

Kharkiv: The Elusive City

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This issue opens with a series of special issues of *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies* devoted to the largest Ukrainian cities of the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine: Kharkiv, Odesa, Zaporizhzhia, and Dnipro. There are several reasons to believe these cities are key to the future of Ukrainian nation-state building. First, they represent the most developed and urbanized regions located in the huge Ukrainian-Russian historical borderland. Second, they are the products of Russian imperial and Soviet modernization, still unsurpassed by its Ukrainian equivalent. Modern megapolises on the territory of Ukraine started acquiring a more pronounced ethnic-cultural Ukrainian profile only recently, during the “short” twentieth century. It is no wonder that they are still looking for their proper places in post-Soviet Ukraine, while their urban landscapes reflect contradictory visions of their past and future. Third, their dwellers surprised many Kremlin-based nationalists in 2014 during the Russian aggression and annexation of the Crimea when they opted for a Ukrainian nation state rather than the new incarnation of the Russian Empire.

Kharkiv occupies a very special place in Ukrainian modern history due to its changing roles as a regional centre and a national capital. During its steady progressive development, which culminated in the twentieth century, Kharkiv became a modern, multi-ethnic, and culturally diverse city, the capital of a historical region known as Sloboda Ukraine, and even served as the capital of the short-lived Soviet Donetsk-Kryvyi Rih Republic (1917-18). As a regional centre with influence far beyond its current administrative boundaries, Kharkiv is comparable to the “margin-centric” or “liminal” cities of eastern and central Europe, Cernăuți/Czernowitz/Chernivtsi, Danzig/Gdańsk, Lviv/Lwów/Lemberg, and Trieste (Cornis-Pope and Neubauer).

During its term as a national capital, Kharkiv was a worthy rival of Kyiv. Until World War II, there was no “primate” city in Ukraine; instead, there were several regional centres competing for the control of Ukrainian territory (Szporluk). Only two of them—Kyiv and Kharkiv—possessed a

sufficient industrial, educational, economical, and financial potential to justify their claim to serve as the Ukrainian national capital. Kharkiv was a capital of Soviet Ukraine from 1919 till 1934, after which it was replaced by Kyiv. However, both cities faced substantial limitations in their metropolitan status. In the case of Kharkiv, it was its geography, which locates the city close to the Russian border on a strategically important route from Moscow to the Black Sea. In the case of Kyiv, it was the multi-layered, thousand-year history that is burdened with Orthodox tradition. As a new nation-state project, Ukraine might benefit from establishing a new national capital. Ankara vs. Istanbul, Washington, DC vs. New York, Astana vs. Almaty—all these cases could be instructive for Ukrainian nation-builders.

Kharkiv never resumed its claim for primacy. As local patriots used to say: “If we are not first, then we don’t want to be second.” Even so, Kharkiv’s geopolitical location and human and economic potentials make it an important actor in the process of national reidentification of the poorly defined Ukrainian-Russian borderland (Zhurzhenko), which, in turn, might make the eastern border of Europe more visible (Schmidtke and Yekelchyk). However, Kharkiv remains to be less known to the Western audience than Kyiv, Odesa, or Lviv.

The Contemporary Ukraine Studies Program (CUSP), established at the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies (University of Alberta) eight years ago, initiated a project to explore the developmental path of the post-Soviet Ukraine by focusing on contemporary urban, regional, and cultural studies of the country. Not accidentally, it started with Kharkiv. The coeditors of this special issue have already been involved in research and publishing projects devoted to the region known as Sloboda Ukraine, of which Kharkiv is the capital. The issue encompasses four original articles, two translations of previously published research pertaining to the topic of Kharkiv, and a reflective essay. We hope that this issue will be succeeded by other similar publishing projects on Odesa, Zaporizhzhia, Dnipro, and possibly other cities in the region.

The article by Svitlana Malykhina, “Changes and Continuities in the Urban Semiosphere of Post-Soviet Kharkiv,” deals with Kharkiv’s public space as a place where different groups express their identities. The city’s semiosphere consists of components—written texts, street art, toponyms—that reflect social and cultural changes and are part of political, ideological, commercial, and artistic discourses. Their coexistence in the urban space demonstrates a symbolic struggle. On the basis of a collection of public signage and a set of interviews, the author studies changes and continuities in the urban semiosphere of Kharkiv in the post-Maidan period, in particular, changes in the decommunization and everyday usage of Ukrainian and Russian languages.

Olga Bertelsen's article, "Crossing Ethnic Barriers Enforced by the KGB: Kharkiv Writers' Lives in the 1960s-70s," explores post-Khrushchev Kharkiv as a place where the KGB pursued individuals in the Kharkiv multi-ethnic community of writers for real or imagined Ukrainian nationalism and Zionism. Were these efforts successful? What factors were crucial? What were the formal and informal practices and rituals performed by the literati residing in Kharkiv in the 1960s-70s? What were the opportunities to resist KGB pressures? These and other questions are answered by the author on the basis of archival documents, diaries, and memoirs.

Ganna Pletnyova's article, "Linguistic Diversity in Kharkiv: Between 'Pride' and 'Profit,' between the Local and the Global," explores the linguistic diversity of the city of Kharkiv. It focuses on the language ideologies and practices of Russian-speaking Kharkivites in the wake of the Russo-Ukrainian military conflict of 2014. On the bases of her field study and a series of interviews, the author analyzes complex interplays between discourses of "pride" and "profit" that were used by respondents to justify their linguistic behaviours.

Finally, an article by Serhii Posokhov and Yevhen Rachkov, "Kharkiv As a University City: The Evolution of Symbolic Space," deals with the popular image of Kharkiv as a university city. The authors explore how this image emerged, how it changed, and how Kharkiv's postsecondary institutions maintain and promote it. The article considers the complexity of Kharkiv's image as a university city. Due to numerous historical changes the university is caught between a "mass university" concept with its emphasis on service and an "elite university" concept with its accent on ideals of enlightenment.

The next section of this special issue features translations of two articles published in Ukrainian. Volodymyr Kravchenko's article, "Borderland City: Kharkiv," offers a brief overview of Kharkiv's historical development as a city and a regional centre from its inception to the end of the twentieth century. The article is based on Kravchenko's monograph, *Khar'kov/Kharkiv: stolitsa Pogranych'ia (Kharkiv/Kharkov: A Capital of the Borderland, EGU, 2010)*, in which the author seeks to identify Kharkiv's changing place on the mental map of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union and studies images of Kharkiv rendered in Ukrainian and Russian narratives up to the end of the twentieth century. The monograph also traces changes in Kharkiv's symbolic space.

Oleksiy Musiyezdov's translated article, "Urban Identity in (Post)Modern Cities: A Case Study of Kharkiv and Lviv," presents the results of his sociological research on urban identity. The author proposes that abstractions of space and time, and their dynamic interactions with a digital age society, can be interpreted as a "space of flows" based on the ideas of Manuel Castells. That is, "global" (cosmopolitan) and "local" groups of people express their connections with the city differently. This hypothesis has been

supported using data from a series of focus-group interviews in Kharkiv and Lviv. The article explores the differences between these two cities by tying them to identity issues and considers urban identity in the context of an “imagined community.”

The issue concludes with Dmytro Zaiets’s essay, “Kharkiv’s Soulful Places: An Artistic Research,” which looks at various places in Kharkiv that have a special aura or a “soul,” according to the data gathered by students in his introductory urban sociology course at the Kharkiv School of Architecture.

Works Cited

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