

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Taras Kuzio, ed.** *Contemporary Ukraine: Dynamics of Post-Soviet Transformation*. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1998. xxi + 290 pp. \$45.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7656-0224-4; \$97.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7656-0223-7.

**Reviewed by** Alfred G. Mueller (Department of Speech Communication, Penn State University, Mont Alto.)

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## A Textual Tour-de-Force on Troubled Transformations

Taras Kuzio's most recent work on contemporary Ukraine is most certainly a tour-de-force in post-Soviet studies. Though flawed in some minor respects, the edited collection of works on political, economic, cultural, social, and strategic issues that Kuzio presents has both the theoretical and methodological breadth to impress everyone from the undergraduate to the post-graduate scholar. In short, this book serves as an example of what good scholarship is and a reminder that such scholarship need not be synonymous with poor readability.

In the eclectic environment in which we find ourselves today, it is rare to find a work that can provide a little something for everyone. Semester after semester, as experience more than readily attests, we professors find ourselves trying to balance the need to expose students to an appropriate amount of material with the need to keep book costs within reason. Kuzio, however, provides a handy solution. With essays ranging from Louise Jackson's case study of Zaporizhzhia to Valeri Khmelko and Andrew Wilson's quantitative study of the correlations between political affiliation and nationalist propensity, the book provides us with micro and macro lenses on contemporary Ukrainian life. With methodological perspectives ranging from the traditional historical approach of Kataryna Wolczuk's study of constitution making to Mykola Riabchouk's more contemporary post-colonial analysis of the cultural pressures resulting from "dominant Russian discourse" (p. 82), the book provides a healthy respect for both the quantitative and quali-

tative. And with pieces ranging from John Tedstrom's economic analysis of Ukraine's present predicament to James Sherr's strategic analysis of Ukraine's overtures to both NATO and Russia, the book offers us a truly multifaceted approach to the study of Ukrainian society.

What impressed me most about this work, though, went even beyond the sheer scope of the essays to the simple fact that I honestly learned something new in each piece. Many political scientists today seem to have collected themselves interminably into the quantitative side or the qualitative side of the discipline. Roman Solchanyk, however, shows us that an effective blend is possible in his study of group identifications in Ukraine. By combining sound theory with good quantitative work, Solchanyk taught me that Ukrainians today are identifying first with Ukraine, second with the Soviet Union, and third with their home region, leaving identification with Russia dead last (p. 31). Similarly, many of us who study Ukraine today take for granted the east-west polarity identified by such scholars as Vicki Hesli (1995), Ian Bremmer (1994), and Dominique Arel (1992).[1] But through excellent analysis and insightful study, Marc Nordberg successfully challenges that polarity, focusing our attention instead on the unitary-federal debates occurring across the country (p. 45). With essays like these, Kuzio cannot help but succeed admirably in his stated goal of binding together multiple perspectives on Ukraine's troubled post-Soviet transformation (p. xvi).

In all fairness, I would be remiss in my duties if I

did not provide a few caveats for the potential reader. For, indeed, Kuzio's gem is not as free of poor cutting as my enthusiasm might lead one to believe. For example, I am very much surprised by his decision to begin his work with Alexander Motyl's essay on state, nation, and elites in today's Ukraine. Whereas, without exception, the other authors argue against views of "divine planning" and "rational development" in Ukraine's recent past, Motyl suggests just the opposite by claiming that both Kravchuk and Kuchma consciously "identified Russia as 'the other'" (p. 7) and that both were following a variant of the old British foreign policy of "muddling through" (p. 6). Though I fully respect Motyl's work and would be one of the first to argue that the brand of advocacy that characterizes his claims certainly has its place, that place is not first in this particular book. By placing Motyl first, Kuzio established in my mind as a reader the expectation that the rest of the book would feature a similar style of vehement advocacy and perhaps outright nationalist argument. A more judicious arrangement may have been to lead off with Nordberg's investigation of institutionalization, to keep Solchanyk second, and to put Motyl's essay third. Thus, Kuzio would have been able to preserve the theoretical and methodological variety that is this book's strength without creating unnecessary unease among the more restrained readers.

I was also put off a little by the qualitatively different "feel" of the economics section of the book. The first section on nation and state building, the second on identity and regionalism, the third on politics and civil society, and the fifth on foreign and defense policies flow very well in terms of readability. But try as I might to overcome my old stereotype of economic analysis as dull, lifeless, and boring, the fourth section largely failed to engage me. Kuzio's contribution to the section is very well written and promises to help me see economics in a new light. Unfortunately, Hare, Ishaq, and Estrin's essay on the legacy of central planning, with its fierce avoidance of short sentences, puts me back in the thick of it. And Tedstrom's piece on potential areas for economic reform,

with list after list of characteristics and potentials, does not help matters much. Of course, I might simply be nit-picking on this point. But it seems to me that the authors need to go that extra mile if they want their work to be appreciated by those of us outside their discipline. Section four suggests to me that, of the five runners in the relay race of economics' image enhancement, only one bothered to put on his running shoes.

Still, aside from these minor flaws, Kuzio's book provides us with a nice blend of quantitative and qualitative studies. The essays presented here provide even those of us who have lived and interacted in Ukraine with new perspectives and new appreciation. The style is, for the most part, clear and readable, allowing beginning scholars the opportunity to appreciate the depth and seriousness of the work. The minor flaws are themselves useful, encouraging discussion over what should be expected—even demanded—of today's scholarship. And the theoretical tolerance and acceptability that characterizes the book is a welcome change from texts that promise us new perspectives, yet rehash the same old arguments. Put simply, in my opinion, this is a reference work that belongs on everyone's shelves, next to everyone's computers, and in everyone's classrooms.

#### Note

[1]. Vicki Hesli, "Public support for the devolution of power in Ukraine: Regional patterns," *Europe-Asia Studies* (1995), 47, pp. 91-121; Ian Bremmer, "The politics of ethnicity: Russians in the new Ukraine," *Europe-Asia Studies*, (1994), 46, pp. 261-283; Dominique Arel, "Federalism and the language factor in Ukraine," paper presented at the National Convention of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, November 1992.

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