

Mental Mapping of Ukraine in the Soviet Union

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Ukraine was regarded during Soviet times as little Russia and highly gendered, showing typical Ukrainian lifestyle by female allegories. Both perceptions had a tradition since the Czarist Empire. New was a broad description of the Soviet modern, showing technical achievements. Different cultural heritages of Ukraine and thus resulting conflicts were not mentioned.

In the Soviet Union, illustrated books (*fotoal'bom*), information brochures and descriptions of the land and its people were very popular, especially since the 1960s. These publications were addressed to a wider, general audience in the country itself and abroad, as the different languages used in some of them indicate. [12-16] The pictorial discourses aimed to provide an ideal representation of the country and as a historical source they shed light on typical Soviet perceptions of Ukraine. The mainly black and white or color photographs represented a positive self-image complemented with explanatory text. Sometimes the photographers and authors are identifiable, but often they are not. The visual culture in all printed material was well composed, as pictures not only illustrated reality, but also have a highly symbolic meaning. The official framing was deeply political and reflected efforts to Sovietize the Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic. Motives on the first pages were always symbols for the unquestionable central power in Moscow: the Kremlin, the first secretary of the CPSU or a Lenin statue. The images were not at all specifically Ukrainian, rather contained symbols of the Soviet state, norms and authorities which were interconnected with the illustrations of Soviet Ukraine.



Illustration 1

Translocal symbols of power

Ukraina. Fotoal'bom. 1986, pp. 88-89. Kyiv main street Khreshchatik,

The inscription on the board says: *Welcome to the peaceful Leninist foreign policy!* Below the text are prominent buildings of the Moscow Kremlin. The propaganda tool is a translocal sign for the political power situated in the heart of the Ukrainian capital. Together with the red flags this is the focus of the photograph. The many people on the pathway suggest a dynamic similar to an official political demonstration, an affirmative action to the use of public space for political education. The Khreshchatik itself is depicted after its postwar reconstruction with Soviet architecture. [7,8]

All publishing houses were state or party owned and access was possible only after applying for a book project and passing different stages of censorship. In my paper I am interested in how Ukraine was conceptualized in the official Soviet discourse. Which mental maps were drawn in pictures and texts and how was the Ukraine characterized? And did regions matter in the official discourse, and if so in which way and function? Therefore I analyze some illustrated books about Soviet Ukraine.

My hypothesis is that regions did play a minor role in the Soviet mental mapping of Ukraine. Ukraine itself was created as a Soviet sub-region, a small part of a supranational state. In the visual and textual representations central discourses like the modernization of the Soviet Union or the unity of the *sovetskiy narod* were important, but popular publications still did create a knowledge base with official norms and values. They influenced the perception of space directly or indirectly. Alternative mental maps and definitions or perceptions of regions were arcane and implied from the perspective of the central power a negative separatism or lacking loyalty.

Mental maps of Ukraine

A mental map is a cognitive, man-made topography of a certain space. It shows the construction of our perception, how we imagine our surroundings, a social practice, based on different framings like available information, norms, values, cultural categories, discourses and memory. A mental map is bi-folded: it creates and affirms knowledge, what can be seen in maps, atlases or popular mass media dealing with national, regional or global spaces. [10] Very often visual culture is the most important media for mental maps, but also descriptions or explanations of maps. When deconstructing mental maps we differentiate between the geographical space, social spaces, memories inscribed in them, symbolic meanings and pictures. Even if photographs are used, they are not authentic, but composed in many ways. Showing nature or 'natural' landscapes underlies the same process of construction: what is to be seen, in which perspective, with which focus and in which media context are all settings, influencing the image itself and the perception of it. [9, p. 216 et seq.]

How different pictures are arranged in a book, in an album or in other visual media is an intentional setting. New inter pictorial themes and interdependences thus become obvious and visible for the observer. The serial character of photographs, their setting on pages, in chapters or as illustrations for a text is meaningful itself and a form of interpretation by the editors. [11] Analyses also must critically assess what is not shown and what alternative interpretations and attributions of meanings exist.



Illustration 2

Performance of social reality

Ukraina v fotoilljustracijach, Kiev 1961

Through folklore and comparable actions like singing both pictures are linked with the central message of peace. The persons are identifiable as Ukrainians and foreigners and the arrangement thus symbolizes internationalism.

Visual culture creates significance. An image not only shows the object itself, but the meaning of it, a symbol or a cultural code. Nations are symbolized like this with flags, allegories, monuments or public buildings. This form of representation is understandable, as it is a cultural, visual practice. In a process of communication a nation and its borders thus become essential. Creating regions or the idea of them is not as clear, but a comparable process. Both categories – nations and regions – are not naturally given, rather products of performance, communication and perception. [4]

The creation of one Ukrainian national space only began around 1861-62 in the journal *Osnova*. [6] Before then, people spoke of different regions like little Russia, Rus' or Ukraine, but not as a united territory. [2] The imagination of a national space was closely connected to the idea of nation-building in general since the second half of the 19th century, and the development of geography as a science, which explores regions and creates knowledge. Of crucial significance for the notion of Ukrainian lands were the research and publications of Stepan Rudnyc'kyj (1877-1937). [3] A first, broad

description of Ukraine was published in 1914. [14] Rudnyc'kyj and other authors first separated the space of Ukraine from the Russian Empire, while providing scientific, quasi-objective, essential arguments about its independence. They argued that the language and race were very different from Russian or Polish and saw more similarities with the southern Slavic family. [13, pp. 8-9] Besides the territory, Ukraine's own history was discussed as foundation for nation-building. In the discourse about the existence of an independent Ukraine different regions were integrated in one national idea based on an integrating space and history. The process of nation-building was complicated, controversial and not at all linear. [5] With the Bolshevik revolution in 1917 a new concept of the national question came into being, which had been applied to all Soviet republics, including the Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic.

Soviet Topographies

In the early Soviet Union internationalism was propagated instead of nationalism, which was regarded as bourgeois and negative. Main ideas were developed by Stalin already in 1913. He mentioned six points defining a nation: a history of its own, a national language, culture, a national territory, the consciousness of the people and an economy. In theory, every nation had the right to declare its independence, even though there were hopes that proletarians would unite for the socialist idea. During the 1920s ethnicities were encouraged build nations by creating national language alphabets, dictionaries, literature, national language schools and strengthening "their" cultures. The slogan was: national in form with a socialist content. Even though the sovereignty and independence of the republics were guaranteed and stressed in the constitutions it was not possible until 1991 to leave the USSR. Politics changed radically at the beginning of the 1930s. The idea of communist internationalism had faded away, and even if it was still visible in popular culture during the 1930s, the new concept of Soviet patriotism was propagated, resulting in the slogan 'socialism in one country'. The idea of the imagined Soviet community was based on the *rodina* (fatherland), the Soviet people (*narod*), a common Soviet culture and the image of the USSR as one big family. A hierarchy was created with the Soviet people and the Soviet Union on top of a multinational state. All other Soviet republics became sub-regions of a supranational idea, even if there were no clear definitions of what is genuinely Soviet or a distinction between Russian and Soviet. This model of a Soviet mental map influenced the presentations of Soviet regions, as it was always stressed that Soviet Ukraine is only a part of the whole. Later on, the descriptions of Soviet Ukraine seemed to follow a certain pattern with smaller variations due to contemporary discourses.

Cognitive patterns in Soviet topographies

When comparing different publications about Soviet Ukraine, one can find many similarities in terms of understanding and performance. A general narrative always shows a stable, prospering country which suffered hard times only due to outer, aggressive, fierce enemies, especially during World War II. Implicitly the idea of border is based on protection and peacekeeping and is not a symbol for conflicts or different belongings in history. Soviet Ukraine is unquestionably shown as an integral part of the Soviet Union; each citizen is also a Soviet citizen. From this perspective Soviet and Ukrainian are synonymous. Due to the national question Ukraine was shown as a sovereign state with formal diplomatic relations of its own. Soviet Ukraine seems to be essential: it has a clear, defined territory of its own, including different geographical (=natural) regions like mountains, rivers, cities, countryside and shores. Nature is manifold, sometimes romantic but also formed by mankind to develop the Ukrainian economy. It is subordinated to progress and can be modulated, as pictures of hydroelectric power plants and water reservoir dams demonstrate. Mineral resources are used for industry, while applying latest technological standards. These are symbols of modernity, which is no longer bound to national standards, but Soviet in itself. *Fotoal'bomy* are often addressed to tourists and recommend pleasant places to visit. The depiction of construction sites of socialism overwrites non-Soviet functions of space, aiming to create a Soviet Ukraine.

Pictures and descriptions in the analyzed publications describe a stable political system, which is democratic and regulated by a well-developed constitution. There are further on references to history: Ukraine has a long tradition, starting with the Kievan Rus'. Together with the Cossacks, Bohdan Khmelnytsky is celebrated as a hero, who liberated the Ukrainians from the Poles and Tatars by signing the treaty of Pereyaslav with the Russian Empire in 1654. Another historical liberation of the Ukrainian people was the Bolshevik revolution and the collective defense of the socialist fatherland against the fascist enemy. As a matter of course the influence of the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth or the Habsburg monarchy, alternative developments, different positions in Ukrainian nation-building and the longing for cultural autonomy are not mentioned in Soviet publications. Instead a close historical kinship with the Russian people is constructed not only through the participation in the holy war myth. There were already traditions before: throughout the Russians always helped the Ukrainians in their fight for liberation. The main message is that without the Russians the Ukrainians could not have been freed from foreign powers. And still both peoples do have many common interests and features – as the Soviet publications say. They are entangled by history and fate, while their relationship is comparable to biological ties, an essential union. Here again a hegemonic narrative about the character of the Ukrainian identity is obvious. As for the counter-narrative, the arcane knowledge would tell a story about other bonds, separatism and distinction. After de-

Stalinization in the late 1950s, Ukrainian writers and intellectuals debated the rebirth of Ukraine and criticized the hegemony of Russian language in Ukrainian schools and the strict norms given by Moscow.[1]

In all publications the reader can find descriptions of the Ukrainian economy, which is Soviet in form. Two sectors are very important: industry (mostly heavy, metallurgical industry) and agriculture. The illustrations of workers and machines, industrial complexes and *kolchozy* showed that Soviet Ukraine contributes to the prosperous Soviet economy and profits from the Soviet modernization in general. The depiction of cities and urban street life again is more a demonstration of a Soviet understanding of modern life. As part of the Soviet Union, Ukraine participates in modernization, while becoming more Soviet as well. What seems to be obvious or commonplace is in my opinion a strategy to integrate the Ukraine into the Soviet empire, without questioning the supranational leadership or the subordinated role of Ukraine. In any case though, official editors and authors had to describe in some way Ukraine and its special character as well as its differences from Soviet culture. How did this take place? And what was shown as Ukrainian culture?

Constructing Soviet Ukraine

Soviet Ukraine was defined as an integral part of European culture, which also contributed to a cultural canon. Famous authors like Taras Shevchenko, Ivan Franko or Lesnja Ukrainka are mentioned for the “old” times, while A. Korneitshuk and Wanda Wasilevskaia are mentioned as Soviet authors. Ukrainian literature as well as science, universities, music and theater began to develop in the 19th century. Under Soviet influence, a differentiated school and professional education system was introduced. All cultural products of modernity like performing arts, film or photography were present and developed in Ukraine. In the books different national artists are mentioned to show the richness of Ukrainian cultural productions. Yet the question still remained what is genuinely Ukrainian. In the pictorial discourses the typical Ukrainian is female: she is beautiful and cultivated, dressed in national costumes, lives in the countryside, knows old folk traditions, and feeds the people with traditional dishes.

this gendered framework a woman is weaker than a man and has to be protected by him. Obviously such a perspective from the Russian Empire was kept as a tradition during Soviet times.

Photographs with folk dances or groups in national costumes remind us of the slogan “national in form and socialist in content”, which was mentioned earlier in this paper. Even if the sovereignty of the Ukraine is stressed in some of the texts, the Soviet central leadership is implicitly unquestionable and Ukraine holds the status of a sub-region governed by Moscow.

Schematic regions

Different regions are mentioned in the analyzed Soviet publications. Beside the already mentioned geographical differences readers informed about administrative units and – most important – different economic regions. Due to nature and resources, agriculture sometimes plays a more important role than industry, which holds a key position in the Donetsk. This definition of regions seems far away from historical, cultural or social perceptions. Another differentiation is the one between rural regions like the Carpathians and cities, which can be regarded as a discourse about modernity, not different regional identities themselves. The Crimea is stereotypically shown as place for tourism, the Soviet Mediterranean without any hints to its history and related ethnic debates.

The question of western Ukraine is also discussed, while some extra information is given on Lviv. The most important statement pertains to the peaceful and voluntary reunification in 1939/40, when according to official interpretation the Soviet Union liberated Western Ukraine from bourgeois nationalistic influences. More information about the cultural heritage has only been available since Perestroika, when pictures of the city were published. Obviously the panorama of the old town is different from socialist cities, i.e. not at all Soviet and thus different from the more homogenous canon of Soviet Ukraine presented in the books. With pictures of buildings from the 19th century, questions were raised about historical traditions which might vary from Soviet textbooks. Some old churches in Lviv are shown with the comment that the city is like a big monument for architecture. Here the reader gets a direct link to a non Soviet tradition, even the text tells that the use of old churches is for concerts only. This metaphorical means of describe might be a first attempt to show arcane knowledge in official discourse. During the 1980s other modifications can be seen in the representation of the Soviet Ukraine: there are of course many citations of political slogans like *uskorenje* and the further development of an efficient industry. National interests are also stressed more than before, as Kyiv now is shown as an important political, cultural, historical and also religious center. In the volume from 1986 the history is described in more detailed fashion, especially concerning the 20th century. It contains pictures of Kyiv after being destroyed in World War II, the battles around the city and Soviet Ukrainian partisans under the leadership of Sydir Kovpak. Another interesting point is a series of

photographs with churches, in which Ukraine is performatively depicted as a religious culture. In general though, loyalty with the Soviet system is prevalent.

Conclusion

All publications express official discourses implemented top-down without reference to the opinions or selfimages of national, regional or local groups. Alternatively, arcane interpretations are rather ignored and tabooed. Soviet Ukraine is shown as a homogenous space with no cultural or social differences and the outcome of possible conflicts. Constructing mental maps and topographies creates knowledge, which is used in the Soviet context – with the publication monopoly by official institutions and strong censorship – as a claim to and technique of power. However, even if the use of regions is relatively limited and one dimensional in the analyzed books, there are political implications, which give hints to other connotations involving separatism and disintegration. The discourse changes during perestroika, as arcane knowledge becomes more popular and conflicts are more obvious. Nevertheless Soviet Ukraine is still embedded in a longer tradition as a sub-region with close, long lasting ties with the Russian kinfolk which it is dependent on. Other forms of understanding regionalism which do not suit the Soviet discourse are disregarded. The implicated understanding of a region is non-problematic, formal and administrative, but not socially or culturally defined. However, a certain degree of plurality exists in relation to the supranational center, which constructs a performative hierarchy and affirms its leadership. Altogether, the understanding of regions is very essential and concepts of identification are constricted to Soviet or Soviet Ukrainian.

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