

**Review of Zbigniew Marcin
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[Eng. Ukrainian Revolutions], Instytut
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2022**

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PL ISSN 0071-1861; e-ISSN: 2719-6534

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.23858/EP67.2023.3491>

<https://rcin.org.pl/dlibra/publication/276883>

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Józwiak, I. (2023). Review of Zbigniew Marcin Kowalewski, Ukraińskie Rewolucje [Eng. Ukrainian Revolutions], Instytut Wydawniczy Książka i Prasa, Warsaw 2022 . Etnografia Polska, 67(1–2).
<https://doi.org/10.23858/EP67.2023.3491>

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Review of:

Zbigniew Marcin Kowalewski, *Ukraińskie Rewolucje [Eng. Ukrainian Revolutions]*, Instytut Wydawniczy Książka i Prasa, Warsaw 2022.

According to the cover description, this book provides the basis for a broader discussion about the different faces of Russian imperialism and the nation-building processes within the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. These processes tend to intersect with class struggles and social revolutions, and Ukraine is no exception in this regard. As stated in the introduction, “Russian imperialism, two key episodes of Ukrainian revolution in 1917 and following years [...] and the Revolution of Dignity and the oligarchic counterrevolution in Donbas in 2014 – this is what this book is about” (p. 21). Focusing on the said period, the Author does not avoid the longer historical context and refers to the history of the Cossackdom and Zaporizhska Sich. The book is divided into eight chapters, two of which (“Russian imperialism” and “The conquest of Ukraine against the background of the history of Russian imperialism”) are, as one can surmise from their titles, devoted to Russian imperialism (in its different political forms), territorial conquests, suppression of national sentiments of the conquered and colonized peoples, and the national-liberation struggles. The following two chapters (“Bolsheviks and the Ukrainian revolution. March 1917 – March 1918” and “Bolsheviks in Ukraine. The catastrophic year of 1919”) describe the turbulent years of (post-) 1917 revolutions in Russia and the revolutionary processes in Ukraine. Three chapters (“Maidan, the spring of the peoples reached Europe”, “Russian white guards in Donbas”, “Donbas’ oligarchic rebellion”) are devoted to the 2013/2014 Revolution of Dignity, the occupation of Crimea and the war in Donbas.

The author, Zbigniew Marcin Kowalewski, somewhat an anthropological outsider, independent researcher and essayist. He was active in the Polish ethnological milieu in the late 1960s and 1970s, and his name is more associated with the early “Solidarność” movement in Poland, of which he was an active member in the early 1980s. Kowalewski’s interest in the Ukrainian national-liberation movement also dates back to the 1980s and until this publication, his studies on Ukrainian issues have tended to appear in hard-to-reach journals and conference volumes. Some of his more recent essays about the 2014 Revolution of Dignity and the war in Donbas, however, have appeared in the Polish edition of *Le Monde Diplomatique* monthly

(and are republished online). Author's intellectual and political autobiography is reflected upon in the last chapter ("A long journey with Russian imperialism in my backpack"), which presents the a his memories from his life in Poland in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, his travels to Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s, emigration to France in the 1980s and his "discovery" of Ukrainian issues having emigrated. He also positions Ukraine with the anti-colonial resistance of 1950s Cuba and Vietnam in the 1950s to 1970s.

The first four chapters present an excellent historical study with characteristics of the political essay. Between 1917 and 1920, Ukraine (particularly its Central and Southern regions, with respect to its contemporary borders) faced a multitude of radical peasants' and workers' protests resulting in the establishment of peasant, workers' and soldiers' councils. It was a period of verbal, written and armed clashes between different political currents, whose leaders often failed to keep up with the course of events and their grassroots dynamics. Towns and villages passed from hand to hand, and fragile, short-lasting alliances were made. Everyone made mistake after mistake, most were objectively on the same side – the side of social revolution and national self-determination. For complex reasons, they were unable or unwilling to come to an agreement.

The author skilfully guides the reader through the hodgepodge of the politics of the Bolsheviks, the Ukrainian socialist-revolutionaries (Ukrainian Party of Socialists-Revolutionaries), social-democrats (Ukrainian Social-democratic Workers Party), anarchists, nationalist-statists (who were willing to support anyone, including the Communists, on the road to the creation of a Ukrainian state), and the Petlurovists. The establishment of the Ukrainian Communist Party (UCP or UKP) (formed out of the factions of the social-democratic and socialist-revolutionary parties) appears crucial to the author's reasoning, as he tracks the independence of the UCP from the Ukrainian Bolsheviks and Moscow, and the significant differences among the Bolsheviks themselves regarding their perception of the national and language questions and the degree of de/centralization of the nascent socialist state. Kowalewski's historical narrative is built on secondary but hard-to-reach sources published in Ukraine or in the Ukrainian language abroad – be it 1920s and 1930s Austria and Czechoslovakia or Canada after the second world war. This part of the book thus presents a well-researched and well-grounded exploration of the period in question.

In contrast, chapters 5-8, dealing with contemporary Ukraine, can be characterised more as political essays and journalism than academic research but are nevertheless worth reading. Readers interested in Ukrainian issues or those living in or originating from Ukraine, will find nothing factually new here. However, Kowalewski's perspective on the events between 2014–2022 are refreshing and thought-provoking. Here, the author places the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity in the context of the events of the Arab Spring in 2010–2012 and points to the fact that Maidan was the first in many years case of European governments being overthrown by protesters. Interestingly, and perhaps debatably, he treats the events of 2014 as a "final" stage of the long process of Ukrainian nation-building, which he dates back to the 17th century.

Unsurprisingly, the war in Donbas is presented as a consequence of interference from the Russian state-security apparatus in concert with certain Russian and Ukrainian business lobbies, “Great Russian” chauvinists and the direct involvement of the Russian army. Kowalewski leaves his readers with no doubt about the authoritarian and anti-social nature of the so-called “uprising in Donbas” and its “peoples’ republics”.

I am somewhat disappointed with a sudden “jump” from 1920 straight to 2014. While the book is about the revolutions and not about the history of Ukraine, the lack of attention to the processes of “sovietisation” (in its various meanings) and resistance to it, the further history of Ukrainian left-wing opposition in the USSR, the post-WWII workers’ protests (e.g. in Krivyi Rih in 1963), leaves the reader somewhat unfulfilled. Neither is one convinced by the author’s overlooking the processes taking place in the Habsburg Empire (Galicia, Bukovyna, Transcarpathia) or after its collapse, in the Second Polish Republic. He focusses exclusively on what is now Central, Southern and Eastern Ukraine, which results in an elision of Western Ukraine from his analysis. The processes observed in Galicia (before and after the First World War), and the Ukrainian nationalism which emerged there, had their historical momentum in the 1940s and 1950s national-liberation struggle against the Russian/Soviet/Stalinist imperialism by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). These processes were focused in Western Ukraine but were also largely informed by the developments in the country’s East and South (which contemporary commentators seem to forget). Kowalewski is the author of several, quite innovative studies of the evolution of Ukrainian nationalist thought, the split within Ukrainian insurgents and the activity of Petro “Poltava” Fedun (1919–1951), whose name is often associated with the left wing of the UPA and Ukrainian Nationalists Organisation (OUN). While rejecting socialism and communism, Fedun and his faction advocated for the classless society and cooperation with other nations oppressed by the Soviet system, including Russia itself. It is a great pity that the contribution this evolution had on Ukrainian history was not reflected upon in *Ukrainian Revolutions*. One can only hope for future publications on this topic.

Not being a historian, I shall still risk a conclusion that the book retains some historical value as it contributes to the study of nation- and state-building in Ukraine, as well as the turbulent social and political processes of 1917–1920. It speaks convincingly too to the area of Ukrainian studies by acknowledging the different traditions of Ukrainian political thought and attempts to build a state by different leaders throughout history (from Zaporizhska Sich to present-day Ukraine). Kowalewski presents some doubtless cultural gains of the 1920s, in the framework of the Soviet *korenizatsiia* policy: Soviet Ukraine as an entity that was possible, despite Moscow leadership and not thanks to it. He points to the lack of consistency of the Bolsheviks towards the national issues as already present in the pre-revolutionary period, “Bolsheviks were the Russian party – the party of the ruling nation’s workers’ movement – to the extent that they did not understand the questions of the nations suppressed by Russia” (p. 13). The author places Kyiv *Centralna Rada* (the Supreme Council) at the core of the Ukrainian national-liberation movement and does a remarkable job

describing its different political currents and related contradictions and antagonisms within and around this political body.

Looking at Ukraine through a revolutionary lenses and locating Ukrainians' struggles among worldwide national-liberation movements and post-colonial state-building efforts undermines modern anti-Ukrainian narratives, such as Ukraine being a "Russian sphere of influence" or the insidious "Ukrainian Nazis persecuting the Russian minority". It also presents an alternative to some of the pro-Ukrainian narratives perceiving current Russia-waged war as a "clash of civilisations" where Ukraine represents the forces of "European values" and "Western civilisation" against the "Eastern", "Asian" and "barbaric" forces of evil. Sympathising with the Ukrainian cause, Kowalewski equally points to the lack of understanding *of* and the lack of interest *in* Ukraine in the "West", which results in the recurring spread of anti-Ukrainian myths.

In the end, this is not conceptually or analytically an anthropological book; it draws much more from history, philosophy and political science than anthropology. Nevertheless, it is absolutely worth reading for anthropologists. The author's autobiographical chapter carries some hint of autoethnography and shows how a long-lasting research agenda intersects with personal experiences and family background. Kowalewski's remarks on the political pseudo-philosophy of Alexander Dugin also criticises the legacy of Lev Gumilov's concept of ethnos, "the biological nature of ethnos with its superethnoses, subethnoses" (p. 8) and the attempts undertaken in Russia to present Gumilov as a founding father of ethnology. It is clear that the concept of "ethnos" still echoes in anthropological studies, not only in Russia but also in other Central and Eastern European countries (including Ukraine). As a whole, the book presents a stimulating account of the long (in the author's own opinion only recently finished) nation-building process and the intersection of the national revolution and the social one. It points to the importance of understanding oppression based on ethno-national belonging and one's mother tongue within the systems of economic and class-based exploitation. It also contributes to the debates around notions of empire and imperialism.

In short, the book is recommended, to be both read and discussed. It also deserves a translation into English (and other languages).