THE “UNIVERSITY AND WAR” PROJECT – PERSPECTIVES OF POLISH-Ukrainian STUDIES AT THE JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY

(University and War in Ukraine. Alicja Z. Nowak / Kinga Anna Gajda (eds.). Published by Peter Lang GmbH, Berlin, Deutschland, 2023)

The war in Ukraine has not only affected the political, economic, social, and cultural systems but also the education and schooling system. The full-scale assault of the Russian Federation on Ukrainian territory on 24 February 2022 disrupted the teaching and research systems. The necessity of finding scholarly answers to tough questions about the situation of the universities – their academic staff and students – during the war, the solidarity attitude of universities in foreign countries, and the status of Ukrainian Studies are the causes of preparing this publication. The value of this volume is that the authors of most of the articles are specialists and theorists of the subject, at the same time observers and witnesses of the events and processes described, often actively involved in them.

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Abstract

This article focuses on the “University and War” project, which has been implemented since spring 2022, and its important element, i.e. an international interdisciplinary academic conference. The work involved scholars from Poland, Ukraine (online and onsite) and Austria. The main objective of the meeting was to discuss the role of the university in crisis situations and make a preliminary assessment of the state of Ukrainian universities and the situation of Ukrainian academics and students in Ukraine and abroad. The next thematic block concerned the reaction of Polish universities to the Russian aggression: scholarship and aid programmes implemented, volunteering activities of the university community. One of the current issues after Russia’s armed attack is the attitude of the academic community in Poland and worldwide to these events, i.e. an adequate evaluation of the aggressor’s policy, including in social media, and above all the institutional and conceptual reconstruction of Ukrainian studies, which is necessary to finally break with the remnants of the “Russian world” concept. An important objective of the project was to involve students (mostly from Ukraine). The students prepared exhibitions featuring photographs of the destroyed Kharkiv, war-themed posters, and poems inspired by the events, and took part in an international (with students from the Kyiv Academy of Fine Arts) scientific student seminar, during which they presented papers, analysed a questionnaire about their own situation after the outbreak of war and their involvement in aid and volunteering. The project was also an expression of solidarity, a form of support that Polish academics wanted to give to students and academics from Ukraine.

Keywords: university, war, Ukraine, project, conference, propaganda.

The Russian-Ukrainian war, which has been ongoing since 2014 and reached full-scale proportions on 24 February 2022, has exacerbated the problems that universities, especially those relocated from eastern Ukraine, have been struggling with for years. It has also put those universities that until then had not been directly affected by the hostilities in a difficult position.

In Poland, on the other hand, it has amplified the problems for those university units that conduct research and offer courses related to the study of Ukraine, e.g. by making it impossible to freely do research, travel, and examine library resources in the war-stricken country. However, these are not the only and most important problems that have had to be faced.

Situation of Ukrainian Scholars and University Teachers

The first days after Russia’s armed attack on Ukraine saw an influx of Ukrainian scholars and university teachers, who, somewhat naturally, while in Kraków, gravitated to the staff of the Department of Polish-Ukrainian Studies at the FIPS JU. Some had been referred to the department by other Ukrainian and Polish academics, most of them came straight from the street, sometimes preceded only by email.

Early in the summer semester of the 2021/2022 academic year, the organisational work was extremely intensive. Special university programmes for Ukrainian scholars were set up, the management were exploring the possibilities of hiring them, we informed the researchers who contacted us about grant and project proposals, and reviewed and submitted scholarship applications.

Institutional support was essential, but equally important were the time and attention given to our Ukrainian guests. In the conversations we had at the time about the situation of Ukrainian universities and the academics themselves, we could sense their distress at feeling idle and useless. In order to minimise these negative feelings and draw on their presence and research potential, we decided to create conditions that would not only show our solidarity and support but also allow for this painful experience to be shared in a wider forum. This led to the idea to approach the problem scientifically through a project entitled “University and War.” The project involved academics who had been forced to leave, but also those who had decided to remain in their homeland despite the extreme working conditions. We also included students.

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In the first stage of the project we organised an international scientific conference that was held on 25 November 2022. The main research objective was to answer the question of the role of the university in crisis situations. We learned about the state of Ukrainian universities: destroyed, displaced, accommodating and supporting the most seriously affected academic units. The deliberations were complemented by a necessary debate on the situation of scholars, both those who remained in Ukraine and those who had been forced by circumstances to leave.

The next block of subjects referred to universities outside Ukraine, especially in Poland, a country which, due to its geographical location, was a natural destination for people fleeing the war. At the same time, due to the shared history, Poland was predestined to in-depth academic reflection on diverse issues in the field of Ukrainian studies and, more broadly, those relating to Polish-Ukrainian relations.

We also explored the response of individual institutions to the crisis, as well as the support manifested through the scholarship and assistance programmes implemented or the involvement of the university community in volunteering.

Following Russia’s armed attack, one of the important, indeed central problems for the above-mentioned research is the attitude of the academic community towards these events. The main question is whether representatives of said community (including us, participants in the “University and War” project) had been able to correctly and accurately assess the situation, its causes and potential consequences.

**Assessment of the Aggressor’s Policy**

More than anything else, war has a military dimension, and it leaves its mark on the life of universities. Russian attacks are killing people, destroying property and depriving universities of vital infrastructure and resources. Ukrainians, including Ukrainian academics, are trying in every possible way to defy Russian aggression, to protect what has not been destroyed yet, to prevent the disintegration of the academic community in their institutions. This struggle and defence is something that we, as representatives of Polish universities, cannot participate in.

It must be remembered, however, that military operations are not the only arena in which the current conflict is being played out. Simultaneously, we are witnessing aggressive propaganda targeting societies in countries supporting Ukrainians in their struggle for freedom and sovereignty. This also applies to Poland. This propagandistic “conquest” is being carried out using a wide range of means, which are usually classified as soft power tools.\(^2\) After 2005, i.e. after the success of the “Orange Revolution,” the Kremlin attempted to adapt these tools to pursue its own foreign policy. One of its key objectives was to keep Ukraine within its neo-imperial sphere of influence. Initially, this was to be served by efforts to build a positive and friendly image of this sphere. This is how the concept of the so-called “Russkiy mir” (or “Russian world”) was created.\(^3\) It was promoted using three types of capital: human capital (through a network of interpersonal relations), symbolic capital (spreading and nurturing various stereotypes and myths about Russia and Ukraine, popular especially in the West) as well as “hard” capital (material support for individuals and academic units that could help generate the two previously mentioned types of capital).

At the turn of 2013 and 2014, during the “Revolution of Dignity,” Ukrainians firmly rejected the model of social and political life offered to them under the “Russkiy mir.” As a result, the Russian government decided not only to challenge the existence of an independent Ukrainian state, but also of the Ukrainian nation as such. Consequently, the function of the “Russian world” concept changed. It no longer served as a tool for projecting a positive image of Russia to the outside world. Instead, it has become a quasi-ideology aimed to legitimise Russia’s aggressive behaviour on the international arena and to consolidate the sympathisers of Kremlin around the defence of Russia against the imaginary attacks of the Western world seeking to destroy Russian culture and language.

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In the countries that support Ukraine today, various segments of the academic community have experienced a kind of “flirtation” with the concept of “Russkiy mir.” A web of dependencies has formed in the process, and some scholars and institutions dealing with Ukraine or, more broadly, the post-Soviet space, may still be entangled in it.\(^4\)

Russia has had some success in its mental conquests, and the imperial dimension of the Russian aggression has been playing out on the level of intellect. Paradoxically, the grandiose “Russkiy mir” project affecting the realm of thought and cultural processes\(^5\) has found its way into Polish universities as well.

Unfortunately, Poles are not insulated against it, despite the fact that as part of their school education they learn about the painful experience of the Russification of the Polish nation, and despite the vivid memory among part of the population of the methods and destructive power of Soviet propaganda. Not only did its operating mechanisms not change after the collapse of the USSR, but they have even been strengthened by means of technology.

One measure of the effectiveness of propaganda and a manifestation of influence in the university may be the communications related to the events in Ukraine posted on its websites and social media. The websites generally serve as a platform to inform about available assistance and express feelings, e.g. outrage and sympathy, but not always include objective and definitive statements on aggression and war. The message is sometimes “watered down,” the word “war” is replaced, according to Russian propaganda, by terms close to “special operation.” The aggressor is not specified, instead, for example, a colourful poster with no substance or clear labelling of reality is presented. This manipulation and sometimes silence are significant, and the problem certainly needs to be investigated in the future.

Unfortunately, many people who are convinced that Russia is fulfilling a civilising mission in the Western world have not changed their minds after 24 February 2022. Instead, they have often become entrenched. It is painful to note that this group includes university people. The notion of Russia’s special mission has been shared by more than one academic circle. Its rejection would have called into question their previous research and cognitive paradigms and shattered the worldview and scientific output carefully built on them. Today, the issue needs to be addressed for ethical reasons. Without a clear and official statement from the scientific community on the Russian-Ukrainian war, good relations between Polish and Ukrainian universities will not be possible in the future.

Also, we should not underestimate the impact of private statements made by scholars. Opinions that are inconsistent with the truth (e.g. denying the fact of the war in Ukraine, blaming Ukraine for the conflict, minimising losses, and casualties), when voiced by a representative of a university, even in private, can still have considerable impact.

**Institutional Problems and Independence of Research on Ukraine**

Ukrainian studies in the world are usually conducted by institutions with the word “Russia” on their banner. The names of other countries and peoples of Eastern Slavdom are generally omitted or relegated to the role of a neighbouring country, a region surrounding the centre in Moscow. This strategy, developed in the previous era when Poland was still dependent on this centre of power, creates a particular vision of the world and effectively perpetuates its Russocentric model. The name does not have to, but unfortunately can reflect the way research is conducted in these entities: strong support for some research (e.g. financial or in terms of staff) and underinvestment for others. This is not a sound, forward-looking arrangement, but a very well established one. The historical process behind the formation of these units and the ideological undertones of this process, both yesterday and today, certainly need to be investigated. It is imperative to do so because this problem has translated into the functioning of entities that teach and

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do research in cultural studies, philology, as well as international relations and political science, and has made it unreliable and faulty.\(^6\)

Russian studies enjoy a strong and dominant position within Slavic studies in particular. In Poland, its position has been consolidated by a long tradition of research and contacts with Moscow during the Soviet era. Indeed, this is the scholarly world that has built an image of a Russia-dependent and, paradoxically, culturally younger and less developed Ukraine. The situation did not change much in the 1990s, with Russian studies retaining its dominant position thanks, among other things, to its well-developed faculty of professors. Some scholars in this community have inherited an imperial perspective from the previous era, which prevents objectivised research, far from ideological schemes and simplifications, and the pursuit of truth. This is further facilitated by a web of connections with Russian institutions, which generously fund efforts to popularise the Russian language, history, and culture as part of the aforementioned “Russian World” project. Especially today, in the face of the war in Ukraine and the escalation of aggressive rhetoric targeting not only neighbouring countries (including Poland) but also the entire Western world, these are problems that need to be reflected upon and discussed by a wide range of scholars representing departments of Slavic studies around the world. The outbreak of a full-scale war is paradoxically conducive to addressing these issues even in circles that have so far ignored it. In spite of the hardships of war, discussions on the subject in conferences and debates are encouraged by Ukrainians themselves.\(^7\)

Already in 2014, contacts with institutions supported financially or otherwise by the Russian government and related institutions, including scientific, cultural and commercial ones, were making it difficult to build simultaneous collaborations with Ukrainian scholars, due to the ethical code they follow after the outbreak of the war in the Donbass and the annexation of Crimea.\(^8\) Therefore, the very fact that departments of Ukrainian studies operated within institutes with the word “Russia” in their name may have already inhibited academic relations, as well as discouraged Ukrainian students from taking up studies there.

The above-mentioned problems call for considering a reorganisation of the research and teaching institutions dealing with Russia and Eastern European countries, for an institutional emancipation of departments of Ukrainian studies as well as, where possible, tying them to units conducting broader

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\(^6\) This is well illustrated by Taras Kuzio on the example of five misconceptions in Western science regarding the crisis and war since 2014: “blaming the West for the crisis, downplaying Russian military involvement, justifying Russian annexation of the Crimea, describing the conflict as a ‘civil war’ and minimizing Russian nationalism while exaggerating Ukrainian nationalism” (Taras Kuzio, “Euromaidan Revolution, Crimea and Russia-Ukraine War: Why it is Time for a Review of Ukrainian-Russian Studies,” Eurasian Geography and Economics 59, no. 3–4 (2018): 529–53, https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2019.15714282018).

\(^7\) For example, the international conference (online, 7–8 of November 2022) Slavic Literary Studies Deconstructed: Translating Ukraine organised by Ivan Franko National University of Lviv. The aim of the conference was, as one can read in the program: “to revisit the role, positioning and impact of Ukrainian studies that stood for decades – together with Polish, Czech and Slovakian scholarship – in the shadow of Russian studies within the world leading Slavic academic centers. As the research community strives for in depth investigations into this unduly neglected situation, some researchers have rightly expressed concerns over the academic rigor and trustworthiness of modern Slavic studies with its unequal if not manipulative representations of cultures. Numerous departments of “Russian and Slavic Studies” inviting students to acquire knowledge of Russian literature, culture, and language with the elements of other Slavic cultures seem to view the latter as the Other, which, in Said’s sense, is constrained within the frames of imperial knowledge imposed by Russia. As the paradigm shift in the Slavic Studies is inevitable, the present conference is a research-based, scholarly response to the current moment that calls for deep rethinking of the area, re-reading and actualizing the multi-perspective Ukrainian narrative and opening up new intellectual perspectives in Ukrainian studies. The event will provide a premier interdisciplinary platform for researchers and educators in Slavic Studies to present and discuss the most recent concerns, trends and thematic innovations,” https://philology.lnu.edu.ua/en/news/international-conference-slavic-literary-studies-deconstructed-translating-ukraine (March 5, 2023).

\(^8\) After the outbreak of a full-scale war, a resolution was issued on the complete severance of cooperation with, among others, in the field of education. See document of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine: https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/rada/show/v4532321-22#Text (March 5, 2023); see also statement of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine (NAN Ukrayiny: “Pro pryppynennya spivpratsi z uchenymy Rosyi’s’koi Federatsii u vydavnychyi sferi”, https://ipiend.gov.ua/novyny/nan-ukrains- pro-prypypennia-spivpratsi-z-uchenymi-rosijskoi-federatsii-u-vydavnychyi-sferi/ (March 5, 2023).
research on Europe. As a result of a conceptual change, a similar restructuring process is currently underway in many American universities.9

In conclusion, we need to take a new look at history and give a voice to the previously marginalised “weaker ones.” Of course, this will not happen overnight and not just by changing the name of a research unit. It is necessary to come up with a development strategy, educate the staff, find the financial resources needed to organise strong research teams in institutes of Ukrainian studies and, in the future, perhaps Belarusian studies as well. It would be important to bring their power in university life and capacities at least on a par with those of Russian studies. A major stimulating role in this process could be played by properly designed European programmes supporting this process financially and conceptually.

Students

In 2014, the Department of Polish-Ukrainian Studies, an independent unit of the JU Faculty of International and Political Studies, launched a new course within Cultural Studies called Polish-Ukrainian Studies. A few years later, after a deeper reconstruction, a full programme of the same name with the main focus on political science and administration was opened. The programme offered two tracks and made it possible to choose between studying in Polish or Ukrainian in the first years of studies (bachelor’s and master’s). These changes resulted in a natural influx of students from Ukraine. According to the aims of the curriculum, in future they should become qualified promoters of democratic tendencies in Ukraine, ambassadors of good Ukrainian-Polish relations, informed participants in public life, resistant to manipulation and propaganda, and above all people aware of the broader European context, both historical and contemporary, in which both cultures function.10

An important part of this bilingual system consists in the actual encounter between young Poles and Ukrainians, who, in Krakow, a city with a pre-war tradition of Polish-Ukrainian cooperation among university elites,11 will study Polish-Ukrainian relations together, take care of their good future and positive development.

Young people of Ukrainian and Polish nationality coming to study from Ukraine have been affected by the war, which has been ongoing in the Donbass since 2014, to varying degrees. As their lecturers, we are aware that these were often traumatic experiences, the existence of which we can guess from, e.g. reading scholarship applications from orphaned students, the children of fallen defenders of Ukrainian borders in the east of their homeland. The tragedy concealed beneath the content of a concise document intensified after 24 February 2022, and not only took the form of a wave of requests for material assistance, but was also fully revealed beyond the scope of formal applications or requests when it became the subject of our daily, often emotionally difficult conversations with students. The full-scale war has affected all Ukrainian students. At the time of its outbreak, most of them were in their home country due to the Covid-related decision of the dean’s office to extend remote teaching until mid-March 2022.

The beginning of the summer semester (25 February) brought the question of how university teachers should work with traumatised young people, the form and flow of classes with those experiencing war, stress, fear for the lives of loved ones and their own. After all, in the first days after the Russian troops entered, some of them were still staying in areas at risk of direct attacks from enemy missiles.

Doubts were raised regarding possible questions about the whereabouts of the students, their current situation and that of their relatives, which, however, had to be determined for organisational and teaching-related reasons, among other things. It seemed impossible to conduct typical classes. The lecturers could not be expected to focus exclusively on the subject matter of the course and, above all, it seemed “inhumane” to require young people to concentrate.

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9 A series of seminars on the decolonization of Slavic studies was organized by Harvard University with the support of many other American universities: https://daviscenter.fas.harvard.edu/insights/announcing-decolonization-focus-seminar-series (March 5, 2023). This university and center for Ukrainian studies headed by prof. Serhii Plokhy is at the forefront of these changes. More about the topic in an article of Iryna Polets-Gerus (this volume).

10 These assumptions are well illustrated by the names of specialties in cultural studies, which provided a reference point for the creation of the Polish-Ukrainian Studies: European Perspective (1st degree studies), Borderland and Neighbourhood in Europe (2nd degree studies) programmes.

It was a very difficult time, but the students surprised the lecturers with their attendance at classes and their expectation that they would be held as usual. They saw the classes as a form of escape, a way of distracting themselves from the daily stress and, paradoxically, to some extent a way of restoring the reality they had known before 24 February, which was now invariably lost. They would connect via the Internet to classes held on MS Teams even from places where they took shelter during missile alerts. It was difficult to remain calm, knowing that a student was leaving a lecture to take shelter from a bombardment in, for example, the Kyiv metro, but the teacher’s calm was much needed, and this realisation, paradoxically, gave us the strength to keep it.

For long weeks, the staff at the department monitored the fate of individual students who had problems reaching and crossing the Polish border (especially the men due to military mobilisation), and in various ways we helped them on their way to Krakow (writing letters to border guards, military commissions, providing transportation from the border). By May, most of them had arrived at the then already stationary classes.

Because of the war we learned about the students’ personal problems, including those related to family or accommodation, financial, and last but not least, psychological and emotional problems. This close relationship caused the students to open up, and through this we discovered that they were already documenting the war (photos, posters, poems). We could not ignore this, especially as these materials are not only important in terms of documentation, but also artistically valuable.12

Between February–April and June 2022, Nikita Daletskiy, then a first-year (BA) student in Polish-Ukrainian Studies, was sending in photos of the destroyed Kharkiv. They were initially available online on the website of the JU Department of Polish-Ukrainian Studies. A few months later, an exhibition of these photographs entitled Kharkiv in Times of War (February–June 2022) became a side event of the “University and War” conference (25 November 2022) at the JU Faculty of International and Political Studies. They were next presented at the Voivodeship Public Library in Krakow as a part of the Militaria in Pop Culture, Pop Culture in the Service of Freedom festival (17 December 2022).13

Posters by Kyiv resident Anna Babych (now a 2nd year undergraduate student, vice-president of the student research club) made in Krakow after the outbreak of war were presented at the student seminar “University and War” on 31 March 2023. The event had been prepared by the JU Polish-Ukrainian Student Research Group “Wernyhora” coordinated very effectively by Sofiia Pishchanska (3rd year BA student) together with the JU European Studies Student Research Group.

During this event, students gave presentations on the situation of Ukrainian society in times of war, discussed their involvement in protests and expressions of solidarity with Ukraine, as well as their aid and volunteer activities (collections, translations, educational support for Ukrainian students and others). They also presented the results of a questionnaire (108 responses), which the project coordinators arranged and distributed to Ukrainian students in Ukraine and abroad, mainly in Poland. All the tasks that the students carried out are relevant to the dissemination of knowledge and have a scientific and educational dimension, in line with the mission to involve students in research.

We did not manage to make all of the above-mentioned issues the subject of the discussion at the conference, but most of them are addressed by the scholars who have authored the volume that we commend to the reader’s attention.

Finally, it is worth emphasising that we raised the issue of war in the life of the university community, not only in the belief that it is important and needs to be monitored and studied. The activity described above was also meant to be a form of solidarity, of “being with people in need,” a support we wanted to give to our students and scholars from Ukraine. Joint research, a conference, a symposium, numerous exhibitions and, finally, a publication, are activities that support the fight against the effects of war and stress, provide relief, at least to some extent, from the feeling of powerlessness, and serve as a kind of therapy through research and artistic activities.

12 Contributions by students majoring in Polish-Ukrainian Studies at the Jagiellonian University can be found in the Annex to this article.

13 The event was organised by the “Arreteka” creative space of the Voivodeship Public Library in Krakow in cooperation with the JU Department of Polish-Ukrainian Studies, https://www.rajska.info/militaria-w-popkulturze-popkultura-w-sluzbie-wolnosci-n-n (March 5, 2023).
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**ПРОЄКТ «УНІВЕРСИТЕТ І ВІЙНА» — ПЕРСПЕКТИВИ ПОЛЬСЬКО-УКРАЇНСЬКИХ СТУДІЙ У ЯГЕЛЛОНСЬКОМУ УНІВЕРСИТЕТІ**


У цьому огляді йдеться про проєкт «Університет і війна», який реалізується з весни 2022 року в Ягеллонському університеті (Краків, Польща). У проєкті брали участь науковці, які були вимушені виїхати з України, а також ті, хто вирішив залишитися на Батьківщині, незважаючи на екстримальні умови праці. Важливим елементом проєкту є міжнародна міждисциплінарна наукова конференція, у якій брали участь науковці з Польщі, України (онлайн і на місці) та Австрії. Основною метою зустрічі було обговорення ролі університету в кризових ситуаціях та попередня оцінка стану українських університетів і становища українських науковців і студентів в Україні та за кордоном. Інший тематичний блок стосувався реакції польських університетів на російську агресію: реалізовані програми стипендій та допомоги, волонтерська діяльність університетської спільноти.

Одним із актуальних питань після збройного нападу Росії є ставлення академічної спільноти в Польщі та світі до цих подій, тобто адекватна оцінка політики агресора, зокрема в соціальних мережах, і насамперед інституційна та концептуальна реконструкція українознавства, необхідна для того, щоб остаточно порвати із залишками концепції “русского міра”.

Важливою метою проєкту було залучення студентства (переважно з України). Ще у 2014 році кафедра польсько-українських студій, самостійний підрозділ факультету міжнародних і політичних студій Ягеллонського університету, започаткувала новий курс у межах культурології.
«Польсько-українські студії». Згодом було відкрито повноцінну однойменну програму з акцен-
том на політологію та адміністрування. У межах проєкту «Університет і війна» студенти підготу-
вали виставки: фотографії зруйнованого Харкова, плакати на воєнну тематику, вірші, навіяні по-
діями, а також узяли участь у міжнародному (за участю студентів Національної академії
образотворчого мистецтва і архітектури, м. Київ) науковому студентському семінарі, під час
якого виступили з доповідями, аналізували анкету про власну ситуацію після початку війни,
участь у допомозі та волонтерстві.

Цей проєкт був також виявом солідарності, формою підтримки, яку польські науковці хотіли
надати студентам і науковцям з України.

Ключові слова: університет, війна, Україна, проєкт, конференція, пропаганда.

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