

BEYOND RESENTMENT

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Vasyl Kuchabsky, *Western Ukraine in Conflict with Poland and Bolshevism, 1918-1923*. Translated from the German by Gus Fagan. Edmondton and Toronto: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 2009. 361 pp. + 6 maps.

It might be a risky enterprise to publish a historical monograph written some eighty years ago, which at the time addressed the very recent developments of 1918-1923—this would seem to be much more suited to lively memoirs than a cool-blooded analysis and archival research. Indeed, since 1934 when Vasyl Kuchabsky's *Die Westukraine im Kampfe mit Polen und dem Bolschewismus in den Jahren 1918-1923* was published in Germany in a small seminar series, a great number of books and articles on the relevant topics have appeared, and even a greater number of archival documents, letters and memoirs have become accessible to scholars.

Still, as Frank Sysyn rightly points out in his short foreword to the English translation of Kuchabsky's book, "it remains critical to the study of the topics [outlined in its title]. It is also essential to understanding the views of a leading Western Ukrainian political activist and thinker, himself a participant in that struggle, and, through him, the generation that shaped Ukrainian politics in the first half of the twentieth century" (ix).

Oleksandr Pavlyuk, who penned an informative introduction to the book that provides readers with a sketch of the author's life and writing and places everything in a comprehensive historical and social context, emphasizes the importance of Kuchabsky's eyewitness accounts. Yet, of even greater value, he argues, is the high professional quality of the monograph—"a study by a scholar with a good education, a sharp analytical mind, and fluency in several European languages" (xiv).

Kuchabsky's account of the events is certainly not impartial. World War I found him a nineteen-year-old student at Lviv University; he joined as a volunteer in the Ukrainian Sich Riflemen—the first Ukrainian military legion created within the Austrian army. The experience of the war, of Russian captivity and escape, of the revolution and further fighting for Ukraine's liberation as the head of the Riflemen, a short stint in diplomatic service for the West Ukrainian National Republic, and the bitter fate of political emigration undoubtedly influenced the way in which he perceived and interpreted events.

His sympathy for the Riflemen as superior fighters is unreserved, his mistrust of the duplicitous Poles is unbalanced, his disdain for the leaders of the Ukrainian revolution sometimes appears extreme, and his repeated accusations of betrayal at the hands of Western governments, however warranted, sound obsessed.

Nevertheless, the book provides a comprehensive account of the political, military and diplomatic efforts

of Western Ukrainians to establish their independent republic on the ruins of the Habsburg empire—in full line with the prevailing Wilsonian principle of national self-determination, the right presumably granted by the victorious Entente to all East European nations. Western Ukraine is in the center of both the title and the narrative, and this makes both the book and its translation rather important, since there are still very few "Ukrainocentric" accounts of these events, which though not necessarily opposing the dominant Polish and Russian perspectives, at least provide some check on the myths and biases and challenge or supplement the dominant views with neglected facts and alternative interpretations.

Ukrainians lost their battle for independence and, as Kuchabsky bitterly remarks, proved to be the only East European nation which failed to benefit from the "Wilsonian" right to self-determination or, rather, which under strong Polish pressure was denied this right by the Entente and its Supreme Council. Resentment reigns supreme in the book, and the author is not sparing with his indignation of Western ignorance, hypocrisy and cynicism, as well as Polish arrogance, pathological chauvinism and perfidy. Yet, despite some excessive emotionality, he avoids propagandistic demonization and the essentialization of opponents. He aptly notes important nuances and internal differences within both the Polish and Entente camps that could have been effectively used by Ukrainians to their advantage.

Within the Polish camp, he distinguishes the "fanatical nationalism" and profound Ukrainophobia of Dmowski's National Democrats, on the one hand, and the more pragmatic approach of Pilsudski and the Polish socialists who flirted briefly with the idea of a Polish-Lithuanian or even Polish-Lithuanian-Ukrainian federation, on the other hand. Moreover, he recognizes that in late 1918 and early 1919 the newborn Polish state was in a much worse internal and external situation than the Western Ukrainian National Republic. Internally, as a result of divisions caused by the Partitions, it was completely disorganized and chaotically ruled by different governing bodies. Externally, it faced actual or potential border disputes with all its neighbors. This was a short window of opportunity for WUNR, when independence could have been secured by military means—if Ukrainians had better prepared their takeover of Lviv and Eastern Galicia or, at least, blocked effectively their border with Poland, primarily the bridge across the San river at Peremyshl and the railway to Lviv, rather than waging

a protracted and unsuccessful battle with Poles for Lviv, which ultimately was a battle of high symbolic but little strategic importance.

After the opportunity was lost and the Polish state had gradually consolidated under Pilsudski's leadership, the fate of Western Ukrainian independence depended primarily on the political and diplomatic skills of its leaders. And here, again, despite all his disgust for the "Western traitors" who sacrificed WUNR to the Poles for particular gains (oil fields for the Brits, an anti-German alliance for French), Vasyl Kuchabsky recognizes that the Westerners who negotiated a political settlement for Galicia were neither a homogeneous group nor were they immutable. Here the interplay of various views and interests was even more complicated than within the Polish camp. And this, again, provided Ukrainians with some window of opportunity—despite the huge advantages the Poles gained from their historical visibility versus the virtual absence of Ukrainians on the Westerners' mental maps. The Poles, indeed, had a much stronger and larger intellectual elite, much better contacts in Western capitals and, of course, they represented their cause more effectively by depicting Ukrainians as an Austrian invention and German intrigue, as wild Bolsheviks and/or unruly, uncultured aborigines unable to govern themselves and requiring assiduous Polish guardianship. Yet, as Kuchabsky argues, there were a number of opportunities to strike a deal with the Poles and the Entente and secure the independence of Western Ukraine—without Lviv and probably without the Boryslav-Drohobych oil fields but with due international recognition that was far more important for the "nowhere nation" than anything else.

It might have been a difficult choice—it ran counter to the popular mood and the inevitable mass protests. But "given Ukraine's internal and external situation at the time, it was in no position to achieve more. It was a major step forward for a stateless people to be able to set up a rump state if the choice was between this and complete subjection. In order to accept [this] kind of peace, a nation would have to be free of all ethnic conceptions in the realm of politics. International politics would have to be seen as the interplay of real national forces, not as a conflict involving just abstract national rights" (206).

In fact, Kuchabsky blames the Entente powers not so much for the cynicism, since Realpolitik, in his view, is a norm on the international scene: all the players are driven primarily by their particular interests, not universal values. He blames the Entente primarily for hypocrisy—the false proclamation of the Wilsonian principle that had not been honestly implemented, but which instead confused and misled Western Ukrainians, evoked expectations that were too high; moreover, a naïve trust in the Entente and the sacred right of national self-determination distracted them from more decisive activity in the battlefield and more rational and pragmatic political decisions. To his credit, he blames not so much the Westerners as his countrymen, especially from

Eastern Ukraine, who discredited and undermined their cause rather than promoted it. At several points, he recognizes that the leaders of the Ukrainian revolution were mediocre persons, inferior in many regards to their Polish counterparts and unable to negotiate effectively with the Entente. None of them "had a comprehensive view of what was happening"; "isolated events were not seen as a part of a general context" (42).

Dr. Yevhen Petrushevych, the head of the West Ukrainian state and a former member of the Vienna parliament, is described as a "provincial lawyer," a person of "strong moral principles" and "inner discipline," whose "complete honesty and respectability" made him a "model notary and keeper of the seal"; but still he was not a statesman. All these features, Kuchabsky argues, were of little help since they only "restricted his political intellect, which operated only in the narrow realm of a puritanical simplicity" (255). The entire Western Ukrainian leadership is viewed in a similar way:

In the atmosphere of legality and security in which the Ukrainian parliamentarians in Austria had carried on their conflict with the Poles, they had never really learned that war is an instrument – in fact, the most refined instrument – of politics, and now that the Poles were no longer a negotiating partner equally subject to the verdict of Vienna, but an independent warring power, they were at a loss as to what to do in such an unusual situation... In the leading Ukrainian political circles there was not a single relatively prominent personality who was capable, in this difficult situation, of taking the reins in his own hands and directing events. (41)

East Ukrainian leaders evoke in him even greater disdain. Volodymyr Vynnychenko is mentioned briefly as a "baleful man of letters" whose politics "had done a good deal of damage to Eastern Ukraine in 1917-18, just as in the decade before 1917 his clever pen had poisoned the intellectual atmosphere" (158-59). General Mykhailo Omelianovych-Pavlenko is described as a "serviceman through and through, very modest in ideas and general cultural interests," skilful in "training troops" but not in "leading them in warfare." "He was unable to grasp a broader totality, be it political or strategic, consider it from different viewpoints, and chart a way forward" (186). Even Symon Petliura, "a brilliant orator with a winning personality, witty, modest and gentle," a great patriot of Ukraine ("no one had greater love for the fatherland than he"), whose name "became practically synonymous with the whole enterprise of the Ukrainian People's Republic," was, in Kuchabsky's view, merely a "tribune of the people, not a statesman" (92-93):

He had no understanding of what constituted the underlying strength of a state or of what moral and intellectual preparation

was necessary for a position in the service of that state. He considered a national sentiment an adequate basis on which to found a state. He sought without scruple to arouse national enthusiasm among the people and was prepared to use any means to that end, whether socialist demagoguery to whip up the masses or an appeal to defend civil order in Ukraine against the threat of Bolshevism... [National independence] became for him a fanatical religion for which he would live and die. But this was only a fanatical emotion, without insight, without understanding... He distrusted the senior officers of the former Russian army, looking instead for the kind of carelessness that, in his mind, went with a proper warlike spirit... He failed to recognize that the army is better fitted to the task of building a modern nation-state if it is strongly disciplined in its military behavior and in its dealings with the civilian population and has a strong sense of honor. (93)

In sum, “Petliura was not a man of any great political talent, and he never really understood the need for proper organization of the army and the country” (286).

These assessments, however harsh and at times imbalanced, deserve our attention since Vasyl Kuchabsky had firsthand knowledge of many Western and Eastern Ukrainian leaders. The Westerners, in his view, deserved less censure, since under peaceful conditions they were well qualified to manage the country lawfully and efficiently. Their problem was rather external. As “small-minded pacifist philistines” (190), with poor statesmanship qualities and strategic vision, they could not withstand effectively the Polish invasion and Entente betrayal. The Easterners, in Kuchabsky’s view, were crude products of the “radical democratic, revolutionary socialist and internationalist development” (93)—not gentrified by liberal notions of constitutionalism, rule of law, separation of powers, and institutional efficacy. Hence, their problem was first and foremost internal. They proved to be absolutely dysfunctional in governing and state-building. “Such a task greatly exceeded intellectual, political and material strength of the Eastern Ukrainian national movement... The national leadership would perhaps have measured up to the task of building an independent state in a country the size of Lithuania. But Eastern Ukraine... had a population of thirty million” (71).

The bitter truth, according to Kuchabsky, is that the Ukrainian People’s Republic “was no more a state than any of the other counterrevolutionary enterprises in Eastern Europe in 1919, such as those of Aleksandr Kolchak or Anton Denikin. It was merely a military organization. Just as in the case of the reactionary armies in Russia, the masses of the people did not take part in this organization. In some areas they approved of it;

in others, they rebelled against it. But that was the full extent of their relations to this organization” (92).

National leadership, in Kuchabsky’s political philosophy, plays the paramount historical role—far more important than the common folk. Nonetheless, at certain points, the author comes to recognize a connection between the quality of elite and the population at large. Great statesmen and military leaders, indeed, can do miracles even with an immature population—as seemed to happen, for a brief time, with the Western Ukrainian army under General Aleksandr Grekov’s lead. But one can barely build a full-fledged nation-state upon miracles, especially if these “miracles,” as Kuchabsky implies, are also products of some path-dependency: “[Grekov] was one of the few Russians who linked his fate to that of Ukraine... In his thinking and his actions he was a statesman of a great political nation, Russia. He had what the Western Ukrainians lacked – a mature political culture that had developed out of the manifold experience of the Russian Empire” (230-31).

Whatever miracles might have happened, the path-dependency is unavoidable in the long run. And Kuchabsky, despite all his profound elitism, comes to recognize a bitter egalitarian truth about the Ukrainian revolution: “The internal state of the Ukrainian nation itself, with its sociopolitical divisions, made it unfit for the task of establishing an Eastern Ukrainian state. In the art of politics it showed itself too weak to build any kind of state, whether democratic or conservative” (71).

Besides the Poles and Bolsheviks who presented the main challenge to Ukraine’s independence and who are rightly featured in the title of Kuchabsky’s book, there was one more force that contributed to Ukraine’s ordeal. The author defines it as the “all-Russian counterrevolution” represented in the southwestern part of the former Russian Empire, including the territory of Ukraine, by the “White Guard” of General Anton Denikin. In September 1919, they threw Petliura’s government out of Kyiv—just a few days after the Ukrainian troops took it over from the Bolsheviks. This left Ukrainians with little choice but to declare war on Denikin, even though they tried to avoid military confrontation with Russian monarchists and were ready for negotiations and some sort of compromise. The Russians, however, preferred the language of ultimatums demanding from Ukrainians unconditional submission to “Russia, one and indivisible.”

“For Denikin’s army, this was madness” [292], since it not only severely hampered the Ukrainian struggle for independence but also dramatically undermined Denikin’s own chances to defeat Bolsheviks in his rather successful march to Moscow. Nevertheless, as Kuchabsky aptly remarks, “this was a typical result of the situation created by the senseless divisions in the counterrevolution... Once again the superiority of the Bolshevik strategy over that of the Russian counterrevolution was demonstrated with a great clarity. The Bolsheviks could have easily advanced from the north to occupy Ukrainian-held territory... But they preferred to postpone the occupation

of Ukraine until Denikin's forces had been finally defeated by the Ukrainians" (293). Remarkably, in 25 years, the Bolsheviks once again demonstrated the same superior strategy—postponing their advance on Warsaw until the Nazis fully extinguished the Polish uprising.

"In overestimating its own potential, the all-Russian counterrevolution completely failed to realize that the driving force that could be turned against the Bolsheviks was not its own desire for restoration but the regional desire to separate" (283). The extreme stupidity of the Russian monarchists who were dogmatically attached to the idea of "one and indivisible Russia" and idiosyncratically rejected any demands of imperial nationalities for a broader self-rule, is a rather well-documented and broadly recognized fact. Vasyl Kuchabsky, however, goes beyond this recognition. He tries to explain the reasons for such a dramatic, unbelievable blindness on the part of an otherwise rational, well-educated imperial elite.

He concludes that Russia was not perceived by the ruling elite as a multiethnic state because, unlike most European countries, it had not undergone the process of democratization throughout the nineteenth century. The Russian nation, for them, was limited to the upper stratum. As long as this stratum (with the remarkable exception of Poland and Finland) was Russian or Russified, rather indifferent to cultural, let alone political particularism, all ethnic differences among the passive popular masses within the empire were irrelevant. "This numerous all-Russian upper stratum, consisting of a bureaucracy in constant flux, as well as of long-established large landowners and bourgeois, gave the empire a unified character... It cemented the bond between St. Petersburg and the ethnically non-Russian periphery and knit together the non-Russian masses, with their real but politically inconsequential ethnic differences, into a more or less organic union with the Russian Empire as if this empire were an ethnic unit, an ethnic Russian entity" (270).

So, Kuchabsky insightfully writes, "when the all-Russian representatives of the Russian empire expressed their contempt for the insignificant separatist activities among the ethnically non-Russian peoples; or when they proclaimed the national unity of the Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians and described the Ukrainian movement in Dnipro Ukraine as a fantasy; even when they rejected with indignation the term 'multiethnic state' with reference to Russia and preferred to think of it as a united nation-state, then, given the overwhelming dominance of the 'all-Russian' idea, they were correct for the time being" (270).

The Revolution of 1917 destroyed this pre-modern quasi-national unity but the "all-Russian" elite failed to recognize its meaning – exactly as they had never actually recognized the real meaning of the French Revolution and all the eventual democratizing-nationalizing developments in Europe, America, and worldwide. "Russia as an all-Russian national state, the state of the Russians and the Russified upper strata,

was now irretrievably lost. What emerged in 1917 was a multiethnic state in which the democratized and nationally conscious non-Russian peoples regarded themselves as equals of the Russians... There was no reason why a democratic sovereign people, in ethnically non-Russian territories such as Ukraine, should allow their state to go on having this all-Russian character..." (271).

The process of the empire's disintegration looked inevitable but, all of a sudden, "the old Muscovite-Russian conception of imperial unity emerged again in a new and unexpected form: Bolshevism" (272). Long before 1917, Kuchabsky writes, the Bolsheviks understood that not only tsarism but also the idea of all-Russian unity had irrevocably played out its historical role. Any social emancipation inevitably entailed an awakening and national emancipation of non-Russian nationalities. Nationalism was a force to be reckoned with. The Bolsheviks as egalitarians understood what the elitist counterrevolutionaries could not grasp. If you cannot contain the process, you'd better try to lead it. They employed, with the highest skill, their favorite tactics of "give away – take back" to dismantle the old empire and re-establish the new.

First, to mobilize allies in their struggle against the Provisional Government and weaken the imperial apparatus, they proclaimed the "right of self-determination for the nationalities of Russia, including their right to separate." Then, when the ancien régime collapsed with the substantial help of peripheral nationalists, they began reconstruction of the empire under the slogans "proletarian internationalism" and "world revolution." To some extent, they offered the non-Russian nationalities a share in the global social-revolutionary joint-venture called the "USSR" that appeared ultimately to be just a cover-sheet for the same old-new Russian Empire.

In order to stem the centrifugal tendencies of [imperial] nationalities and weld them together once more into a unified political nation, the Bolsheviks advanced not a political but a social program. Unlike in the old regime, the all-Russian idea would now penetrate to the lower strata. While leaving their ethnic, regional and linguistic particularities untouched, as was the practice under tsarism, the Bolsheviks spoke to the political aspirations of the nationalities, calling on them to create the closest possible bond with the Russian state and, in the name of the international social-revolutionary solidarity of the non-Russian and Russian peoples, to defend Soviet Russia against the whole capitalist world. These nationalities would then be restricted in the process of their development toward nationhood and kept politically at the level of their "Little Russian" regional particularity not by power

of the Russified upper strata but by means of the free will of the non-Russified lower strata. (274)

However brilliant the idea, the Bolsheviks largely overestimated the ability of social categories to substitute for national categories. The “free will” of the non-Russian masses did not prove to be a sufficient bond to hold the multiethnic empire together vis-à-vis the centrifugal tendencies of ethnic nationalisms. The new regime had to rely not only on the power of the Russified upper strata but also on the secret police and mass terror to keep the democratically emancipated masses at bay. It turned out exactly as Kuchabsky predicted: “with the decline of the democratic revolution, an even greater despotism than the tsarist one would emerge: world-revolutionary Soviet Russia” (274).

In 1918-23, both Western and Eastern Ukrainians lost their struggle for independence but the Ukrainian question had not disappeared from the agenda either in interwar Poland or in the Soviet Union, but instead continued to poison the organism of both states, ultimately contributing to their decline. In the early 1930s, when Kuchabsky was completing his book, he could certainly not predict the timing of pending processes or their specific ends. But he felt perspicaciously that all the parties “caught up in a wild and vicious conflict” are ultimate losers, “sliding toward dissolution and internal collapse” (327).

Despite all its misapprehensions and limitations, Vasyl Kuchabsky’s insightful book remains important reading for any student of the history of the region as well as its still complicated present.

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