

# OPERA SLAVICA

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## International Workshop “Pluralizing Ukrainian Studies in Times of Turmoil”

OPERA SLAVICA [XXXIII / 2023 / 4]

[zprávy—kronika]

The project “(Un)Disciplined: Pluralizing Ukrainian Studies—Understanding the War in Ukraine” (UNDIPUS) is a research network that critically examines current issues in Ukrainian Studies at three universities in Germany, which are Greifswald, Giessen, and Regensburg. The project is funded by the German Ministry of Education and Research. Academic events are held regularly to promote exchange between project participants and external scholars at different international locations. On March 27–28, 2023, a workshop was organized at the University of St. Gallen, with participants from Switzerland, Germany, and Ukraine presenting papers and contributing to discussions.

In the beginning, Roman Dubasevych (Greifswald) spoke about “Trauma, Heroism, and War—the Story of a Traumatic Repetition”, and examined the connection between Russia’s war against Ukraine, the cult of heroic masculinity and trauma. Despite all the serious differences between the aggressor and the victim, his ideas address a striking structural similarity between two aspects, namely the conspicuous presence of heroic narratives in the memory and cultural production of both Ukraine and Russia. As this phenomenon is interpreted as the result of disappointments brought by the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the post-Soviet transformation, the paradoxical repetitive character of national hero and victim myths was discussed. This lecture was followed by an exhaustive comment by Ulrich Bröckling (Freiburg i. Br.) and a summary by Tatjana Hofmann (Zurich).

Afterward, Martin Henzelmann (Greifswald) presented his research on “Tracing Language Contact in Southern Bessarabia”. He explained the formation of a genuine language contact zone on both sides of the Southern Moldavian-Ukrainian border region, also called “Budzhak”, and commented on concrete results of language change in the local Bulgarian minority language. Numerous documentations on the description of these varieties were cited, as well as the findings of field studies, which prove a strong influence of the Russian language (and far less Romanian resp. Ukrainian languages) on the linguistic structure of the local Bulgarian dialects.

Elena Denisova-Schmidt (St. Gallen) introduced in her talk, “Language of Corruption in Ukraine: Some Insights from Business, Higher Education, and Society”, several aspects from the areas of lacuna theory, language games, sociolinguistics, and pragmatics that are particularly important for corruption research. Both corruption research, as well as anti-corruption measures and remedies, benefit enormously

from the variety of perspectives offered by different disciplines. Her upcoming book (“Breaking the Bonds of Corruption: From Academic Dishonesty to Informal Business Practices in Post-Soviet Ukraine”, Harvard University Press) gives even more insights into the topic.

Oksana Myshlovska (Bern) offered a paper entitled “The Government and its Regionally-Based Challengers: Trajectories of Contention and Radicalization during Yushchenko Presidency”. Drawing on some theories of conflict, the author examined the link between the central state authorities and regionally-based challengers during the presidency of Viktor Yushchenko (2005–2010). She conceptualized state legitimacy as contingent and structured relationships between the government and organizations, the latter representing groups that continuously articulate discursive acts of (non-) recognition. Finally, she identified the context of a full denial of legitimacy to the state as conducive to conflict escalation.

In their talk “After the Collapse of the Soviet Union: Intercultural Literary Negotiations about the Donbas and Upper Silesia”, Alina Strzempa and Oleksandr Zabirko (both Regensburg) outlined the discursive modeling of regions in Ukraine and Poland after the fall of communism. Focusing predominantly on literary texts, they discussed both the trajectories of re-imagining contested or “unsettled” industrial regions and the political implications of the corresponding literary and cultural production, ranging from nationalism to separatism and irredentism. They highlighted those works of literature which deliberately construct the Donbas and Upper Silesia as transcultural and trans-local regions, thus mitigating the political explosiveness of their genuine identities.

The first day of the workshop was rounded off by a panel discussion on “The Future of Ukrainian Studies”, in which Ulrich Schmid (St. Gallen), Alexander Chertenko (Giessen), Olena Palko (Basel) and Maria Mayerchyk (Greifswald) provided important intellectual impulses.

The second working day was opened with a contribution by Alexander Chertenko (Giessen). In his speech, entitled “Nationalizing women? *L’écriture féminine* and Ukrainian Gender Identities before and after 2022”, he focused on the basic models of femininity “at war”, typical of Ukrainian literary and cultural discourse, and showed how they developed between 2014 and 2022. According to Chertenko, this development can be best explained within the framework of gender and postcolonial compensation. While the first phase of the war was marked by multiple defeats of post-Soviet Ukrainian “fragile masculinity” and thus clearly prioritized various forms of a bellicose masculinization of the feminine, the stabilization of the situation on the front after 2016/17 effectively reclaimed the “real” masculinity from the (former) imperial center and, as a result, also invoked traditional gender hierarchies of nationalist type, even more so after 2022.

Marta Havryshko (Basel) spoke on “Sexual Violence, War, and Militarism: Challenges in Ukrainian Studies”. In her remarks, she commented on the increasing reports of rape of Ukrainian women by Russian soldiers in the current war. She questions who is talking about this violence and how this is being portrayed or what is not being talked about. An important challenge to come is how such crimes will be punished and if *iustitia omnibus* will be guaranteed.

Olga Plakhotnik’s presentation, titled “Contested Categories in Social Science: Citizenship, Sexuality, and Gender”, outlined methodological, political, and ethical problems that occurred in the course of her research in Ukraine. While approaching sexual citizenship from a critical queer feminist perspective, the study developed a nuanced account of how different LGBT communities position themselves in relation to the state and discourse of nationhood. It was proposed that the epistemological shift toward the decolonial framework might overcome the limitations of “methodological nationalism” and open a new perspective on feminist and queer studies in Ukraine. The discussants Oleksandra Tarkhanova (St. Gallen) and Yuliia Soroka (Fribourg/Freiburg) elaborated further on this idea and offered their reflections on the issue.

The event ended with the film screening of *Мої думки тихі* (“My Thoughts Are Silent”, 2019), and its subsequent analysis. This resulted in fruitful discussions, driven by Roman Dubasevych (Greifswald) and Nataliya Tchermalykh (Geneva).

In sum, the event took a pluralistic approach to socio-cultural developments in Ukraine and, above all, addressed overlaps with neighboring disciplines of Ukrainian Studies, such as sociology, history, linguistics, and literary studies. Moreover, the participants offered a nuanced and methodologically innovative perspective on the latest happenings in geographical border areas such as Bessarabia, the Donbas, and Upper Silesia. In the recent political times of turmoil, these solicitous reflections and thoughtful comments provided fresh impulses which will help to be *au courant* with the multidimensional challenges of Ukrainian studies.

*Martin Henzelmann*



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