukrainian women and children as forced laborers. The authors criticize that in

Germany not enough emphasis is put on Ukraine, or Belarus for that matter, as victims of Nazi violence. Most sympathy in that regard, be it symbolic or political, is shown towards Russia (Nikolai Klimeniouk, Gelinada Grinchenko, Sebastian Christ). In the remaining contributions, the authors focus on the *Erinnerungskultur* in Russia, and conclude that in Russia as well as in Germany, Ukraine's sacrifices are consistently ignored in public discourse. Even a historical revisionism regarding the Holocaust that was first observed in the USSR is making a comeback in Putin's Russia, along with the rehabilitation of Joseph Stalin (Irina Scherbakova). The book grapples with the trauma of Chernobyl and touches upon the disorientation and political turmoil that followed the fall of the USSR (Anna Veronika Wendland, Rebecca Harms, Eduard Klein). Finally, the authors discuss the Euromaidan and its consequences, such as efforts at decommunizing Ukraine (Kateryna Mishchenko, Sébastien Gobert, Yevhen Hlibovtsky).

In conclusion, throughout its chapters, *Ukraine verstehen* follows the belief that it is impossible to understand modern Ukraine without understanding its tragic past, especially its collective and individual traumas of the twentieth century. It emphasizes that the history of Ukraine is not only shaped by the repeated exertions of influence by Russia over the centuries, but that Ukraine also has a prominent connection to Germany, which is, however, barely known or taught in Germany. This is why the content of the book is broadly separated into two "histories of oppression": oppression under the USSR and oppression under Nazi Germany. In Germany, a flawed notion of "historical responsibility" toward Russia is often overemphasized in political discourse, due to past atrocities committed by the Nazis on the territory of the Soviet Union during the Second World War. On the other hand, the discourse largely neglects other nations of the former Soviet Union that suffered no less under Nazism, especially the Ukrainians. This new perspective on Germany's "historical responsibility" is intended to create an open dialogue and better understanding of the past. Furthermore, by exploring the oppression of the Ukrainians under communism, the book helps reveal the historical trauma many Ukrainians suffered at the hands of the Soviets and facilitates better understanding of the historical context of current political events.

Ukraine verstehen is a book that is not primarily aimed at academics. Rather, it is intended as an effort at scientific communication, introducing a wider German audience to current academic and political debates surrounding Ukraine's past and present from a Ukrainian perspective. *Ukraine verstehen* contributes significantly to counteract and debunk Russian propaganda that has been running rampant, especially in Germany, since long before Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Russia's most recent war on Ukraine has made this volume even more important, as Russia continually seeks to justify its actions by rewriting and weaponizing history. Not surprisingly, this book was reprinted by the German government's Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung in July 2022 following Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine. It has since been treated as a standard reading for the larger German public. It not only educates its German audience on Soviet atrocities committed in Ukraine in the twentieth century, but also reckons with German violence perpetrated on the Ukrainian people under the Third Reich.

Overall, the book deserves praise, because it strikes an extraordinary balance between conveying complex historical events and political processes and presenting that information in a concise manner and accessible language. The formats of the essays are varied. They include more complex conceptual works, autobiographical contributions from contemporary witnesses, opinion essays on different topics, and case studies of groups of actors and specific regions. While most of the contributions in the book are original articles written for this volume, some are excerpts from already existing pieces that were licensed for use in it. Many of the essays are clearly based on state-of-the-art original research. Without the space here to discuss each original article and its context in the current research landscape, let it be said that all the authors paid great attention to valuable source material that was consulted in the research process.

To sum up, this volume makes an incredibly valuable contribution to German discourse on Ukraine, today more than ever, and is succeeding in its aim of introducing the German public to Ukrainian perspectives. In a public and political discourse where the mainstream perspective is often deliberately distorted by Russia, this book offers a direly needed Ukrainian view on events of the past and thereby increases understanding of the present. It is a comprehensive introduction to the history of the Russification of Ukraine and reckons with a plethora of Russian propaganda myths. Its exploration of Stepan Bander and the OUN, by Wilfried Jilge, might be the most prominent chapter for its German audience. However, this book was long overdue, not simply because of its perspective on Russian narratives, but also because it illuminates a blind spot that perseveres in the German *Erinnerungskultur* of the Holocaust and the atrocities committed by the Nazis in Ukraine. This volume fills a gap in the German literary landscape with which no other similar contribution can compare. As such, *Ukraine verstehen* is a must-read for all those who are new to the topic, who want to know more about the history of Ukraine, and who desire to understand the context of today's events. It is a fantastic piece of introductory reading, and I wholeheartedly recommend it.

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