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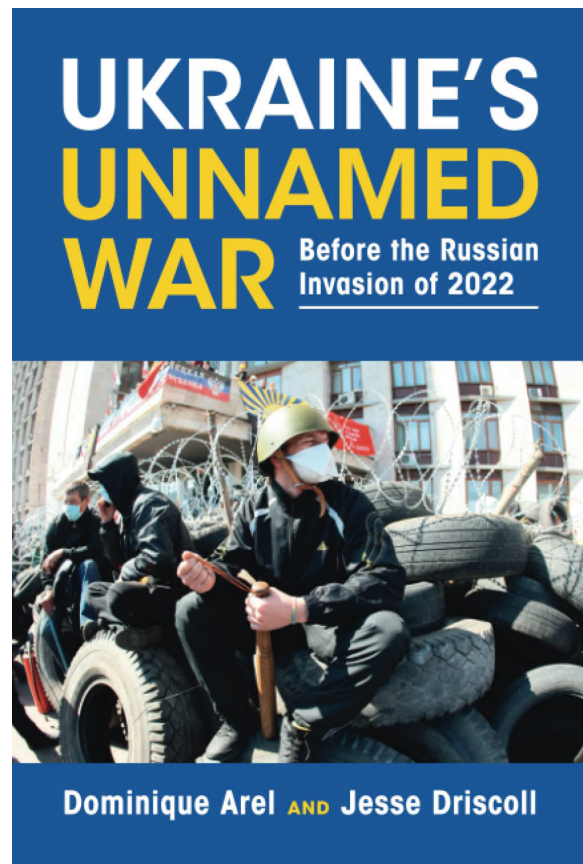
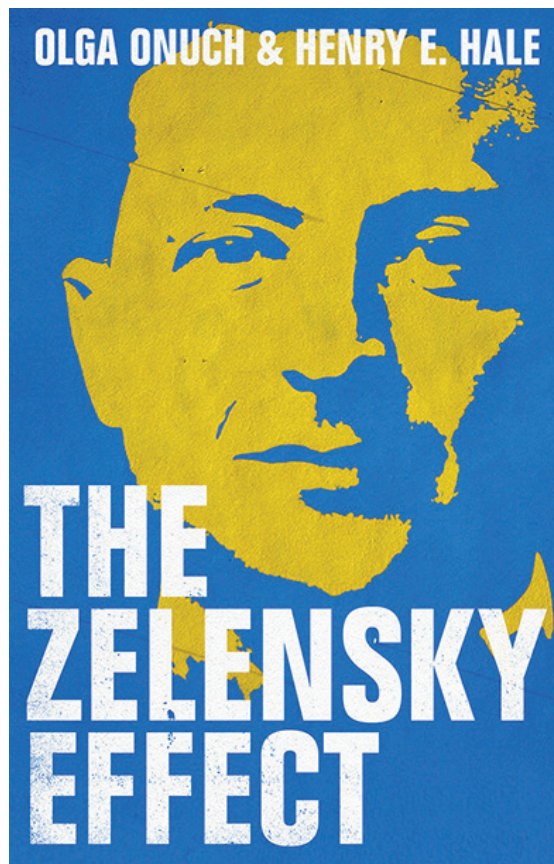
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## **RUSSOPHILISM AND MISUNDERSTANDING UKRAINE**

**Review:**

Olga Onuch and Henry E. Hale. *The Zelensky Effect*. London: Hurst and Co., 2023;

Dominique Arel and Jesse Driscoll. *Ukraine's Unnamed War. Before the Russian Invasion of 2022*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023



Olga Onuch and Henry Hale have written the first English-language book about Zelenskyy which includes new information. They describe the landslide election of Zelenskyy in 2019 as heralding the arrival of a civic identity and building of a civic state in Ukraine. Ukraine is like all nation states which are composed of both civic and ethno-cultural factors as there are no fully civic states in the world. Onuch and Hale's confusion is evident when analysing Western democracies. In 1991, Ukraine provided citizenship to all those who were resident in Ukraine, and it is wrong to claim Zelenskyy changed the meaning of identity in Ukraine (pp. 8, 10, 23). Estonia and Latvia adopted ethnic citizenship legislation like that used by Germany until its reunification; nevertheless, Ukraine did not; nevertheless, Estonia and Latvia were invited to join NATO and the EU.

Onuch and Hale do not make a convincing case how Zelenskyy's ethno-cultural policies are different to earlier presidents. Using Stephen Shulman's framework (published in 2005), only one of Ukraine's six presidents (Yanukovych) promoted an east Slavic identity while five supported ethnic Ukrainian identity (centrist Leonid Kravchuk [1991-1994], Leonid Kuchma [1994-2004], and Zelenskyy [2019-]), centre-right Viktor Yushchenko [2004-2010], and Poroshenko [2014-2019]). Onuch and Hale exaggerate 'civic' Zelenskyy's difference to his 'ethnic' predecessor Petro Poroshenko and yet on examination there is little to differentiate them. Differences over ethno-cultural policies between Ukrainian centrists and centre-right national democrats are similar to those found between the liberal-centre-left and centre-right in Western democracies.

Onuch and Hale portray Ukrainian presidents as 'civic' and 'ethnic'. Shulman's framework is better at understanding Ukraine as experiencing a cultural war between 'ethnic Ukrainian' and 'east Slavic' identities until Russian military aggression from 2014. Centrists and national democrats, such as Zelenskyy and Poroshenko respectively, support only Ukrainian as a state language, autocephaly (independence) for Ukrainian Orthodox from the Russian Orthodox Church, a Ukrainian history separate to that of Russia and the eastern Slavs, criticism of nationality policies and Russification undertaken by the Tsarist Empire and Soviet Union and Ukraine's membership of NATO and the EU. In contrast, Yanukovych supported a common eastern Slavic history and future, Russians as the leaders of the eastern Slavs where Ukraine has no agency to decide its domestic policies and foreign trajectory, nostalgia for the USSR, religious cult of the great patriotic war, the Russian Orthodox Church as the dominant confession and the Russian language upgraded to a second state language.

Zelenskyy's vision of Ukraine is 'defined primarily by civic rather than ethnic criteria' and his vision is one 'defined by civic rather than any ethnic litmus test' (p. 260). Zelenskyy did not reverse Poroshenko's ethno-cultural policies on education, media, language, and de-communisation. In fact, Zelenskyy's ethno-cultural policies are in many ways more 'ethnic' (using Onuch and Hale's definition) than Poroshenko's, such as closing five pro-Russian television channels, banning twelve pro-Russian parties, and launching criminal investigations of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Onuch and Hale (pp. 57, 145) emphasise growing attachment to the Ukrainian state as being 'less about ancestry and ethnicity' and when thinking of what is a Ukrainian 'they increasingly think of civic rather than ethnocultural criteria.' Opinion polls since 2014 show the opposite to be the case with the language question important to Ukrainians who uphold both 'ethnic Ukrainian' and 'east Slavic' identities. It is mistaken to write that language is not a priority for most Ukrainians (p. 104) as many Ukrainians have deliberately switched to using Ukrainian in protest at Russian military aggression. The language divide became less important (pp. 105–106) not because Zelenskyy was espousing a civic identity but because Russian speaking Ukrainians, appalled by Russia's military aggression, moved psychologically away from Russia and closer to Ukrainian speakers. Radical changes in the identity of Russian speakers in Ukraine's southeast undoubtedly impacted Zelenskyy who until his election had been a Russian speaker.

Onuch and Hale credit Zelenskyy with changes in Ukrainian identity that are attributable to Russian military aggression since the 2014 crisis and Russia's full-scale invasion. The growth of Ukrainians upholding European values is part of a long-standing call to 'return to Europe' and move away from Russia. While there was growth of 'civic identity' from the 2014 crisis (p. 202) what also took place was the spread of 'ethnic Ukrainian' identity from central Ukraine to Ukraine's southeast. De-communisation,

introduced in 2015, played an important role in this but the topic is ignored by Onuch and Hale (de-russification since 2022, which is beyond the scope of the book, continues these processes).

Onuch and Hale credit Ukrainians with fighting against the Russian invasion because they believe Ukraine is a free country in contrast to Russia. While democratic freedom is an important factor, it is mistaken to exclude civic nationalism as an additional driver. Ukrainians hold both a civic attachment to their democratic state and a commitment to protecting their culture, language, and history which 89 percent in one opinion poll see as being subjected to genocide by Russia.

Zelensky's support for EU and NATO membership continues that of four earlier presidents, including Russian speaking Kuchma (pp. 222, 233). The book emphasises Ukraine's drive for EU membership while ignoring official support for NATO membership; yet Ukraine has always supported joining both organisations. Ukrainian popular support for integration into the EU rested on reforms implemented after 2014 by Poroshenko that Zelensky sought to imprison using bogus criminal cases. These were suspended (not closed) after the invasion while Poroshenko's bank accounts continue to be frozen. Poroshenko's television channels were prevented from joining the national television marathon, reducing their number of viewers. Attributing Zelensky with greater 'civic' policies than 'nationalist' (and less democratic) Poroshenko is also not evident from his selective use of justice against Poroshenko and pressure against his media outlets.

Onuch and Hale define Zelensky as the first Ukrainian leader who represents the 'independence generation' who came of age in independent Ukraine. The authors exaggerate influences on Zelensky from the Ukrainian dissident movement as reinforcing his civic identity (p. 44). There is no evidence Zelensky was involved in Ukraine's dissident movement which was weak in Dnipropetrovsk as it was a closed city in the USSR due to its large military industrial complex. Zelensky was not elected because he embodied a 'civic, and not ethnolinguistic and conservative image of a good Ukrainian' (p. 183) but because the 'independence generation' were fed up with the old guard and wanted 'new faces.' This demand long preceded the 2019 elections. Zelensky's election was supported by oligarch Igor Kolomoysky, no different to oligarch backing for earlier presidential campaigns.

Dominique Arel and Jesse Driscoll write 'Our book provides clear answers' (p. 19) but the 2013-2014 Euromaidan Revolution, 2014 annexation of Crimea, and 2014-2021 war in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine are already covered by countless academic articles and books and they bring little new to these subjects in a book that was overtaken by events (hence the strange title). Arel and Driscoll's major pitfalls are a disconnect between the theoretical and empirical sections, lack of field research, and contradictory denials of Russian intervention. The book does not use polls by the Levada Centre, Russia's last remaining independent pollster, and uses no Democratic Initiatives polls and only two Razumkov Centre polls from Ukraine. This leads to mistaken claims in the book, such as Ukrainians continued to be divided over memory politics after 2014 (p. 54), which is not true. The most divisive historical subject was always public attitudes towards Ukrainian nationalist groups in the 1940s towards which ninety percent of Ukrainians now hold a positive view.

Arel and Driscoll's core argument is the Donbas conflict in 2014-2021 was a 'civil war' (p. 7) whose root causes were language and regional divisions. After Euromaidan Revolutionaries came to power Russian speakers lost their bargaining power and rebelled (p. 45). Although they accept that pro-Russian forces were only successful in the Donbas, they do not explain why, if language is so important a determining factor, they failed in other Russian speaking regions of southeast Ukraine. They write that separatism was unpopular (p. 43) without explaining how protestors transitioned into insurgents without Russian support (p. 151). Their intra Russian World 'civil war' between Russian speaking Ukrainians ignores Shulman's more lucid framework (of Ukraine experiencing a cultural war between ethnic Ukrainian and east Slavic identities. Arel and Driscoll ignore Russia's long-standing intervention in support of an east Slavic identity in Ukraine.

Since the 1990s, Arel has stressed the influence of language and regionalism in Ukrainian politics and, drawing on David Laitin's theoretical framework, has focused on a mythical Russian speaking community in Ukraine, without undertaking field work to ascertain whether this was reality on the ground. Arel and Driscoll's use of the term 'language of preference' to denote the loyalty of Ukrainians ignores extensive bilingualism in Ukraine and high levels of Ukrainian patriotism among Russian



speakers. Their framework is unable to explain President Zelenskyy, a Jewish-Ukrainian Russian speaker from eastern Ukraine who is representative of Russian speaking Jews in Ukraine who are not nostalgic for the USSR and are not pro-Russian.

A Russian speaking community proved to be mythical in 2014 when most Russian speakers showed their patriotism and supported Ukraine. Arel and Driscoll attempt to explain this by moving the goalposts and having it both ways; Ukraine had a Russian speaking community but at the same time the southeast did not speak with one voice. Arel and Driscoll write that claims of ‘Russian infiltrators’ responsible for the violence is ‘plainly false’ (p. 144) while later writing weapons and people ‘had probably been smuggled since the early weeks of the conflict’ (p. 164), an admission that undermines the first statement and their main thesis of a ‘civil war.’ Arel and Driscoll deny the importance of Russian intervention while admitting the importance of Russian information warfare and GRU (military intelligence) agents (pp. 3, 6). Arel and Driscoll write that Russia was responsive to the crisis and Moscow did not know the faces of the rebel leaders (p. 146), which is impossible as until August 2014 leaders of the so-called DNR (Donetsk Peoples Republic) were all Russian citizens.

The book provides little understanding of the profound changes in Ukrainian identity that took place after 2014 and therefore does not prepare the reader for even greater transformations that are taking place since Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Their discussion of Vladimir Putin’s July 2021 essay, which set the stage for Russia’s invasion, ignores transformations in Russian nationalism and dehumanisation of Ukraine and Ukrainians in the Russian media and political discourse that had been taking place since the mid 2000s.

Arel and Driscoll’s core argument of a ‘civil war’ ignores widespread evidence of Russian intervention (pp. 3–4) and fails to adequately show an understanding of hybrid warfare (p. 14). Arel and Driscoll do not find ‘compelling evidence’ of Russian actors until August 2014 because they are not looking for it; for example, they ignore detailed investigations of which Russian units fired the BUK missile that shot down MH17 in July 2014 that killed 298 civilians (p. 165). Claiming there is no ‘convincing evidence’ (p. 123) of Russian support for protests ignores numerous examples of Russian ‘political tourists’ bused into Kharkiv from Belgorod and into Odesa from the Moldovan region of Transnistria (pp. 134–135). Claiming there was no ‘carefully constructed plan’ (p. 124) for a Russian Spring ignores numerous published intercepts of Russian agents and political technologists.

Russian intervention did not just take place in one city (Slovyansk), while an understanding of Russian politics undermines the claim Igor Girkin was a freelancer (p. 4). Evidence of Russia’s intervention should not be confined to only Russian boots on the ground in August 2014. Prior to then, Russia sent small and heavy weapons and forces loyal to pro-Russian Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov and undertook artillery attacks from Russia into Ukraine.

In fact, Russia has been conducting hybrid warfare against Ukraine since the 2004 Orange Revolution and took control of Ukrainian security forces during Viktor Yanukovich’s presidency in 2010-2014. Russia’s hybrid warfare included intelligence operations, information warfare (pp. 53, 55), covert funding to pro-Russian parties and groups, trade embargoes, and weaponisation of corruption. Nearly all these facets of Russian intervention are ignored by Arel and Driscoll.

Arel and Driscoll make three factual mistakes. *Rukh* (abbreviated for Ukrainian Popular Movement for Restructuring) was never a ‘nationalist movement’ (p. 56) unless one uses the unacademic Russian definition of ‘nationalist’ applying to national democrats, Girkin was a former FSB (Federal Security Service) not GRU agent (p. 147) while the Opposition Platform party did not participate in the 2014 elections as it was not launched until 2018 (p. 188).

Both books are weakened by their terminological confusions. In believing that civic states exist in practice, Onuch and Hale misunderstand the nature of nation-states. Ukrainian politics was never a competition between ‘civic’ and ‘ethnic’ presidents but a cultural war between proponents of ‘ethnic Ukrainian’ and ‘east Slavic’ identities and thereby Zelenskyy was not very different from his predecessor Poroshenko. Arel and Driscoll portray the conflict in Ukraine in 2014-2021 as a ‘civil war’ by ignoring (at times in a contradictory manner) evidence of Russian interference which would have been evident if they had undertaken field work in southeastern Ukraine and used a wider variety of Ukrainian opinion polls.

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## **РУСОФІЛЬСТВО І НЕРОЗУМІННЯ УКРАЇНИ**

### **Рецензія:**

Olga Onuch and Henry E. Hale. *The Zelensky Effect*. London: Hurst and Co., 2023;  
Dominique Arel and Jesse Driscoll. *Ukraine's Unnamed War. Before the Russian Invasion of 2022*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023

Цей критичний огляд присвячено двом новим книгам, опублікованим західними вченими, які продовжують надавати хибне розуміння України. Ольга Онух і Генрі Гейл дотримуються загального неправильного сприйняття української політики, розділеної на «громадянських» і «етнічних» або «націоналістичних» і «проросійських» президентів. Негативний «етнічний» і «націоналістичний» ярлик застосовується лише до правоцентристської української політики, яку злило з націоналістами в одну групу. Не взято до уваги східнослов'янський націоналізм, який пропагували радянський режим, Росія та проросійські сили в Україні, як-от Партія регіонів. Стівен Шулман дає кращу структуру української політики з конкуренцією між прихильниками «етнічної української» та «східнослов'янської» ідентичностей. Використовуючи структуру Шулмана, ми бачимо, що між президентами Володимиром Зеленським і Петром Порошенком невелика різниця. Основна концепція Онух та Гейла про те, що «громадянський» Зеленський кращий за «етнічного» Порошенка, підривається теорією, порівняльним розумінням національних держав і їхньої політики. Домінік Арель і Джессі Дрісколл описують конфлікт в Україні у 2014–2021 роках як «громадянську війну», навдивовижу повторюючи російську дезінформацію та твори русофілів на Заході. Аргументи Ареля та Дрісколла послаблюються вибіркоким використанням ними українських, російських і західних джерел (наприклад, дуже мало залучено українських опитувань громадської думки), відсутністю польових досліджень на південному сході України та перебільшенням значення мови в ідентичності більшості українців. Вони не пояснюють адекватно, чому «російська весна» провалилася в шести з восьми південно-східних регіонів України і лише частково вдалася на Донбасі. Через слабе розуміння концепції російської гібридної війни вони нехтують багатьма прикладами російського втручання, окрім військової агресії (як-от дезінформація, кібервійна, російські політичні туристи, які видають себе за українців, підбивна дія російської розвідки, російська артилерія, що обстрілює Україну, та війська Кадирова), що існувала до російського вторгнення в серпні 2014 року.

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