

BOOK REVIEW:

Merlo, Simona. (2023). *La costruzione dell'Ucraina contemporanea. Una storia complessa*. Bologna: il Mulino

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The history of Ukraine is marked by complexity, requiring a comprehensive and multifaceted approach to grasp its intricacies fully. As Orest Subtelny aptly remarked, “Modern Ukrainian history is the story of a people emerging from centuries of foreign rule to claim a state of their own” (*Ukraine: A History*). Simona Merlo’s *La costruzione dell'Ucraina contemporanea. Una storia complessa* offers a profound examination of Ukraine’s modern historical and geopolitical evolution, focusing on the transition from the Soviet era to the formation of contemporary Ukraine. The book demonstrates Merlo’s deep understanding of Ukraine’s distinctive socio-political and cultural history.

The book’s structure contains multiple chapters, and it carefully dissects Ukraine’s development from its Soviet past to the current complexities of its status as an independent state. Merlo masterfully navigates through historical, political, and cultural contexts, emphasizing the ways in which Ukraine’s past has shaped its present geopolitical landscape. One of her central arguments is rejecting the notion of bifurcation of Ukraine into “Western” and “Eastern” entities. Instead, she presents Ukraine as a multi-ethnic, value-driven state where democracy has long been a focal point of struggle.

The bipolar model, which divides Ukraine along the Dnipro River into a Ukrainian-speaking, Greek Catholic West and a Russian-speaking, Orthodox East, does not fully capture the country’s cultural, linguistic, demographic, and religious complexity. Similarly, its variation, which splits Ukraine into four macro-regions, has also proven to be an inadequate interpretative framework.

This analysis highlights the oversimplification often used to explain Ukraine’s regional diversity. Instead, a rich and intricate tapestry of identities and historical experiences characterized Ukraine, which cannot be neatly categorized by language, religion, or geography. Ukraine’s cultural and political landscape reflects centuries of influence from different empires, nations, and religious communities, contributing to a more nuanced and diverse national identity.

The book traces the multi-layered history of the territory, from its roots in the Kyivan Rus to the influence of the Polish-Lithuanian kingdom (or called in the book “Commonwealth”), the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and eventually the Soviet Union. Merlo’s ability to weave together these disparate historical threads demonstrates

Ukraine's complex past and how it influences contemporary political and cultural divisions.

Merlo's work touches upon the contradictions of nation-building in Ukraine, especially in light of its Soviet legacy. Her analysis shows that the creation of modern Ukraine was not a linear process but one fraught with internal and external challenges. She names two main factors that influenced Ukraine's post-independence struggle: its Soviet past and the difficulties in fostering a cohesive national identity amid regional differences and external pressures, especially from Russia.

In the first chapter, "*Preludio: l'Ucraina sovietica*", Merlo begins with an exploration of the roots from the Middle Ages to the Soviet times with a particular focus on the 17th and 19th centuries when the Ukrainian cultural and political leaders set preconditions for the fight for the independence at the beginning of the 20th century. The author clearly explains the Soviet approach in the so-called "Ukrainization" of Ukrainian territories as well as its people, which in reality was rather its Sovietization. Specifically, it marked a Bolshevik-style Ukrainization, achieved through Sovietizing the primate city. It reflects how, instead of fostering a distinct national identity, the policy was more about embedding Soviet ideological control within the Ukrainian framework, especially in urban centers like Kyiv, aligning local governance and culture with the more extensive Soviet system.

A special interest in this chapter takes place in describing the historical implications of various empires on Galicia, Bukovyna, Volyn, and Crimea, especially during the First and Second World Wars.

The incorporation of territories into Soviet Ukraine significantly impacted its geopolitical, demographic, ethnic, and linguistic balance. The homogenization policies applied in these regions, in the form of Ukrainization, were a form of Sovietization in reality.

The broader goal was to strengthen identity in these regions while simultaneously diminishing the influence of other ethnic groups, aligning these territories more closely with Soviet ideological goals under the guise of national unity. This approach often downplayed the cultural diversity of the population in favor of a monolithic Ukrainian national identity that served the broader objectives of Soviet control.

Ukraine was among the republics most significantly impacted by the Soviet economic reforms. With its substantial industrial power, the Soviets expected Ukraine to play a decisive role in achieving the ambitious economic expansion plans set forth by Soviet leadership. The primary objective of this plan was to close the gap between the Soviet economy and the capitalist economies of the West. Ukraine's industrial capacity was seen as essential to the success of this initiative, reflecting its strategic importance in Soviet economic planning.

In the second chapter, "*Perebudova: la perestroika in Ucraina*", Merlo analyzes the impact of Gorbachev's reforms on Ukraine, noting how these reforms, intended to preserve the Soviet Union, ultimately fueled nationalist movements that led to Ukraine's independence. The author provides an in-depth exploration of perestroika and glasnost,

contextualizing their effects on Ukraine's evolving national consciousness and its eventual drive toward sovereignty. The Chernobyl disaster, as Merlo thoroughly describes, played a pivotal role in altering perceptions of Soviet governance and the viability of Soviet expansionist policies, particularly in the nuclear energy sector.

In particular, Merlo emphasizes that while Gorbachev's reforms were supposed to salvage the Soviet Union in Ukraine, they had the opposite effect, encouraging nationalist movements that would later lead to independence. This chapter is particularly insightful, highlighting the distinct Ukrainian experience during the Soviet-wide transformation.

The author puts efforts in providing much more analytical details of the "reform", embodied in the twin concepts of perestroika and glasnost, which were thoroughly outlined by Mikhail Gorbachev on February 25, 1986, during the opening session of the 27th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Gorbachev delivered a long and comprehensive political report outlining a program for the coming months, with a central focus on perestroika in its various forms: Perestroika of thought, Technological perestroika, Economic perestroika, Perestroika of the economic mechanism, Psychological perestroika of cadres, Perestroika of the social structure.

This process paired perestroika with glasnost (openness) towards the existing system and the complete democratization of socialist society. The aim was not merely to initiate a "restructuring" process but to push forward a radical, bold reform, particularly in the economic sphere, while simultaneously applying glasnost.

Chernobyl tragedy was thoroughly described in the book by Merlo when the Soviet Union interpreted the tragedy "in a completely different way", viewing it as "yet another reminder that the nuclear age demands new political thinking". In Ukraine, a republic that represented only 2.6% of the Soviet Union's total land area, approximately 40% of the Soviet Union's nuclear power plants were either operational or under construction at the time of the Chernobyl disaster. Ukraine played a crucial role in the expansion of nuclear energy within the Soviet Union, not only due to its industrial centrality within the European part of the USSR but also because of its proximity to Eastern European countries.

Merlo places particular interest in Soviet archival documents published in the 1990s. They reveal that Kyiv's leadership was fully involved in the Soviet Union's nuclear expansion plans. For example, a joint decree from December 1971, signed by Petro Shelest and Volodymyr Shcherbytsky – then the First Secretary and Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Ukrainian SSR, respectively – expressed dissatisfaction with the slow pace of nuclear power plant construction in Ukraine. The decree laid out a series of measures to accelerate the development of these plants despite all security precautions.

This involvement of Ukraine's leadership underscores the republic's active participation in the Soviet Union's strategic energy initiatives, emphasizing how critical Ukraine was to the broader Soviet plans for nuclear modernization.

The rise of language-focused societies reflects a broader reawakening of national consciousness within Ukraine during the late Soviet period. It coincided with the policy

reforms of glasnost and perestroika, which facilitated the resurgence of cultural and linguistic expressions suppressed under Soviet rule. These movements were significant not only for their immediate impact on language policy but also for their role in the broader process of Ukrainian national self-assertion during a time of political and social transformation.

These informal groups grew more substantial and led to developments further elaborated in chapter three, "*La svolta del 1989*".

It covers the rise of informal national movements during perestroika and the crystallization of political opposition to Soviet control. Merlo highlights the importance of the Rukh movement and the significant role played by intellectuals and writers in fostering Ukrainian national identity. The 1989 semi-free elections are portrayed as a critical juncture in Ukraine's journey toward independence, setting the stage for the declaration of sovereignty in 1991.

A critical element in the relationship between the Communist Party and Rukh lay in the hybrid nature of the latter. This characteristic gained prominence as the movement expanded by integrating informal groups. The intellectual class played a pivotal role in forming the Rukh movement, mainly through members of the Union of Writers of Ukraine and Taras Shevchenko's Institute of Literature at the Academy of Sciences of Kyiv. These institutions were integral to the Soviet system, serving as representatives of the cultural elite in the capital. The individuals associated with these bodies, although deeply embedded within Soviet structures, fostered a national consciousness centered on promoting and preserving Ukrainian culture. This intellectual environment provided fertile ground for the emergence of Rukh as a movement advocating for cultural and national identity within Ukraine.

Additionally, the precedent set by the Baltic national fronts influenced the strategic decision to expand Rukh's outreach beyond the intellectual community and engage broader societal groups. These fronts not only actively promoted national movements within their respective republics but also sought to extend support to similar causes in other Soviet republics. This broader mission of national solidarity across borders significantly shaped the trajectory of Rukh, as it evolved from a primarily intellectual initiative into a more comprehensive national movement, being important in the first electoral campaign in 1989.

It inevitably was connected to the spike of democratic processes in Ukraine the same year, characterized by a series of simultaneous and turbulent events such as street demonstrations, public meetings, strikes, and protests. These occurrences engaged various societal actors, extending beyond intellectual circles to workers from multiple sectors, trade unions, and youth organizations. The motivations for these mobilizations were diverse yet interconnected, reflecting the regional particularities of Ukraine. These multifaceted developments illustrated a convergence of nationalistic and socio-economic grievances, contributing to the region's broader dynamics of political transformation.

In "*L'Ucraina sovrana*", Merlo delves into Ukraine's path toward sovereignty, focusing on the political and social transformations that ensued after it declared

independence. The author skillfully traces the growing tensions between Ukraine and Russia, particularly regarding the strategic importance of the Black Sea fleet and the Crimean Peninsula. The author convincingly argues that Ukraine's independence was not merely a consequence of Soviet collapse but a deliberate outcome of its own political and civil movements. Merlo correctly stipulates that the 1990 elections represented a significant turning point in Ukrainian politics, both for the crystallization of forces opposed to the Communist Party and for the shift in direction within the party itself. These elections marked a critical moment in Ukraine's journey toward greater political pluralism, as they showcased the growing power of opposition groups and signaled the beginning of the Communist Party's waning dominance in the political landscape.

The elections also highlighted internal shifts within the Communist Party, reflecting broader changes across the Soviet Union at the time. This period was pivotal in Ukraine's political transformation, eventually leading to its declaration of independence in 1991. After that, an essential step in the form of a referendum took place, which was boycotted not only by the Baltic republics but also by Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova. The question posed to Soviet citizens read: "Do you consider it necessary to preserve the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics as a renewed federation of sovereign republics with equal rights, in which the rights and freedoms of individuals of all nationalities are fully guaranteed?". This formulation was likely intentionally ambiguous and contradictory, containing an inherent paradox by juxtaposing the terms "federation" and "sovereignty", which are mutually exclusive.

Merlo's final chapters bring the reader to the present, dealing with Ukraine's ongoing struggle for sovereignty, especially in the face of Russian aggression. Chapter five, "*L'Ucraina indipendente*", explores the early challenges of state-building in independent Ukraine, including the political and economic transformations required to assert sovereignty.

Merlo also explores the collapse of the Soviet Union from a Ukrainian perspective, making a compelling case that Ukraine's independence was not merely a byproduct of Soviet disintegration but a deliberate act by its political elites and civil society. She highlights key events, such as the 1991 referendum, where over 90% of Ukrainians voted for independence, as critical moments in the country's path to sovereignty.

The author correctly indicates key pitfalls for Ukraine as a maritime country presented by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The roots lie in the 90s when Ukraine became an independent state. The Soviet Black Sea fleet, as is widely recognized, was primarily based in the city of Sevastopol, Crimea, a location deemed "strategic" due to the presence of nuclear weapons. Additionally, the region hosted numerous naval facilities, which, during the Soviet era, provided key services, including specialized training, to other Soviet fleets. Furthermore, the symbolic significance of Sevastopol and its fleet for Russian nationalism further complicated the resolution of the conflict between Moscow and Kyiv.

The linguistic issue was a longstanding matter, originating from the "korenizatsiya" policies of the 1920s, and it reemerged as a significant concern for the leadership of Soviet Ukraine during the perestroika era. This resurgence was mainly

driven by debates initiated by intellectual circles surrounding the Society for the Ukrainian Language. Amidst this national awakening, the Supreme Soviet of the republic enacted the "Law on the Languages of the Ukrainian SSR" in October 1989. This legislation, remaining unamended, would continue to serve as the foundational legal framework for language policy in independent Ukraine.

The final chapter, "*Epilogo. Una costruzione ancora incompiuta*", brings the reader to the present day, addressing Ukraine's ongoing struggle for sovereignty, especially in light of Russian aggression. The author critically assesses the 2022 Russian invasion, tracing its roots back to unresolved tensions in the 1990s, particularly regarding Crimea and the Black Sea fleet.

Beginning in the 1990s, Ukraine witnessed the emergence of patrimonialism, with influential oligarchic groups playing a central role. These oligarchies primarily originated from regional clans associated with the Soviet-era *nomenklatura* and were characterized by a close intertwining of economic and political power. The electoral victory of Yanukovich in the 2010 presidential elections signified not only the re-establishment of a dominant power pyramid but also the creation of a nepotistic system centered on the president, his relatives, and close associates, collectively referred to as the "family." The Revolution of Dignity did not dismantle the influence of the oligarchs. After the Orange Revolution, competition among various power pyramids reemerged.

The political dominance of the oligarchs was facilitated by the ongoing institutional fragility of Ukraine following its independence, the absence of a comprehensive reform agenda, and the lack of political parties capable of channeling the demands for structural changes from society. After the Orange Revolution, the Yushchenko administration's promotion of national identity domestically and alignment with the West internationally contributed to the increasing polarization of the linguistic issue. The irreconcilability of these two stances is at the core of the conflict that erupted in the spring of 2014. Though described as "hybrid" or "low-intensity," this conflict persisted for eight years, culminating in the Russian invasion of February 24, 2022.

Merlo concludes with an exploration of Ukraine's incomplete journey toward modernity, emphasizing the nation's persistent challenges in its fight for territorial integrity and democratic governance.

In sum, Simona Merlo's *La costruzione dell'Ucraina contemporanea* is essential for those seeking a deeper understanding of Ukraine's complex history and its current geopolitical challenges. Merlo's rigorous analysis and ability to synthesize Ukraine's multifaceted past into a cohesive narrative make this book invaluable for scholars, policymakers, and anyone interested in the region's history and future. The author does not shy away from addressing complex and often controversial topics, making her work a critical contribution to the ongoing discourse surrounding Ukraine's identity, sovereignty, and struggle against external aggression.