Introduction: European Histories of Ukraine and the Valorization of the Past

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On 24 February 2022, Ukraine became, in the eyes of both Ukrainian and Western European politicians, a European country—defined by its history and values. In response to Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine, European politicians reflected on the nation's European history to explain the support offered by the European Union (EU) and its member states. Charles Michel, President of the European Council, for instance, visited Odesa to celebrate Europe Day on 9 May, praised the city as "a melting pot of European culture and history," and declared that "the people of Odesa shield their monuments from the bullets and rockets, just like Ukrainians are shielding their freedom from the Russian aggression."[1] In addition to valorizing Ukraine's past, others directly referred to the values guiding their actions. The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, asserted that "a people that stands up so bravely for our European values belongs in our European family" and outlined prospective EU membership for Ukraine.[2] Similarly, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelens'kyi reminded the European Parliament and national parliaments of his country's place in European history and that the Ukrainian people "are fighting for the values of Europe and the world."[3] This political rhetoric is indicative of a broader framework of interpretation.[4] In the weeks and months following Russia's full-scale attack, intellectuals, civil society activists, and the media challenged the often stereotypical perception of Ukraine as a dysfunctional and corrupt post-Soviet state and the antithesis of what Europe supposedly stands for. Following this

1   CHARLES MICHEL: Europe Day Statement by President Charles Michel in Odesa, Ukraine, in: European Council (2022-09-05), https://www.consilium.europa.eu/de/press/press-re leases/2022/05/09/europe-day-statement-by-presidentcharles-michel-in-odesa-ukraine/ (2025-04-09). See Gregor Feindt's contribution to this special issue.

2   URSULA VON DER LEYEN: Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the Russian aggression against Ukraine, 2022-03-02, https://ec.europa.eu/ commission/presscorner/detail/%20en/speech_22_1483 (2025-04-09).

3   VOLODYMYR ZELENSKYY: Speech at the European Parliament, 2022-03-01, https://www. europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2022-03-01_EN.html (2025-04-09); Speech by President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the Sejm of the Republic of Poland, 2022-03-11, https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/vistup-prezidenta-ukrayini-volodi mira-zelenskogo-v-sejmi-res-73497 (2025-04-09); Rede des Präsidenten der Ukraine, Wolodymyr Selenskyj, im Deutschen Bundestag, 2022-03-17, https://www.bundestag. de/dokumente/textarchiv/2024/kw24-rede-selenskyj-de-1008282 (2025-04-09); Address by President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy to the US Congress, in: Official website of the President of Ukraine, https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/promova-preziden ta-ukrayini-volodimira-zelenskogo-pered-kong-73609 (2025-04-09). – For an analysis of Zelenskyi's historical arguments, see: MARTA DYCZOK, YERIN CHUNG: Zelens'kyi Uses His Communication Skills as a Weapon of War, in: Canadian Slavonic Papers 64 (2022), 2–3, pp. 146–161.

4   ELENA BARACANI: Ideational Agenda-setting Leadership: President von der Leyen and the EU Response to the Invasion of Ukraine, in: West European Politics 46 (2023), 7, pp. 1451–1474.

thinking, war refugees from Ukraine were welcomed as culturally akin to those in their EU host countries and as Europeans fleeing from war within Europe.[5]

In the context of the war, references to Europe, history, and values allowed Western European and Ukrainian commentators to demarcate Ukraine, its culture, and its people from Russia. These arguments responded to a Russian imperial interpretation of history that denied Ukrainian sovereignty and statehood by situating the country within the conceptual framework of the "Russian World."[6] In particular, Vladimir Putin, the President of the Russian Federation, claimed that Ukraine was a state that had come into being only by historical chance and was now being monopolized by the West.[7] While historical arguments and memory politics should not be mistaken as the main reason for the invasion, Russia's imperial memory clearly fueled its growing ambitions to renew the former Russian or Soviet Empire. History, therefore, contributed to the rationale for the war and allowed the Russian government to mobilize large parts of Russian society for this invasion.[8] Studying these conflicting historical narratives about Ukraine and its relation to Europe and Russia is fundamental to understanding the ongoing war.

However, the question of whether, to what extent, and due to which qualities Ukraine belongs to Europe is not limited to the context of Russia's full-scale invasion. This special issue inquires into the (re)imagining of Ukraine and its European history before and after 24 February 2022.[9] It brings together five articles that study specific cases in which Ukrainian history has been rendered "European" since 1991. The authors analyze how various actors from politics, media, and historiography, as well as the educational sector and museums, bring forward such ideational Europeanization. In examining arguments for or against a European history of Ukraine, the contributors to this issue do not essentialize or question the country's Europeanness but critically reflect on narratives and interpretations. The articles consider how different actors communicate a European history of Ukraine, how they use the past, and which values they mobilize

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5   Félix Krawatzek, Friedemann Pestel, Rieke Trimcev, Gregor Feindt: Shades of Blue: Claiming Europe in the Age of Disintegration, Ithaca, NY 2025, pp. 213–215.
6   Mikhail Suslov: "Russian World" Concept: Post-Soviet Geopolitical Ideology and the Logic of "Spheres of Influence," in: Geopolitics 23 (2018), 2, pp. 330–353; Marlène Laruelle: Russia's Ideological Construction in the Context of the War in Ukraine, Paris 2024 (IFRI Studies / Russie.Eurasie.Reports, 46).
7   Vladimir Putin: Address, in: Official Website of the President of the Russian Federation (2022-02-22), http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828 (2025-04-09).
8   Gwendolyn Sasse: Der Krieg gegen die Ukraine: Hintergründe, Ereignisse, Folgen, München 2022, pp. 13–14.
9   The contributions originate from a workshop of the Leibniz Research Alliance "Value of the Past" held at the Leibniz Institute of European History (IEG) in Mainz on 15/16 February 2024, organized by Gregor Feindt and Joachim Berger (IEG) with Marcus Otto and Steffen Sammler (Leibniz Institute for Educational Media | Georg Eckert Institute).

in these processes. While all authors share an interest in the history of ideas and memory studies, they follow different methodological approaches according to their specific cases, from textbook comparison and the history of historiography to discourse analysis.

With this collection of articles, the special issue addresses the profound lack of research on the European framing of Ukrainian history and the values conveyed by arguments drawing on this history or memory.[10] In particular, Ukraine is largely ignored in memory studies concerning the pernicious East-West divide in European memory and the memory conflicts between East Central European EU member states and Russia. Consequently, the special issue contributes to the general understanding of Ukraine's position in European history and the utilization of the past across Europe.

Studying narratives and interpretations of Ukrainian history and their relation to Europe, the special issue confronts fundamental questions of Ukrainian statehood since the country won its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Despite Ukraine's indisputable sovereignty under international law, it is the country's historical position and not its current legal status that is more often used to legitimize or question its struggle against Russia's invasion in much of public discourse. Before discussing the individual contributions, this introduction outlines three overarching approaches to conceptualizing European histories of Ukraine and the valorization of the past.

A Contested History of the Ukrainian Lands

Ukraine is a dynamic historical region, not only because of its location in Europe. There are two schools of thought about what fundamentally constitutes Ukrainian history. These define Ukraine either ethnically in terms of language, religion, or possibly the legacy of the Cossacks, or in terms of historical statehood beginning with the medieval Kyivan Rus or during the Russian Revolutions.[11] Furthermore, there is a historical view of the present-day state territory, including regions that became part of Ukraine after 1945 and were not considered by contemporaries as belonging to Ukraine in earlier times, such as Northern Bukovina, Transcarpathia, and Crimea. One example discussed in this special issue comes from the field of archaeology, where Ukrainian prehistorians consider Scythian findings or the remains of the Cucuteni-Trypillia culture part of Ukrainian history.[12]

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10   Among the few publications, see: GIOVANNA BROGI BERCOFF, MARKO PAVLYSHYN et al. (eds.): Ukraine and Europe: Cultural Encounters and Negotiations, Toronto 2017; VOLODYMYR KRAVCHENKO, MARKO ROBERT STECH: The Unpredictable Past? Reshaping Russian, Ukrainian, and East European Studies, Edmonton 2024.

11   ANDRII PORTNOV, TETIANA PORTNOVA: Ukrainische Geschichte: Interpretations- und Erklärungsansätze, in: Osteuropa 72 (2022), 6–8, pp. 79–102.

12   See Stefan Albrecht's contribution to this special issue.

The concept of what constitutes Ukrainian history has changed significantly over the last 40 years. In the Soviet Union, historiography on Ukraine adhered both to Marxist-Leninist tradition and a historical Russo-centrism that underscored the historical unification of the Ukrainian lands and Russia as a seemingly logical and progressive process. Only since the late 1980s have historians in Ukraine come to openly discuss the history of Ukraine as an independent subject.[13] After the country's independence, historians both from Ukraine and around the world debated whether Ukraine had a history at all and, given its lack of continuous statehood, asked what periods, political entities, or traditions could be considered "Ukrainian." They also reflected on the methodological approaches necessary to write the history of a "non-historical nation" and how to transcend a national and, indeed, ethnic framework.[14] Within this framework, Ukrainian history provided space for methodological innovations. One example from 2009 is when Georgiy Kasianov and Philipp Ther presented the Ukrainian lands as "a laboratory of transnational history." Their groundbreaking volume explores the cultural contacts, transfers, and intersections that have shaped modern Ukraine.[15] More recently, historians such as Serhii Plokhy, Serhiy Bilenky, and Yaroslav Hrytsak have added to the transnational, European, and global history of Ukraine. This transnational approach emphasizes Ukraine's ethnic, linguistic, religious, socioeconomic, and political diversity and identifies negotiating differences as a distinctive feature of Ukrainian history.[16]

These conceptualizations of a Ukrainian "national" history compete with a Russian imperial or Great Russian interpretation of history developed in the nineteenth century.[17] While this position is not the focus of this issue, it is always present as a background theme. According to the Russian imperial view, Ukraine is part of the "Russian world," defined by Orthodoxy, the military, and Russian statehood, and Ukrainians are merely "Little Russians." According to this

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13 ANDRII PORTNOV: How History Writing Became "Official": Soviet Ukrainian Historiography Reconsidered, in: KORINE AMACHER, ANDRII PORTNOV et al. (eds.): Official History in Eastern Europe, Osnabrück 2020, pp. 39–64, here pp. 61–63.

14 MARK VON HAGEN: Does Ukraine Have a History?, in: Slavic Review 54 (1995), 3, pp. 658–673; SERHII PLOKHY: The History of a "Non-historical" Nation: Notes on the Nature and Current Problems of Ukrainian Historiography, in: Slavic Review 54 (1995), 3, pp. 709–716.

15 GEORGIY KASIANOV, PHILIPP THER (eds.): Laboratory of Transnational History: Ukraine and Recent Ukrainian Historiography, Budapest 2009. See also: TIMOTHY SNYDER: The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999, New Haven, Conn. 2003.

16 SERHII PLOKHY: The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine, 2nd ed., New York 2021; SERHIY BILENKY: Laboratory of Modernity: Ukraine between Empire and Nation, 1772–1914, Montreal et al. 2023; YAROSLAV HRYTSAK: Ukraine: The Forging of a Nation, New York 2024.

17 Cf. MARTIN SCHULZE WESSEL: Der Fluch des Imperiums: Die Ukraine, Polen und der Irrweg in der russischen Geschichte, München 2023, pp. 118–148.

interpretation, Ukraine was conquered by the Russian Empire, either integrated through alliance politics or annexed through subjugation, and then developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries through the settlement of agriculture and industry on supposedly unclaimed land called "New Russia." Following Russia's annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in Eastern Ukraine in 2014, Russian publicists and politicians revitalized this narrative. On several occasions, Putin emphasized the supposed historical "unity of Russians and Ukrainians."[18] Just days before the full-scale attack, he indulged in a series of historical statements insisting that Ukraine was "an inalienable part of our own history, culture and spiritual space," implying that its independence from Russia was the result of historical coincidence and misfortune.[19] These conflicting historical arguments continue to play a fundamental role in Russia's war against Ukraine, not only with regard to Ukraine's Russian-speaking east.

A European Country?

Ukraine is situated between historical regions. The nation's very name indicates that the country is on the margins of Europe and in a transition zone to the Steppes on the west bank of the Dnipro River. To varying extents, historians have suggested that this geographic position between Europe and Eurasia or Russia provides a meta-narrative for the history of the Ukrainian lands. Serhii Plokhy describes Ukraine as the "Gates of Europe," at times stopping foreign invasion but mostly serving "as a bridge between Europe and Eurasia."[20] Ihor Ševčenko, in turn, imagines Ukraine "between East and West" with a strong emphasis on the distinctive and often conflicting religious traditions of Orthodox and Latin Christianity that shaped the country's cultural history.[21] Such narratives of in-betweenness underscore a gradual belonging to Europe—historically, Ukraine was a European country, yet not fully.

Ukrainians have frequently turned to "Europe" as a measuring stick against which to demand modernization, free and fair elections, the rule of law, or simply a life lived in dignity in their country. This has been particularly visible since the Orange Revolution of 2004/05 and during the Euromaidan protests of 2013/14. References to Europe and the EU as a political project have been a recurring pattern throughout Eastern Europe, often appealing to various interests and val-

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18 Vladimir Putin: On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians, in: Offical Website of the President of the Russian Federation (2021-07-16), http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181 (2025-04-09).

19 Ibid.; Putin, Address.

20 Plokhy, The Gates of Europe, p. xxi.

21 Ihor Ševčenko: Ukraine between East and West: Essays on Cultural History to the Early Eighteenth Century, 2nd ed., Edmonton 2009.

ues.[22] To varying degrees and along different topics, this turn toward Europe is underpinned by historical arguments.

Since 24 February 2022, a growing number of voices in politics, journalism, and academia in Western Europe have moved Ukraine from its peripheral position to the center of Europe or even declared it the "heart of Europe."[23] Those quoted at the beginning of this introduction are among the most prominent. Using this common anthropomorphic metaphor, politicians and representatives from academia, civil society, and nongovernmental organizations emphasize Ukraine's transfers and contacts with Western Europe to stress the country's Europeanness in this moment of crisis.

The Value and the Values of a European Past

The question of whether Ukraine belongs to Europe is closely tied to the value attributed to a common European past and the values guiding the social actions of "the" Europeans, including the Ukrainians, in the past and present. As the articles in this special issue make clear, for the actors under examination, Europe is constituted not only through cultural transfer, extreme experiences of violence, or programmatic conventions, such as internationally agreed standards in education, but also through shared, positively understood values such as freedom, sovereignty, democracy, and the rule of law. These values are, on the one hand, marked as "European" and, on the other hand, claimed as having universal validity.

It is not surprising that in moments of crisis—that is, the ongoing war—Ukrainian politicians have asserted that Ukraine shares European values. For instance, Ukrainian Prime Minister Arsenii Iatseniuk made such claims when he signed the Association Agreement with the EU in 2014. President Zelens'kyi also did so when he addressed the US Congress in 2022.[24] This narrative drew on a reservoir of arguments marking certain values as both specifically Ukrainian and European. However, in contrast to the statements of Ukrainian politicians, the findings of value research highlighted the endorsement of "Orthodox" values among the Ukrainian people leaning towards Russia rather than the EU. The

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22   See, e. g.: José Maria Faraldo, Paulina Gulińska-Jurgiel et al. (eds.): Europa im Ostblock: Vorstellungen und Diskurse, 1945–1991, Köln 2008; Christian Domnitz: Hinwendung nach Europa: Neuorientierung und Öffentlichkeitswandel im Staatssozialismus 1975–1989, Berlin 2015.

23   For this metaphor, see: Krawatzek/Pestel, p. 101.

24   "Ukraine Shares European Values" Says Interim PM, in: BBC News (2014-03-21), http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26681876 (2025-08-15); Address by President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy to the US Congress.

younger generation of Ukrainians in particular is, however, more outspoken towards values attributed to the EU.[25]

Most prominently, "freedom" is considered a central value in Ukrainian history. In Ukrainian historiography and memory culture, freedom is associated above all with the myth of the Cossacks, their opposition to serfdom, proto-democratic governance, and their political and military power.[26] The importance of this value was particularly visible during the Euromaidan, as protesters saw their actions as part of the Cossack legacy.[27] For instance, protesters referred to the camp on Maidan Nezalezhnosti as *sich*, the name for the administrative and military center of the Zaporozhian Cossacks in wartime.[28] This national historical symbolism gained a European outlook as the Euromaidan made clear that in today's Europe, the affirmation of "European" values could guarantee Ukraine's freedom—and since 24 February 2022, European actors have frequently pledged to guarantee this freedom.

The contributions to this special issue shed light on the changing and contentious interpretations of Ukrainian history and their relation to Europe as an ideational framework, as well as cultural and political leverage, as the following summaries begin to show.

The Contributions

The first article focuses on the relationship between Ukraine and Europe in historiography. Joachim Berger asks: "Ukraine before Statehood—A Blind Spot in Western European Historiography of/on Europe since 1991?" He analyzes how general accounts of European history from the early modern period to World War I conceive of "Ukraine" and "Ukrainians" and into which spatial and temporal patterns of European history they insert these lands and people before modern Ukrainian statehood. Furthermore, the article traces the characteristics and structural features of Europe used to frame Ukrainian history as "European." It is evident that both the people and the country, situated between Poland and Lithuania, the Habsburg Empire, and Russia, are seldom portrayed as protago-

25 PLAMEN AKALIYSKI, TIM REESKENS: Ukrainian Values: Between the Slavic-Orthodox Legacy and Europe's Allure, in: European Societies 26 (2024), 2, pp. 522–551.

26 SERHII PLOKHY: The Cossack Myth: History and Nationhood in the Age of Empires, Cambridge et al. 2012.

27 WIM VAN MEURS, OLGA MOROZOVA: Majdan: Presence and Political Representation in Post-Communist Ukraine, in: DANIËLLE SLOOTJES, HARM KAAL (eds.): New Perspectives on Power and Political Representation from Ancient History to the Present Day: Repertoires of Representation, Boston 2019, pp. 144–170, here p. 160.

28 SERHIY KVIT: The Ideology of the Euromaidan, in: SHCS Journal 1 (2014), 1, pp. 27–39, here p. 30; TETYANA BUREYCHAK, OLENA PETRENKO: Heroic Masculinity in Post-Soviet Ukraine: Cossacks, UPA and "Svoboda," in: East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies 11 (2015), 2, pp. 3–27, here p. 20.

nists in European history. Berger argues that this mirrors the regional expertise of most authors of such overall accounts, or rather, their lack of specialization in Eastern Europe. Moreover, after the "cultural turn," histories of Europe have rarely been organized according to categories of space and state. However, it is unlikely that the escalation of Russia's full-scale attack will lead to a new "spatial turn" that will conceptually integrate state and nation-building processes on the territory of present-day Ukraine into European history.

Two articles study how educational media shape narratives of European integration. In her article "From Inequalities to Partnership: Analyzing a New Paradigm of Europe-Ukraine Relations in Ukrainian History School Textbooks, 2001–2024," Maria Kovalchuk analyzes the dynamic changes in the representation of Europe and its relations with Ukraine after 2010. With the recent merger of Ukrainian History and World History courses into "Ukraine and the World," Ukrainian history textbooks offer a unique entry point into the question of belonging and European self-understanding. Kovalchuk demonstrates how Europe's image in Ukrainian textbooks underwent a paradigmatic change from uncritical adherence to Europe as an inspiration to a horizontal relationship in which Ukrainian textbook authors evaluated Europe and, more specifically, the EU critically and deconstructed its previously assumed cultural superiority. She further underscores that textbooks do not present Europeanization as a standalone goal but rather as a means to foster the further development of Ukraine as an independent nation-state.

With "Europe as Argument, Value, and Promise? Western European Perspectives on the History of Ukraine in History Curricula and Textbooks," Steffen Sammler and Marcus Otto provide a comparative analysis of how Ukrainian history is represented in recent history textbooks in Germany, France, Italy, and the United Kingdom. The article reveals that in Western European history textbooks, Ukraine rarely appears as an inherent subject, actor, driver, or advocate of history but rather its object. While problem-oriented textbooks take up Ukraine as an example of general developments in history, the country is widely framed within Russian and (post-)Soviet histories and only recently presented in a European perspective. In national history textbooks, the history of Ukraine widely serves the purpose of European self-reassurance within topical self-descriptions of Europe in terms of definitions, values, narratives, and history, including diagnoses of crisis. Bilateral and multilateral textbooks, however, shift this perspective to include Ukraine in topics such as migration or cultural diversity and provide an inclusive understanding of European history that can be read as a possibility for Europe's and the EU's futures.

The last two articles shed new light on the Western European public's perception of Ukrainian history after 1989. In his article "From Gold in the Scythian Steppe to Scandinavian Influence in Kyiv: Ukraine's Relationship with Europe in the Past Thirty Years, Portrayed in International Exhibitions," Stefan Albrecht

focuses on the presentation of objects of art. Upon gaining independence in 1991, Ukraine held its first major exhibition on the archaeology of the Steppe in Germany. Since then, several exhibitions on premodern Ukraine have followed. Initially, these exhibitions focused on the Scythians and Crimea, largely sidelining Europe. In later exhibitions, Ukraine was presented as part of Russia or Europe. Only in recent years have curators shown an increasing interest in Ukraine's relations with Europe, most evidently after Russia's full-scale attack in 2022. Reflecting on several exhibitions, exhibition catalogs, and media coverage, Albrecht shows that the exhibitions presented different contexts to their audiences, depending on the country where Ukrainian objects were being shown. Specifically, within Europe, Ukraine displayed its history as part of Europe, characterized by diversity, the peaceful coexistence of peoples, democracy, and economic prosperity. Outside of Europe, exhibitions aimed instead to present Ukraine as an old, important, and independent nation without further emphasizing its Europeanness.

Finally, Gregor Feindt analyzes the newspaper discourse and unparalleled public attention to Ukraine in the first year of Russia's full-scale invasion. "An Unknown Land? The Making of a European History of Ukraine in German, British, and Polish Print Media after 24 February 2022" shows how, for many European journalists (and to varying extents, also their readers), the beginning of the full-fledged war marked a "return of history." In debates about the war, history became a fundamental argument used to justify Western support for Ukraine. Yet, Ukraine's contribution to European history remained scarce as the country was mostly presented as a realm of extreme violence in the twentieth century. With a focus on more recent history, later newspapers in Germany, Poland, and the United Kingdom portrayed the Euromaidan and the "Revolution of Dignity" as Ukraine's most European moments, thus presenting a history that revolved around shared values and how to secure them for Ukraine. However, much of this debate failed to reflect Ukrainian perspectives. Feindt holds that while the Western European media declared Ukraine and its history and culture quintessentially European, its arguments, which primarily drew on history, projected German, British, and Polish perceptions of Europe onto Ukrainian history.

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