Igor Baranko and National Precarity in Ukrainian Comics

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In summer 2017, a visitor to Moscow strolling the historic Arbat pedestrian mall would have glimpsed an unusual sight: a multi-poster display, stretching several meters, devoted to the construction of a bridge. Not, of course, just any bridge, but the structure over the Kerch Strait meant to link mainland Russia to the peninsula of Crimea. "We Are Building a Bridge," announced the title poster, in bold caps over an aerial shot of the gleaming steel span in progress. "The Crimean Bridge is the dream of generations. We have been thinking of the possibility of uniting Crimea with the Caucasus since the end of the 19th century."[1]

A tourist might be forgiven their puzzlement over such a grandiose encomium to an infrastructure project, however impressive—indeed the construction posed considerable logistical challenges: twelve miles long, over difficult terrain and stormy weather.[2] But these were not the reason for the triumphant language, which had more to do with the fact that, just over three years prior, Crimea itself had belonged to another country, Ukraine, in whose Eastern region Russia was embroiled in a violent insurgency against Kyiv.

The Arbat outdoor photo exhibit did a commendable job of completely eliding the neo-imperialist context of the bridge: in addition to militarily supporting separatists in the predominantly Russian-speaking Ukrainian East (a conflict which has claimed over 10,000 lives and displaced more than 1.5 million), Russia had illegally annexed Crimea in 2014 after a hastily-staged referendum with Russian troops already on the ground; the action led to international sanctions which have seriously damaged the Russian economy, and which remain in place today. Instead, the exhibit appealed to nationalism, patriotic pride and the notion that the peninsula had never really been Ukrainian to begin with—a sentiment captured by Russian president Vladimir Putin when he remarked in a spring, 2014 address: "Crimea has always been an integral part of Russia in the hearts and minds of our people" (Yaffa).[3]

The Ukrainian challenge to Moscow's hegemony, most recently through its 2014 Euromaidan Revolution which ousted a Russian-backed president, represents both a remarkable assertion of its people's aspirations to reorient the country towards Western Europe and align itself with the EU, as well as a profound blow to Russia's geopolitical influence. But with the war in the East dragging on, continued Russian meddling and few of the revolution's hopes fulfilled, Ukraine remains a divided nation. Given these pressures, some question whether it will last in its present form at all, but rather split into its Western-facing Ukrainian-speaking portion (including the capital Kyiv and Lviv) and its Russian-dominated East (Lugansk, Donetsk, Crimea).[4]

This chapter examines such anxieties over national precarity as expressed in Ukrainian comics, a scene still in its infancy. I focus on the work of graphic novelist Igor Baranko, which exemplifies the postcolonial themes we have been touching on through adult fantasies of alternate histories which defy both the fixedness of the past and the menace of the future, thus opening new possibilities—or, more pessimistically, indulging in an elaborate form of denial. Baranko's oeuvre, and as I will argue Ukrainian comics in general, put on display the anxieties of a country with no solid footing and, at the beginning of the 21st century, no secure path forward.

Years and Years of Living Dangerously

Author Oksana Zabuzhko, in her 1996 novel *Pol'ovi doslidzhennia z ukraïns'koho seksu* [Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex], captured the mood of national insecurity in the line: "Ukrainian choice is a choice between nonexistence and an existence that kills you" (46). Historian Mark von Hagen posed a similar conundrum in a provocatively titled 1995 essay, "Does Ukraine Have a History?" Only if the country had a history, he argued, could it have a future. In other words, by being the subject, not the object, of history.

But establishing that history has proven elusive, since the major European powers have long diminished Ukrainian sovereignty claims to advance their own imperialist ambitions. Whether at the hands of the Russians, who trace their civilization to Kiyvan Rus,[5] or of the Third Reich, who annexed the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in the name of *Lebensraum* (Snyder 19-20, Plokhy 259-260), the territory which today goes by that name has served as battleground and spoils for larger and better-equipped states. The country's current borders date back to only 1945 (in the case of Crimea 1954 or, if so inclined, 2014) and despite attempts to paint a direct line back to the Cossack Hetmanate of the 17th/18th centuries, Ukrainian historians have failed to definitively substantiate a Ukrainian identity from the pre-modern period, lacking state/national continuity. Von Hagen concludes, "Today's Ukraine is a very modern creation, with little firmly established precedent in the national past" (667).[6]

What all these matters return us to, of course, is the uncertain identity, existence and recognition—or disdain—of Ukraine itself in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse. Yet even as part of the USSR, the Ukrainian state found itself subordinated, its "backwater" capital Kyiv starved of attention, resources and contacts with the West (von Hagen 663), its self-determination undermined with campaigns to discourage the use of the Ukrainian language and "propagation of the stereotype of Ukrainian culture as second-rate and mediocre" in the 1930s and again in the 1970s (Chernetsky 49).[7] Its people suffered enormous physical harm as well. To punish peasant resistance to the collectivization of agriculture, Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin launched a plan to seize Ukrainian harvests in the early 1930s, creating an artificial famine. The *Holodomor* (famine) killed as many as 3.9 million people. At its height, denizens of Ukrainian cities such as Kharkiv grew inured to the sight of starved corpses on the streets (Conquest, Applebaum). Soviet suspicions over Ukraine's loyalties flared up during and after World War II, when the so-called Ukrainian Insurgent Army fought against Moscow's rule in the 1940s and 1950s, even collaborating with the Germans during the war (Plokhy 280-284). (Contemporary denunciations of some Kyiv-supporting fighters and politicians in the current Eastern conflict as "fascists" stem in part from that history; see De Ploeg 157).

When in November 2013, President Viktor Yanukovych backtracked from an association agreement with the European union in favor of stronger ties to Russia, thousands gathered in Kiev's Independence Square in opposition. Over the course of the winter the protests turned violent, sparking the 2014 "Euromaidan"[8] Revolution that toppled Yanukovych. Petro Poroshenko was elevated to the presidency in May, 2014, but he inherited a crisis: massive public debt, the loss of Crimea (annexed by Russia), and a secessionist war in the east led by pro-Russian militias (not-so-secretly assisted by the Russian military).

Given all the foregoing, Putin's project to span the Kerch Strait starts to look less like a bridge and more like a tentacle.[9]

Across the centuries, the pattern holds: Ukraine's very survival, always tenuous, is routinely threatened by either all-out invasion or the machinations of outside powers (mostly Russia) exploiting its ethno-religious fault lines. Today, such a situation and the country's response render it a compelling example of a resistant postcolonial state in a region of the world still dominated by past and present Russian imperialism.

Contemporary Comics in Ukraine: Postcolonial in Practice

Like the nation itself, Ukrainian comics emerged from the shadow of a much larger cultural sphere, namely Russia's. Under the Soviets, the most important satirical journal, *Perets* [Pepper, launched in 1927] featured cartoons; it was however published

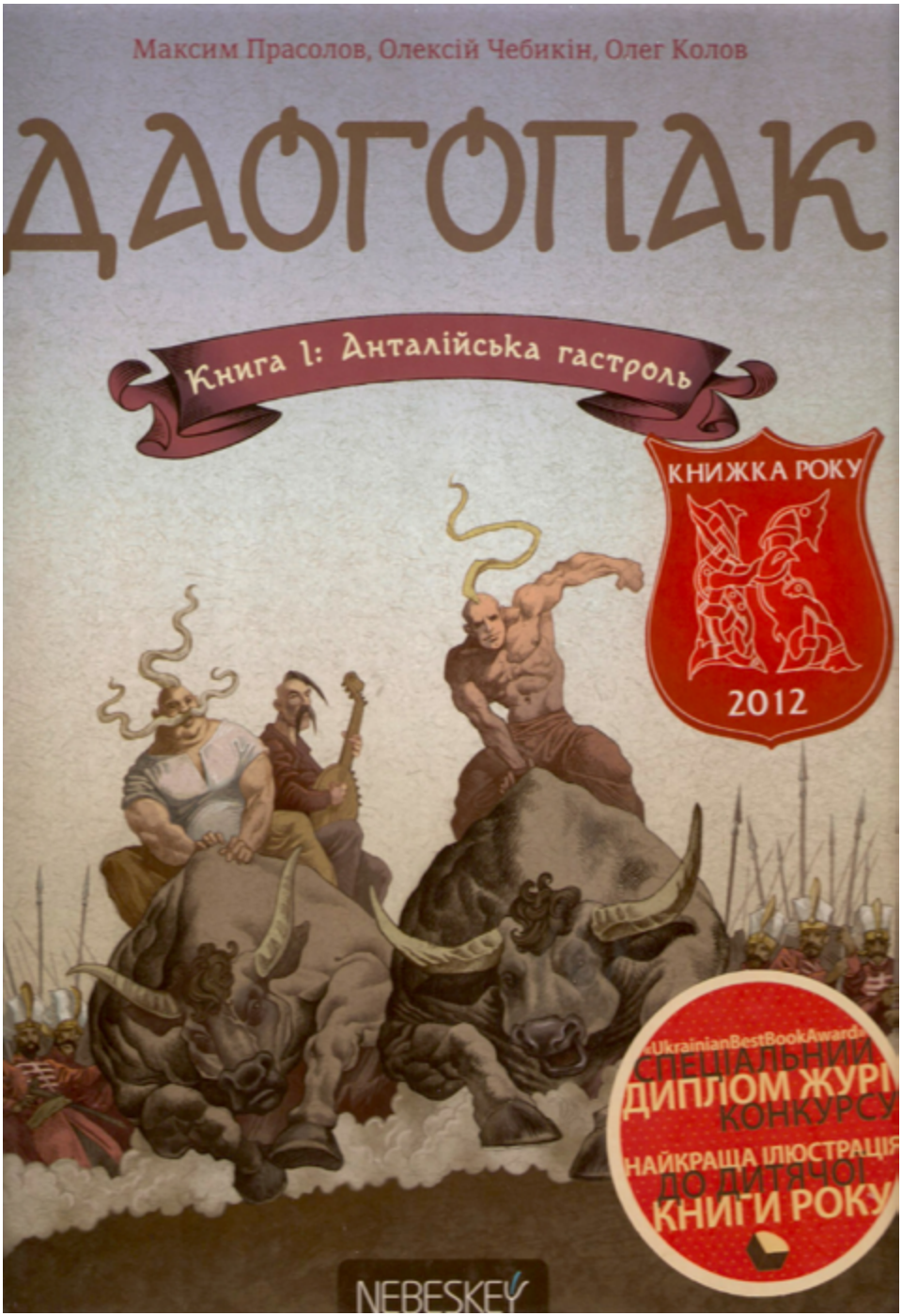

Fig. 1. *Daohopak*, a historical fantasy set in the 17th century by Maksim Prasolov, Oleksiy Chebykin and Oleg Kolov.

in the Ukrainian language. The French communist party children's journal *Pif Gadget* and Eastern European bloc publications such as *Galaktika* (Hungary) and *Stripoteka* (Yugoslavia) exposed readers to comics, though the form remained politically suspect throughout the Soviet era.[10] With the collapse of the USSR, pioneering Ukrainian comics journals appeared, such as *Nash* [Ours, launched 1999] and *K-9* (2003-2009).[11] The short-lived *K-9* Comics Festival debuted in Kyiv in 2005, under the auspices of Ninth World press, publisher of the journal. More recently, the Odessa-based publisher Eugenios, with its eponymous journal (launched 2007) and Kyiv's Nebeskey Press have become key players in what remains a small comics market.

Notable Ukraine-based comics artists include Alexei Lipatov, whose *Stalin vs. Hitler* (2000)[12] restages the antagonism between the country's Western and Eastern nemeses as a superhero slugfest, literalizing Van Hagen's contention that "For both German and Russian historiography, east and central Europe existed primarily as 'the borderlands' over which they competed in occasional geopolitical struggles" (660-661)[13]; Yevgeny Pronin, whose *Katya and Dead* (1999) spins a futuristic adventure tale in which the titular Uncle Dead sports a Cossack *oseledets'* hairstyle and speaks in *surzhyk* (a non-standard spoken vernacular mixing Russian and Ukrainian); and Maxim Bogdanovsky, all from Dnipropetrovsk. Kyiv's Oleksiy Chebykin published an important work of historical fiction, *Novyi Borisfen* [The New Boristhenes], in 1994. Georgii "Zhora" Litichevsky, a prominent Russian cartoonist and fine artist active since the 1970s, also hails from Dnipropetrovsk. Another active figure in the Russian scene, Andrei "Drew" Tkalenko, who co-created the graphic novel *Sterva* [Bitch, 2010], emigrated from Kharkiv.[14]

2012, a pivotal year for Ukrainian comics, brought the debut of the ComArt Festival in Kyiv, along with the manga series *Hakken Seimei.* On the Bus, one of the first comics shops in the country, opened in Odessa in 2013, while the third and largest festival, ComicCon, launched in Kyiv in 2015, attracting over 10,000 visitors (Pivtorak 2). Many recent comics exhibit explicitly nationalist traits, perhaps none more so than the graphic novel series *Daohopak,*[15] a historical fantasy set in the 17th century by Maksim Prasolov, Chebykin and Oleg Kolov, which burnishes the hyper-masculine image of the Cossacks[16] as national heroes on par with Japanese Samurai, Nordic Vikings and US cowboys.[17] The first volume, *Antaliis'ka gastrol'* [The Antalya Tour, 2012], introduces the bulky, shirtless hero Skorovoda[18] and his friends on a rescue mission to what is now modern-day Turkey (Fig. 1). Yet for all the traditionalist trappings, as Yuliya Pivtorak argues, "Cossacks we see in the comics are the product of modern visual mythology (or global visuality – [sic] they have good-looking and perfectly trained bodies, they know technical [sic] and possess magical tricks, they are well-dressed, well-connected and well-read. These Cossacks have a lot more in common with the Marvel characters than with folk paintings of the 18th century" (3-4).

Pivtorak sees Ukrainian comics as a transnational and paradigmatic postcolonial practice, whereby new potentialities of identity, modernity and public culture enter the mainstream.[19] I would add that the non-finalizing cross-discursivity of graphic narrative—what Chute calls its capacity to offer "ethical representation without problematic closure" through its "expansive visual/verbal grammar" (2009, 352)—offers a potent tool for destabilizing entrenched notions of "Ukrainianness," even if in practice highly gendered works like *Daohopak* leave the knotty linkage between male prowess and national vitality unexamined. For Pivtorak, the postcolonial comic, "a set of texts which intend to make a revision of history and reclaim the national history" (4), nonetheless advances an important task of de-colonization. She writes:

> Graphic writing, particularly enabled by complex signifying recourses, may be seen as an effective category of "postcolonial textuality" making visible the colonial legacies and re-writing the missing or misinterpreted identities in their precise contexts. Moreover, it could be proposed that postcolonial comics are uniquely able to perform the characteristic "deconstructive image functions" (4).[20]

Or as *Daohopak* author Prasolov puts it more colloquially: "Ukrainian culture is colonized by and filled with images imposed from the outside. That's why this graphic novel series [is] aimed to replace this existing picture with 'our own version' of history based on the 'real facts'" (quoted in Pivtorak 5).

While presentation of "real facts" seems a dubious claim for Prasolov et al.'s trilogy, which features magic, impossible physical feats and talking animals, such definitely do not constrain *The Will* (2017), a steampunk alternate history co-written by Vyacheslav Bugayev and drawn by Aleksei Bondarenko, which depicts a world where the short-lived Ukrainian People's Republic (1917-1921) never fell. Published by Asgardian Comics, the graphic novel (part of a planned series) depicts a war for national survival against a cyborg Lenin and his Bolshevik zombie hordes. The book received a huge public relations boost when President Poroshenko himself purchased a copy while visiting the Knizhny Arsenal book festival in 2017 ("Triller o voine").

The project certainly got the Russian press' attention, too, prompting even comics artist and avid blogger Daniil Kuzmichev to contemptuously sneer: "[S]uch dreams result from the fucked-upness (khuevnost') of contemporary life. Look at us, we [Russians] are feeling nostalgic about some Stalin or other, while the Ukrainians do the same even with Skoropadsky[21] (not with the German invaders too?) (Kuzmichev)." The Kremlin-controlled media hardly gave it a better reception. During one Russian current events talk show devoted to *The Will* on Channel One, an audience member denounced it as "crude, malicious nationalist Ukrainian propaganda" ("Ukrainskiy komiks"). It only underscored the raw feelings on both sides of the Ukraine/Russia

divide that of all things, a comic book—among the most marginal of cultural productions in both countries—could provoke such a heated response.

Igor Baranko and National Precarity

Given the foregoing, it should come as little surprise that the most well-known and successful Ukrainian comics artist, Igor Baranko (b. 1970, Kyiv)[22] often creates narratives that disrupt smooth historical continuity and cast doubt on the nation's very ontology, troubling its past, present and future. In his works, reality itself is never guaranteed to last.

Baranko's baroque, psychedelia-influenced line art and adult scifi-fantasy stories, his publication in *Metal Hurlant* (in collaboration with Alejandro Jodorowsky and Jean-Pierre Dionnet, among others), as well as his work for the French Humanoids Press, have made him a cult favorite. Critics have often focused on the "weirdness" of Baranko's comics (reminiscent of Moebius), from his humorous alternate reality epics *Pifitos: A Newly Found Unknown Poem of Homer* (Slave Labor Graphics, 2001) and *Shaggy the Lost* (SLG, 2005) to his more recent "serious" graphic novels like *Shamanism* (2014, originally *La Danse du Temps,* 2005-2006, both Humanoids). Alongside the "weirdness," they exhibit a near-obsessive preoccupation with the theme of history,[23] often in the sort of tragic, dystopian key not uncommon in the animation and graphic narrative of former Soviet bloc countries.

Baranko, however, goes further than most, to fantastic scenarios which foreground the contingency and malleability of past events; *Shamanism,* for example, imagines a world where the European conquest of the Americas never happened—yet this "solution" to genocide also finds itself in constant danger of being mystically "danced away." *Jihad* (2012, originally *The Horde,* 2003-2004, both Humanoids) combines science fiction with Sufism, Buddhism and futureshock for its tale of a Russian dictator in 2040 scheming to restore Genghis Khan's Golden Horde, in hopes of conquering Asia and Europe—including a free and independent Ukraine. How Baranko approaches national identity through alternate but "fragile" realities, and how this theme resonates with Ukraine's post-Soviet existential crises, grounds my analysis.

Shamanism, at first glance, would seem to have nothing to do with Baranko's home country[24]: lushly illustrated, with meticulously-researched, distinctive details of dress, technology, decorative arts and architecture, the graphic novel imagines a parallel America populated by innumerable Native American nations some 200 years after the point wherein in our world's Columbus landed. No industry has despoiled nature, and the various tribes live in uneasy peace, still practicing their ancient traditions (such as bride kidnapping). So it happens that the braggart Lakota warrior Four Winds makes off with the Pawnee princess Moon-in-the-Clouds, an event

Fig. 2. Four Winds keeps recklessly changing history until he succeeds in kidnapping Moon-in-the-Clouds in Baranko's *Shamanism.*

undone by the medicine woman She-Who-Slithers-Like-a-Snake, who for her own reasons has the princess killed. The incensed Four Winds sets off to find the Paiute people, "masters of time," to "go back in time and start over from the beginning"

(27). From the Pauite elders he learns that ten generations before one of their tribe, Wovoka, had initiated the Ghost Dance so as to rid the world of the Wasicu, pale skins who had come from across the sea and destroyed the land, turning people away from the Great Spirit (32).

Baranko bases this account on real people and events, namely the Ghost Dance of 1890, which took place at the Great Sioux Reservation in South Dakota, led by the Pauite Wovoka (aka Jack Wilson) and Lakota Chief Sitting Bull, to reverse time and bring back the world before the arrival of the whites. Messianism of this sort is not uncommon among colonized peoples, as noted by historian Rani-Henrik Andersson:

> Such movements mainly aimed at getting rid of the dominant culture and restoring traditional ways of living. Through religion and religious ceremonies and with the help of a religious prophet, the object was to bring about a new world without the conquerors. Typically, the destruction of the world was prophesied; it would then be replaced by a new paradise promised by the prophet or messiah … The fact that, in the Native Americans' case, the whites are excluded from the new world does not necessarily reflect hatred toward the whites. Very often it simply symbolizes the fulfillment of the expected return of the old ways of life (24).

Shamanism thus takes place in a reality where the 1890 Ghost Dance succeeded—a veritable Native American utopia. Nonetheless, the rash anti-hero Four Winds wishes to re-perform the ritual for his own personal ends, so that he may have another chance to steal the princess, and convinces the elders to help him. His repeated failures to win Moon-in-the-Clouds (Slithers assassinates her, she kills herself, her guards stop him, etc.) prompt Four Winds to recklessly keep changing history until he succeeds (Fig. 2). We see the kidnapping replayed in variations, twice without textboxes or sound effects, from different angles, which imparts a "timelessness" effect (6-9, 37).[25] Significantly, the third and final attempt (45-46), in which Four Winds himself is captured by the Pawnee, greatly affects the trajectory of his life (for one thing, it leads to his dawning maturity and the taking on of the burden to correct his earlier disturbance of the timeline)—and this is the version of history we stay with for most of the novel.

A number of influences went into *Shamanism,* Baranko told me (2017), from reading Golden Age and classic science fiction, including alternate reality narratives such as Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962); to immersing himself in Native American history[26] while living in the US in the early 2000s; to Márquez-style Magical Realism, which Frederic Jameson considers the postcolonial literary mode *par excellence,* due to its fixation on "history with holes, perforated history" (Jameson, *Signatures,* 179).[27] But Four Wind's near-paranoid preoccupation with

the return of the "bad past" of the white demons (brought about by his abuse of the Ghost Dance) reminds us of the fundamentally "reactionary" nature of science fiction's parallel reality trope. As Kathleen Singles explains:

> Alternate histories reflect the postmodern tension between artificiality and authenticity, but they do not deny the existence of a real past, nor do they deny the validity of a normalized narrative of the real past. Rather than challenge our notions of history, or call into question our ability to know the past through narrative, they conservatively support the normalized narrative of the real past. ... The point of divergence relies upon the principle of contingency, while the continuing variance from the normalized narrative of the real past—that is, the rest of the narrative—relies on the principle of necessity (7-9).

In other words, though Four Winds alters events through the Ghost Dance, remaking history over and over to suit his desires, the pattern is one of repetition with only minor difference (once we eliminate the whites), following "the principle of necessity." Moreover, the continuities with our own "real" world take on an uncanny cast. For example, the map of the "large sleeping turtle" which the Iroquois Toad-Who-Croaks shows Four Winds (77) is recognizable as a depiction of North America —though of course tribes replace states and national borders (what we know as Florida is here the "kingdom of the Powhatan," etc.). More disturbing, the white devils are not really eliminated; what we regard as the "true" history (our history, reader), keeps threatening to return, to break through into the reality of *Shamanism.* As an elder warns, "The world that the Wasicu demons took hold of still exists. If you stir up time again, you could disappear where the prophet Wovoka erred and where the dance of the spirits has no effect ... and believe me, there is *nothing* worse" (41).[28]

Hence the graphic novel evokes its own "ghost dance": we remain aware of what really happened even as we relish Baranko's highly detailed alternate storyworld (let's face it, a preferable if romanticized vision tailor-made to assuage white guilt). This makes for an intensely Gothic reading experience; our own fallen reality haunts the Edenic reality of Four Winds, who laments, "[I]t's my fault they're here. When I danced the dance of the spirits, I must not have properly closed the door leading to our world ..." (78). This historical unconscious takes shape in our hero's glimpses of the world of the Wasicu, where "all inhabitants live in large rectangular boxes and ... listen to the orders issued from their square little boxes" (43, my ellipsis). It arises in the form of Don Juan Alonso, a Cervantes-loving Spaniard, descendant of the failed conquistadors (85); the white man's weapons left behind from that abandoned mission, such as Alonso's rapier (105-106 and passim), cannons (85-86) and the rifle Moon-in-the-Clouds uses to kill her father in a dream (90); and a US half-dollar coin, emblazoned with an eagle (100).[29]

Fig. 3. Marauding armies from the East overwhelm the Slavic lands over and over through the centuries in Baranko's *Jihad.*

Worse, various figures, from Toad-That-Croaks to the Navajo He-Who-Has-Blood-On-His-Hands, lust after the white man's weapons so as to dominate others—the pattern of conquest once more trying to reassert itself. The reformed Four Winds thus takes on the mission to close the "breach in time" and keep the whites out, lest they "swallow up the world" (105). Which as we know, they did. In *Shamanism,* Baranko

Fig. 4. *Jihad's* climax takes place in and around the Soviet-era Motherland Monument in Kyiv.

betrays a pessimistic, deterministic view, which as Singles argues, the alternate history trope ultimately reinscribes as a matter of course. *Pace* Joyce, there is no waking up from history's nightmare.[30]

In *Shamanism,* Baranko saves the "new" world from European conquest—but, as with his homeland, no salvation is ever secure, or lasting. The constant threat of national annihilation certainly permeates his dystopian graphic novel *Jihad* as well, which, though produced only a couple of years earlier, seems the raw work of a much younger artist, less sure of his expressive powers. Convoluted, with many intersecting plotlines spanning the Eurasian land mass and higher states of being; characters that never meet (at least on Earth), though they affect each other mightily; a dozen-strong ensemble cast; clones of Isaac Newton and Abraham Lincoln; and a Lenin resurrected by UFOs,[31] *Jihad* presents a daunting challenge for any thorough analysis.[32] Here I will restrict myself to the most relevant strands and themes.

Ivan Apelsinov, failed scifi writer[33] and absolute dictator of Russia in 2040, comes to embrace a mix of Pan-Mongolism[34] and Buddhism as an ideology of conquest, whereby he may reincarnate Genghis Khan and the Golden Horde that swept to power in the Middle Ages, which he considers the true ancestors of the nation. Determined to incorporate Khan's warring spirit into his own body, he sends a team of NKVD[35] operatives to infiltrate the free nation of Ukraine, "the last bastion of peace and progress" (56), and bring back to life the remains of an influential lama buried there in the 1930s, who holds the secret to the entire scheme. Meanwhile, a lone, devout Chechen named Jhokhar[36]wanders the land, trying to "find the way to the Heavenly Chechnya" (22), since the physical one was bombed out of existence by a Russian nuclear strike during the 2030 "Third Chechen War" (14).[37]

A mood of paranoia, mysticism and black humor permeates the story, which accentuates the precarity of Ukraine itself, a nexus of spiritual energies that makes it a tantalizing prize for would-be conquerors. As the crone Shakti Noyon explains, Ukraine "is the crack between worlds. The crack between Russia and Europe, East and West, the left and right hemispheres of the brain ..." (98),[38] a supernatural reification of the country as a site of contention between larger powers. Baranko visually dramatizes the quandary through a page of three panels, each stretching full-length, which show invading armies sweeping in from the East, overwhelming the Slavic lands: in the 7th century BCE, the Scythians; in the 3rd century CE, the Huns; in the 13th century CE, the Mongols. "Every thousand years," marvels Apelsinov, "... and always the same territories ..." (34). (Fig. 3) In Baranko's cyclical view of historical trauma and national threat, the hordes assail, overrun again and again. As in *Shamanism's* repeated scenes of Four Winds trying to kidnap Moon-in-the-Clouds, *plus* ça *change ...*

Other, more down-to-earth expressions of disdain towards the author's homeland sting no less for their banality. As the train carrying the Russian agents approaches

the border, their cabin's radio plays a patriotic program (in Ukrainian): "… Because of its geographical and political situation, Ukraine is the only neutral state left in Europe after the failure of globalization in the year 2024." The agent Nikolai's only comment: "I hate Ukrainian. It sounds like a parody of Russian.[39] Why do we still put up with their independence?" (56).

Significantly, *Jihad's* climax takes place in and around the Motherland Monument, an actual structure dedicated in 1981, now part of the Museum of the History of Kyiv in World War II (Fig. 4). The 203-foot (62m) "mother" figure holds a sword and upraised shield, which up to the present still bears the emblem of the Soviet Union. This site of a disgraceful colonialist past holds the tomb of *sulde,* "a god's thirst for power, for domination" (73). It is thus also the incubator of a new imperialism menacing Ukraine. "This iron lady keeps the embryo of the new empire beneath her feet," Shakti Noyon elaborates. "Empire—it is *greatness.* People want to *feel* the greatness. Empire—it is *fear.* People want to feel the fear" (108).

And so, inside this "iron idol" (109), Jhokhar at last confronts the Russians, whose government eradicated his homeland. Unexpectedly, the resurrected Lama Noyon offers the Chechen the ultimate gift of sulde, to make his enemies suffer and to conquer the world:

> Sulde is the ravenous hunger for power! It doesn't care who possesses it! The important thing is to find the vessel that will carry it into this world! …Take sulde inside of you … for vengeance. You will burn down their cities. You will destroy their countries. Millions will follow you. Don't you want this? (120, my ellipsis).

In ultimately renouncing the temptation of worldly dominion, Jhokhar pays with his life—which to him only means he can finally enter his beloved "heavenly Chechnya." In any case, he breaks the cycle of imperialist conquest, bringing the Russians' plots to naught. In his firefight against Ukrainian special forces—still inside the Motherland Monument—the Russian ultra-nationalist Ilya Serbin can only sputter helplessly as he blasts away: *"Pathetic little nation!* Can you even comprehend what *empire* means?" (135). Fittingly, Serbin's end comes in battle with the Ukrainian Colonel Buzun, a telepathic mutant from Chernobyl, conspiracy theorist and anti-Semite ("Did you know that the Masons are in bed with the Elders of Zion?" [103]). Serbin blows himself up, taking Buzun with him, in the shadow of the Motherland Monument; the plans of Ukraine's enemies—i.e., extremists, both foreign and domestic—go up in smoke (142).

This denouement offers a possible solution to the eternal problem of Ukraine's iffy survival: only through a Buddhist repudiation of desire will suffering cease. Like

Four Winds, Jhokhar transcends selfishness and saves the world … but for how long? In all of Baranko's mature work, just beyond the high-concept plots and spine-tingling futures, lurks the shadow of imperialism—centuries of it—and the unending struggle to escape its grasp.

Conclusion: "Ukraine's Glory Has Not Yet Died"

"To articulate the past historically … means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger." – Benjamin (255).

Even in its national anthem Ukraine is in peril. Its current version[40] reads in part:

Ukraine's glory has not yet died, nor her freedom,
Upon us, compatriots, fate shall smile once more.
Our enemies will vanish, like dew in the morning sun,
And we too shall rule, brothers, in a free land of our own.
…
Souls and bodies we'll lay down, all for our freedom,
And we will show that we, brothers, are of the Cossack nation!

To be Ukrainian, these lyrics tell us, is to live in perpetual danger of non-existence; someone is always annexing your territory, fomenting separatists on your periphery, outright invading you and making you subject to their will. Like Colonel Buzun, a Ukrainian carries history on their body and soul: metaphorically scarred, traumatized by generations of plunderers. Only the utmost vigilance and strength will prevent the next onslaught of marauding hordes.

We should read the ongoing war in the county's East (centered in the Donetsk and Lugansk regions) in this context of national border insecurity. Though the reasons for the conflict defy easy explanation[41]—I would never suggest Russian neo-imperialism as the only factor—stakeholders on both sides tend to resort to just such simplifications. Baranko, for example, opines:

> I would call the war today a mistake. They've filled people's heads with some crap or other, they're fighting and they themselves don't know what for. For some sort of mystical "Russian world." It's a war of phantoms. The people of Donbass are fighting for and against something that doesn't exist. They all have different goals, but in their heads, it's all the same: the Soviet mentality *(sovok).* They want to revive it, but that's impossible. The *sovok* has already died out (Gavrishova).

Comics too have been conscripted in this fight—literally; works devoted to the eastern war include the graphic novel *Zvytiaga: Savur Mohyla* [Victory: Savur Mohyla, 2015] by Denis Fadeev and several artists, about a 2014 battle around a strategic point near the Russian border; *Kiborgi: Istoriia trekh* [Cyborgs: Story of the Three, 2016] by Dmytro Tkachenko, on the battle for the Donetsk airport; and *Okhorontsi kraïny* [Guardians of the Country, 2017], a series co-conceived by writer Leonid Krasnopolsky, himself displaced from the Donbass region due to the war, with script and art by Asta Legios ("Ukrainians Defend"). The latter was presented by the Ukrainian Ministry of Information Policy in a press conference, at which Deputy Minister Emine Dzhaparova noted, "All in all, it is about our modern history, where we have our heroes, more natural to our worldview, instead of Soviet 'Little Octobrists', 'pioneers' and 'Russian bogatyrs'" ("Ukrainian Comics About Crimea Liberation").[42]

Such works and statements dovetail with Pivtorak's notion of modern Ukrainian comics as an unavoidably postcolonial practice. In these times of crisis and renewed alarm over perceived neo-imperialist threats, a long-standing—and justified—sense of national precarity becomes especially plain for all to see, even in comics. What Baranko often addresses allegorically, through magical realist fantasies and baroque alternate histories, grows all too explicit: "Ukrainian choice is a choice between nonexistence and an existence that kills you." The situation recalls the rather Orwellian reply of a Ukrainian scholar when asked whether his country has a history. "[I]f Ukraine has a future," he answered, "then Ukraine will have a history" (von Hagen 658).

Notes

1 The City of Moscow Department of Culture sponsored the open-air exhibit, which ran from June 22 to July 17, 2017. Except where noted, all translations my own.

2 The bridge cost more than three billion dollars, its construction contract handled by a childhood friend and judo sparring partner of Putin's, Arkady Rotenberg (known as "the king of state orders" for his facility at drawing government contracts, often with no competing bid) (Yaffa). It opened to vehicular traffic in May, 2018, to much fanfare.

3 Crimea had belonged to the Russian Empire since the 18th century. In 1954 it transferred to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, which collapsed in 1991 along with the rest of the Soviet Union (Plokhy). In March, 2014, with the separatist conflict underway in Eastern Ukraine, a stage-managed referendum showed overwhelming support among Crimeans for joining Russia. The Obama administration immediately imposed economic sanctions on Russia for its encroachment on Ukraine's sovereignty and the annexation. As for the bridge, Mikhail Blinkin, Director of the Transportation Institute at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, noted a better-developed ferry system would achieve much the same results, at least in terms of

passenger traffic (Yaffa). This had to do with politics, not economics.

4 My wording here risks oversimplifying matters. Pro-Western European vs. pro-Putin positions in Ukraine do not divide up neatly between Ukrainian and Russian speakers, respectively. See Chernetsky 2019.

5 Zenkovsky: 65-71. On the necessity of resisting Russophile historiography, see Wilson: 183.

6 He adds: "The multi-ethnic chaos of the region, itself one of the direct consequences of imperial policies over the centuries, typically was offered as a justification for further imperial hegemony. Moreover, both Russian/Soviet and German ideologists and political leaders traditionally maintained that even intra-regional cooperation in east central and eastern Europe was not viable without German or Russian hegemony" (660).

7 As George Grabowicz further noted: "Provincialization in terms of the loss of quality, narrowing of horizons, distortion of intellectual and artistic production, and so on was accompanied by the more classical features of colonial rule, especially economic exploitation and the reshaping of all indigenous cultural institutions … In effect, while turning it into a province and thus purportedly a constituent part of a larger administrative whole, the imperial goal was to weaken it, to prevent its resurgence by purposefully stunting its growth and infrastructure … Overarching it all was the general discreditation or, as the Soviet term had it, "deperspectivization" of things Ukrainian—in the scholarly sphere, as well as in every other" (quoted in Chernetsky: 47).

8 Named after the central public square in Kyiv.

9 Crimea is not the only territory Russia is annexing. For a report on the country's ongoing "border creep," see Smith.

10 See Alaniz 2010, Chapter 2. Kasanědi names Anatolyi Vasilenko, who published the children's book *The Adventures of Blackpaws the Cat* in 1983, the "patriarch" of modern Ukrainian comics (61).

11 See also Buryanik for a useful summation of Ukrainian comics in the 1990s.

12 Featured for years on the homepage of the Russian *Komiksolet* website.

13 *K-9* co-founder Alexei Olin struggled to differentiate Ukrainian from Russian comics in 2005. As he told me: "To be honest, we don't have many differences. Now we see a tendency to make short pieces, large works don't get published. They don't exist. … The mentality is very much the same as in Russia. … I think for at least the next five years, comics [in Ukraine] will keep getting published primarily in Russian." When I asked what effect the Orange Revolution had had on comics there, he replied, "Nothing has changed." If anything, censorship had worsened under President Yushchenko; *K-9* was now having trouble putting a nude woman on its cover (Olin).

14 See also Tufts, on the controversial Kyiv-born, WWII-era émigré artist Vincent Krassousky.

15 The word is formed from the Chinese *dao* ("way" or "path") and *haopak*, a traditional Ukrainian dance which some believe closely related to a domestic martial art (see Pivtorak's comments on "Combat Haopak" [6]).

16 Legendary horsemen and warriors, the Cossacks are an ethnic group of the southern Russian/Ukrainian steppes, who fought both for and against the Czars for centuries. From 1649 to 1764 the Cossack Hetmanate formed an independent quasi-democratic state within the borders of modern Ukraine (see Wilson).

17 As Baranko rather caustically put it to me: "The olden times … more specifically, the 16th-17th centuries—this is a theme which Ukraine will never get away from. It's, as they say, our everything. Just like, incidentally, Westerns in the USA. From time to time, the nation starts to get sick of this theme, but within five years or so they start to miss it again and it bursts out anew. Samurai in Japan, cowboys in America, musketeers in France—this is forever. And, well, in Ukraine it's Cossacks. And I like this quite a bit, of course, except those cases when they use it for some sort of nationalist themes. By the way, in the last 100 years in Ukraine this was used precisely as a dumb imprint: some moustachioed dude (dyadka), dancing the *haopak* in baggy trousers—everybody gets sick and tired of it" (Baranko 2017).

18 Some see a resemblance between Skorovoda and the beloved Olympic boxer Oleksandr Usyk (Rafalsky).

19 In contrast, foreign graphic narrative about Ukraine tends to highlight tragedy, national disaster and stereotype, as seen in Chantal Montelier's *Tchernobyl Mon Amour* (2006); Igort's *Quaderni Ucraini* (2010); Francisco Sánchez and Natacha Bustos' *Tchernobyl La Zone* (2011); Emanuel Lepage's *Un Printemps à Tchernobyl* (2012); Aurelien Ducoudray and Christophe Alliel's *Les Chiens de Pripyat* series (2017). See Gosling for a less maudlin outsider's view of modern Ukraine, from Sarah Lippet.

20 Though as Christophe Dony understates, "Characterizing comics as postcolonial simply because they are produced, published, and distributed in actual postcolonial spaces seems to be problematic" (12). See his essay for his elaboration, a challenge for comics studies to truly grapple with postcolonialism.

21 Pavlo Skoropadskyi (1873-1945) briefly led a revived Hetmanate after toppling the Ukrainian People's Republic in 1918.

22 At about age seven Baranko discovered the French newspaper *L'Humanite,* which featured comics on the last page (Gavrishova). He received the greatest inspiration from Hugo Pratt. After serving in the Army, he went on a mystic journey to Siberia and won the US immigration lottery in 1999. He emigrated to the states, but returned a few years later. Baranko's early works include the 1993-1998 *Mamay* series, about a Cossack adventurer.

23 For example, *Maxym Osa* (Evgenios, 2008), deals with a rapscallion 17th-century Cossack anti-hero detective and goes beyond a mere "glorification of Cos-

sackhood" (Pivtorak: 3). As Baranko told an interviewer: "No two patriotisms are alike. For example, *Maxim Osa* is not at all a patriotic comics work, like many people think. It's an adventure story on Ukrainian themes. Overall I can't stand any sort of patriotic literature, comics, films. I just like good stuff." (Gavrishova).

24 Baranko shares an interest in Native American culture not uncommon among Eastern Europeans. It dates to the immense European popularity of Karl May's 19th century novels, which spawned the "noble savage" portrait of Native Americans in various media, including the "osterns," "ghoulash westerns" and "borscht westerns" produced in the USSR, various Soviet bloc countries and Yugoslavia. See Šavelková.

25 The repetition with a difference recalls Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski's 1987 film *Blind Chance*, in which we witness the different lives that result from the main character catching or not catching a train (a scene repeated over and over).

26 He singled out *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux* by Black Elk and John G. Neihardt (1932) (Anderson-Elysee).

27 A Ukrainian version of Magical Realism has existed at least since the Romantic era, especially in the work of Myhola Hohol (more widely known by the Russian version of his name, Nikolai Gogol).

28 All emphases and ellipses in comics works in the original unless otherwise indicated.

29 The author himself falls under the gravitational pull of "what really happened." As Baranko explained in an interview: "Some logic traps of the time were really the pain in the ass. For example, if we had no Europeans in America, that meant no horses in America. With no horses, although a stereotype, there's no strong image of American Indian Plain Rider. But the Empire of Aztecs and the lost and last Conquistador helped me with that" (Anderson-Elysee).

30 For further discussion of the racialized pitfalls of the alternate history, see Alaniz 2019.

31 Baranko told me: "For this project I wrenched out of my head the craziest stuff that had stuck and made an impression on me in the foregoing 15 years while at large in the former USSR and made a kind of cocktail out of it" (2017). He also cited Mikhail Bulgakov and Russian postmodernist Viktor Pelevin as influences.

32 The novel's visual-verbal excess recalls Chernetsky's linkage of magical realism with the Baroque, and his description of Ukraine as "the most Baroque-oriented" of the Slavic nations (188).

33 *Apelsin* means "orange" in both Ukrainian and Russian, perhaps in an echo of Anthony Burgess, whereas the failed sci-fi writer as dictator himself recalls L. Ron Hubbard.

34 Apelsinov's belief that Russians descend from the Golden Horde reflects Eurasianism, a very real strain in post-Soviet Russian politics, which rejects Western rationalism and culture. In their place it puts a mystical hodgepodge of Slavic/neo-pagan origin myths and apocalypticism, reorienting the country culturally

and ideologically to the East. Originated in its modern form by historian Lev Gumilev (1912-1992), today political scientists like Aleksander Dugin, a close advisor to President Putin, have made it a central plank in Russia's domestic and foreign policy. See Gumilev's *Ethnogenesis and the Biosphere of Earth* (1978).

35 Apelsinov has revived the Soviet-era People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, forerunner of the KGB.

36 While a common Chechen man's name, Jhokar evokes associations with the Batman villain Joker, particular given the diabolical toothy grin Baranko's hero occassionally sports.

37 Among the most precarious of populations, the North Caucasian Chechens proved stubbornly resistant to imperial Russian incursions into their region, which date back to the late 18th century. They even defied Stalin, who punished them severely, deporting whole populations. In the post-Soviet era, Chechnya had openly defied Russian centralized control, which led to two wars (1994-1996 and 1999-2000). See Ram. The "nuclear option" for Chechnya is not so far-fetched, as some military leaders recommended just that in the 1990s.

38 Baranko called the "tendency to isolation from the world and the idea of The Border between worlds" "an old stereotype lodged deep in Ukrainian brains" (2017).

39 A common opinion among Russian chauvinists and ultra-nationalists.

40 Music adopted in 1992, lyrics in 2003, revised from the original 1862 lyrics by Pavlo Chubynsky, which stated, more darkly, "Ukraine has not yet died ..." Compare this with the first line of the Polish national anthem, its lyrics written by Józef Wybicki in 1797: "Poland has not yet perished ..."

41 See De Ploeg, Chapter 13, for a sense of the danger in such dehumanizing oversimplifications, and Yekelchyk.

42 One cannot avoid mixing politics and art in this era. Sergei Zakharov, dubbed "the Donetsk Banksy," was held captive for six weeks by Donets People's Republic forces for his unflattering caricature of DPR leaders (Lokot). In the current hyper-nationalist climate, even works unrelated to the war, such as Oleksandr Koreshkov's series *Among Sheep* (2017), about a wolf hiding in a population of sheep, take on paranoid colorings. For one of the Ukraine-Russia crisis' more ridiculous developments, the anime fan art inspired by Crimea's new Prosecutor General Natalya Poklonskaya, see Ashcraft.

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