Turning public

Historians and public intellectuals in post-Soviet Ukraine

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As scholars, historians must discover the truth about the past, writes Volodymyr Sklokin. But following the Ukrainian intellectual community's transformation after 1991, Ukrainian historians have also begun to find their feet as intellectuals responsible for sustaining a public sphere.

During the last 30 to 40 years, the concept of the public intellectual has become the subject of a heated debate in western Europe and North America. Revived interest in this relatively old phenomenon was related on the one hand to the realization of its peculiar importance in the age of mass liberal democracy and, on the other, to the growing conviction among some scholars that the concept of the public intellectual, or at least an important type of public intellectual, had entered into decline. Eastern European concern with this issue arose from different historical circumstances. The fall of the communist regimes in 1989-1991 brought about new political, economic and sociocultural conditions that made possible the emergence of a public sphere independent of the government. With this revival of the public sphere, the public intellectual returned to the stage of public life in eastern European countries. Thus, eastern European researchers’ interest in this phenomenon was stimulated on the one hand by the public intellectual’s return to the region and, on the other, by the concurrent decline of another traditional historical actor – the eastern European intelligentsia.

In this article, I explore one aspect of this Eastern European transformation. I focus on Ukrainian historians who, after the fall of the Soviet Union, started to play the role of the public intellectual. Such a perspective allows us, on the one hand, to understand better the specificity of the general transformation of Ukrainian academic history writing after 1991, in particular the changing character of its relationships with the authorities and society, and, on the other, to take a closer look at public intellectual work as it emerged in Ukraine after the attainment of independence. In order to achieve this, I first review the general debate on public intellectuals and the intelligentsia that has taken place in Ukraine during last twenty years. I then analyze the participation of Ukrainian historians in public intellectual work, trying to delineate its different genres and approaches. I conclude with an attempt to conceptualize of an approach to public-intellectual work that
seems to me to be especially fruitful.

Before launching into the substance of my argument it is worth noting that there is no agreement among today’s scholars concerning the definition of the public intellectual. And this is quite natural, because in this case one deals with a sphere of social life that might be described and conceptualized from different perspectives. Simplifying, one might say that there exist two main approaches to this problem: the normative approach, which attempts to define intellectuals in terms of desired or expected characteristics; and the functional approach, which attempts to conceptualize intellectuals as actually existing actors and milieus distinguished according to their social roles.

In this study, I deploy an eclectic approach. At the heart of this approach lies an understanding of the nature of public-intellectual activity proposed by the US scholar Richard A. Posner. However, it is supplemented by a typology of the public intellectual based on ideological criteria, as well as by selected elements of classification schemes of public-intellectual work proposed by Michel Foucault and Zygmunt Bauman.

Posner defines the intellectual as a person who “applies general ideas to matters of public concern, working from the top down, theorizing about the abuses, corruptions, injustices he has discovered.” In turn, by “public intellectual”, he understands an intellectual who opines to an educated public in an accessible way on questions informed by a political or ideological concern. [1] In his approach – and this is especially important for the Ukrainian case – the intellectual is not identified with the intelligentsia or “knowledge workers” in general. A representative of the intelligentsia, in order to be classified as an intellectual, must have an interest in ideas, and these ideas must have a general character and a political or ideological cast. The person who possesses these characteristics is an intellectual, but he becomes a public intellectual only when he expresses these ideas to a general audience in an accessible way. In the case of historians or other academics, this means that in order to be classified as a public intellectual, they must consciously address not (only) specialists in their own field or discipline but a broader audience of educated people.

Posner distinguishes between nine main genres of public-intellectual work: [2] self-popularizing; own-field policy proposing; real-time commentary; prophetic commentary; general social criticism; specific social criticism; social reform; politically inflected literary criticism; and political satire. He also identifies different forms of public intellectual activity: an article in an intellectual magazine; a newspaper column; an op-ed piece; a book review; an appearance on a radio or television talk show; participation in a teach-in; and so on. At the same time, Posner tends to identify genres of public intellectual work with specific types of public intellectuals (for example, he mentions “the commentator on current events” and “the critic of social trends” [3]) This, in my opinion, is not the best strategy. That is why I supplement Posner’s classification with a typology of public intellectuals based on ideological criteria.

Three main types of public intellectuals might be distinguished here: conservative, liberal and leftist. Diverging views on the nature of society and ways of its desired development lies at the heart of this classification. Whereas conservative intellectuals tend to see society and nation in organicist and primordialist categories, an atomistic and constructivist understanding of society is more characteristic of liberal and leftist ones.
Conservative intellectuals seek to preserve the integrity of society, its collective memory and traditions, or to return to some “golden age” of its existence. Liberal and leftist intellectuals, on the contrary, promote the modernization of society; with the former geared toward securing the fullest individual autonomy and freedom, and the latter toward broadening the scope of social justice.

How to examine public-intellectual work? Different approaches are possible. I adopt the approach developed by the German-American intellectual historian Jan-Werner Müller, the author of a brilliant monograph on the intellectual life in post-war Germany. Müller proposes concentrating attention on four main elements: [4]

- individual trajectories of intellectuals;
- generational experience;
- key concepts, which determined the character of the debate;
- intellectual field.

While the first three components hardly require additional explanation, the meaning of the last one should be clarified in advance. The concept of the intellectual field had originally been introduced by Pierre Bourdieu. I borrow this concept from Muller who slightly modifies its meaning. In his view, the intellectual field refers to “a systematic and historically specific structure of intellectual orthodoxies and heterodoxies”, as well as the institutional basis of newspapers, journals, magazines, websites and broadcasts which supports it. [5] According to Bourdieu and Muller, this concept draws our attention to the antagonistic nature of intellectual exchange and ideational context of specific claims and debates.

Debating “public intellectuals” in Ukraine

The Ukrainian debate on the fate of the intelligentsia and intellectuals in the post-Soviet period – which was neither intense, nor did it involve many participants – demonstrates nevertheless a widespread assumption about the decline of the intelligentsia in independent Ukraine. This assumption is mostly implicit and becomes apparent in the absence of the word “intelligentsia” in most of the texts that attempt to describe and evaluate the transformations of the Ukrainian intellectual community after 1991. Instead, various authors have actively used a new term for the Ukrainian intellectual landscape: “intellectual”. In this regard, the following declaration by Mykhailo Minakov, philosopher and a participant in the debate, seems symptomatic:

Speaking of the symptomatic character of the word “intellectual”, I mean that the term “intelligentsia” today has disappeared amidst the tangle of the Ukrainian landscape, and has become a part of the dumb world “beneath us”. The representative of the intelligentsia in our situation is a figure of suppression, a sphere of avoidance in the lexicon and in thinking. This, surely, does not mean there are no representatives of the intelligentsia among us, but rather it is evidence for the disappearance of the intelligentsia that used to rest on the constant doubts of its members in the foundations and constant reminder of its own existence. The representatives of the intelligentsia are alive, but the intelligentsia has died. [6]
The same tendency can be discerned in other countries of the region. For instance, Serguei Oushakine speaks of the withering of the intelligentsia in Russia and Eastern Europe after the fall of state socialism. He contends that under the Soviet regime, the intelligentsia that had no real control over cultural production and circulation repositioned itself as a moral elite. In his opinion, for the Soviet intelligentsia (both opposed and loyal to the regime), what was important was not so much adherence to some concrete set of moral values, but the articulation of the importance and timelessness of an ethical stance as such. Thereby, “articulating a promise of morality in an immoral society” became the main function of the intelligentsia in late socialism. However, after the break-up of the Soviet regime, both the political and social situation and the patterns of cultural production have changed. As Oushakine points out,

Highly fragmented and diversified, the new educated classes in post-socialist Eastern Europe choose strategies of professional existence and forms of cultural involvement that have little in common with the two-century-long history of east European intelligentsia. In turn, increasingly differentiated post-socialist societies seem to be more concerned with the pragmatics of their social and economic restructuring rather than with the cultural or ideological homogenization that the intelligentsia traditionally offered [...]. the disappearance of norms, values and practices cultivated and defended by the intelligentsia goes hand in hand with the disappearance of the intelligentsia as a distinctive social group.

It is worth noting that not all researchers support this view of the definitive decline and disappearance of the intelligentsia. However, it was the term “intellectuals” that appeared at the centre of the Ukrainian public debate over the fate of the intellectual community after 1991. The participants of the debate have been using different Western approaches to the classification of public intellectual work in their attempt to describe and conceptualize the Ukrainian situation. The most popular was Foucault’s distinction between “universal” and “concrete” intellectuals, but some authors also invoked the divide between “traditional” and “organic” intellectuals proposed by Antonio Gramsci, as well as between intellectuals-legislators and intellectuals-interpreters posited by Zygmunt Bauman. In this reasoning, after the decline of “traditional” or “universal” intellectuals, who were implicitly or explicitly identified with the intelligentsia, the stage should have been taken by the “concrete” or “organic” intellectuals who do not deal with universal values and meanings but who are to be the bearers of some expert knowledge. What caused anxiety for the majority of commentators was the fact that in the Ukrainian case this scheme did not work, or at least did not work properly. After the disappearance of the “traditional intellectuals”, their place was not taken by “concrete intellectuals”. Or, more precisely, “concrete intellectuals” emerged in Ukraine in the 1990s, but there were few of them and their influence on the wider public was minimal.

**Historians as public intellectuals**

An examination of Ukrainian historians’ participation in public-intellectual activity should take into account at least two perspectives: first, the dynamic of internal changes in academic history-writing, especially in the context of the rethinking of the social relevance of history, and secondly, the general transformation of educated classes or intelligentsia in post-Soviet Ukraine.
Now, when we already know something about the second perspective, let’s turn to the first. At the very outset, it should be mentioned that Ukrainian historians’ views on the social role of their discipline have changed significantly since the fall of the USSR. As far as the Soviet period is concerned, as a result of the successful Stalinization of Ukrainian historiography in the 1920s-1940s, a single dogmatic approach, which might be called “Dialectical Historical Materialism” (DHM), was imposed on Ukrainian historians. It attempted to combine two well-known ideas. The first one, historicist, refers to the role of history in uncovering the shape of human destiny and finds its embodiment in the theory of socio-economic formations. The second one, instrumentalist, treats history as an instrument serving immediate political objectives. According to DHM, history is a product of class consciousness, and therefore should serve as a “weapon in the class struggle.” In the official interpretation, this meant that history served to legitimize the Soviet order and new initiatives of Communist party authorities.

DHM led to significant ideologization of academic historiography and turned historians from scholars into “fighters on the ideological front”, “propagandists” or “priests in the Marxist parish” as it was dubbed by Leonid Zashkilniak. At the same time, the official approach tolerated and even encouraged the “nationalization” of history, primarily, in the Soviet-Russian, but to some extent also in a Ukrainian, vein. This tendency turned out to be very important in the period of Perestroika and after the break-up of the USSR.

A general tendency toward a limited de-ideologization of social and intellectual life in the 1960s-1980s found its embodiment in the historiography in the formation of the so-called “ideology of professionalism.” This ideology appeared more pronounced in the intellectual capitals of the USSR – Moscow and Leningrad, but it gained some currency also in Ukraine. The ideology of professionalism was a defense reaction against the excessive ideologization of the DHM. However, it opposed DHM not through competition on theoretical grounds and proposing alternative views on the nature and functions of history, but through abandonment of theory as such and concentrating instead on thorough factual studies and source publications. According to Nikolay Koposov, who introduced this category, the “ideology of professionalism”, on the one hand, had positive consequences because it helped to preserve the foundations of scholarship in historiography. On the other, it definitively abandoned the sphere of intellectual life to the official dogmatic philosophy. By the sphere of intellectual life he means the sphere where “comparison and initial philosophic interpretation of the results of study of separate disciplines as well as mental attitudes engendered by the social experience” take place. [12]

Thus, both official Soviet policy toward scholarship and the “ideology of professionalism” contributed to the de-intellectualization of academic history-writing, which found itself in a state of crisis, unable to reflect upon real social problems and challenges.

This crisis did not disappear together with the Soviet system which it provoked. At the beginning of the 1990s, the majority of historians had given up DHM and embraced quickly and uncritically another dogmatic approach – the national paradigm. Like DHM, this approach was teleological, i.e. it encouraged historians to look for the “real” logic or structure of the past and found it in the progressive narrative of the national history. On the other hand, it also subordinated history writing to political objectives: historic legitimization of the newly established national state and affirmation of the national
identity and patriotism of its citizens. This approach, which might be named affirmative, quickly became a new orthodoxy in Ukrainian historiography.

However, it was almost immediately contested by the two competing views. The first, a “history for its own sake” approach, is, in fact, an improved version of the “ideology of professionalism”. It contends that a thorough and accurate study of the past as an end in itself is the primary goal of historians. Such investigations enrich us intellectually and spiritually, and simply give us pleasure, and this constitutes the main function of history. As Natalia Yakovenko, the main promoter of this approach, puts it, a historian should avoid examination of today’s world, because that undermines his objectivity, leaving this task to sociologists and political scientists. Academic history writing should likewise shun educational and other practical functions, leaving them to the school and popular histories. [13]

The second view, that emerged in opposition to the national paradigm might be termed the critical approach. Its proponents do not reject the necessity of a thorough and accurate study of the past, but at the same time believe that historians also have an important duty towards the present, namely – to reveal and deconstruct contemporary historical myths, stereotypes and prejudices, to counteract political manipulation and abuse of history. Historians who work in this vein, like for instance Heorhii Kasianov and Oleksii Tolochko, do not reject practical functions of history writing, but believe that only a negative practical role in this function is possible, whereas any positive role might potentially lead to the abuse of history. The monograph “Danse Macabre: The Famine Of 1932-1933 in Politics, Mass Consciousness, and History Writing (1980s-early 2000s)” (2010) by Heorhii Kasianov might serves as a good example of this view.

Summing up this short overview of current approaches, one can see, on the one hand, a denial of the practical functions for history (“history for its own sake”). On the other, is the recognition of them as the most important, but in a way that leads to political instrumentalization of history and contradicts the basic principles of historical inquiry (affirmative history). And there is also the approach that recognizes in historical inquiry only negative practical function (critical). The question whether it is possible to combine the practical social functions of history writing with the maintenance of basic principles of historical inquiry remains open. In fact, the question hasn’t been raised at all. This might be explained – and this is one of my key points – by the fact that it has been considered in too narrow context. As I will try to demonstrate in the reminder of my lecture, an analysis of the participation of Ukrainian historians in public-intellectual activity might provide a necessary context for answering this important question.

So, let’s now turn to this issue, and let’s look more closely at the participation of Ukrainian historians in public-intellectual activity. We may start by saying that relatively few Ukrainian historians have attempted the role of a public intellectual since 1991. In my estimation, the number does not exceed 20 persons, which constitutes about 0.2-0.3 per cent of the Ukrainian academic historical community. Some of these historians might be included into this category only with qualifications. What is probably even more important is that the professional community has been rather critical of those historians who dared to try this new role, treating public-intellectual work as popularization, bowing to fashion, and in some cases as betraying scholarly ideals.

The reasons for this a relatively low percentage lie, first of all, in the historians
themselves, in their unreadiness and unwillingness to speak directly to a lay audience. One must remember the devastating effects of Sovietization on academic history writing. Moreover, after the rejection of the Soviet historiographical master narrative at the beginning of the 1990s, the majority of historians found themselves disoriented and unready to undertake the function of experts for a general audience. Meanwhile, another part of the profession simply thought that academic historian should address only their peers and did not consider the option of direct communication with a lay audience at all.

On the other hand, the weakness of the institutional base of the Ukrainian intellectual field played here its negative role. This was especially true for the 1990s, when the decline of the media market inherited from the USSR was accompanied by a severe economic crisis. This situation has gradually improved in the 2000s, especially due to the rapid development of online media. However, compared to such neighbouring countries as Poland and Russia, the Ukrainian media market still may be characterized as weak, especially in the segment of intellectual or cultural magazines that is especially important for our topic. Nevertheless, a general positive tendency is clear – together with the strengthening of the Ukrainian media market in the late 1990s and 2000s, participation by Ukrainian historians in public intellectual activity has demonstrated a steady growth.

Those historians who can be identified as public intellectuals as a rule address historical topics that are the subjects of their scholarly interest. However, in the period under consideration here, these topics, such as the Great Famine of 1932-1933, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army of the WWII period, or the Holocaust, have been not only scholarly issu, but also important identity problems frequently employed in political struggles. Accordingly, if historians in their publications written for the general audience take into account this ideological or political dimension, I treat them as part of public-intellectual activity.

Using the classification of genres of public intellectual work proposed by Posner, one might say that “self-popularizing” and “own-field policy proposing” were the most widespread genres in which Ukrainian historian-public intellectuals worked. Stanislav Kulchytsky’s articles on the Great Famine for the newspaper “The Day”, Volodymyr Viatrovych’s blogs about the OUN-UPA for the websites zaxid.net and Ukrain’ska Pravda and John-Paul Himka’s articles on the OUN-UPA and the Holocaust in different newspapers and magazines serve as examples of this tendency. These two genres often overlap with “real-time commentary”, in which an author comments on an ongoing debate over a certain historical event – for instance, on attempts to commemorate it or on changes in the government’s historical policy of the authorities concerning it.

Compared to “self-popularizing” and “own-field policy proposing”, the Ukrainian historians much more rarely chose other genres, such as “real-time commentary”, “general or specific social criticism”, or “social reform” to opine on topics related to current rather than historical events or processes. My observations indicate that only six academic historians (Yaroslav Dashkevych, Yaroslav Hrytsak, Vasyl Rasevych, Oleksii Sokyrko, Andriy Portnov and Oleksandr Zaitsev) dared to address such issues, and for only five of them (Yaroslav Dashkevych, Yaroslav Hrytsak, Vasyl Rasevych, Anriy Portnov, Oleksii Sokyrko) did the texts written in this vein constitute an important part of their contribution to the public debate.
The classification based on genres is rather formal, however, and remains insufficient if we want to discern a link between historians’ participation in public intellectual work and the rethinking of the social relevance of history in post-Soviet Ukraine. That is why I complement it with a typology based on ideological criteria that distinguishes among three main types of public intellectuals: conservative, liberal and leftist.

Conservative intellectuals in the Ukrainian case have been exclusively advocates of affirmative history, interested in the promotion and protection of a certain dogmatic version of Ukrainian history. Yaroslav Dashkevych (1926-2010) is probably the most characteristic example of a public intellectual of this type. In the 1990s and 2000s, Dashkevych was one of the most authoritative Ukrainian historians and headed the Lviv branch of the Institute of Archeography and Source Studies at the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences. During Soviet rule, he was primarily a specialist in the history of the Armenian community in Galicia in the Early Modern period. Because his parents were treated by the Soviet authorities as nationalist “enemies of the people” and because of his own dissident views, he was not allowed to work in academic institutions and spent six years in prison camps. After the fall of the USSR he wrote on a broader range of issues in Ukrainian history, including the peculiarities of Ukrainian nation-building, numerous biographical studies, investigations in source criticism and other auxiliary historical disciplines and so on. At the beginning of the 1990s Dashkevych began to opine on ongoing ideological or political controversies for the Lviv newspaper Ratusha as well as other newspapers and magazines. These articles were mostly related to controversies over historical events or processes, such as the role of the USSR in Ukrainian history, the OUN-UPA, and Ukrainian-Polish and Ukrainian-Jewish relations. However, he also commented on ongoing political events and put forth proposals for government policy in areas as removed from his main scholarly interests as, for instance, inter-ethnic relations in contemporary Ukraine or the political status of Crimea.

The word “truth” was central for Dashkevych’s contribution to the public debate. He often repeated that the historians’ main task is to tell the truth regardless of any difficulties and obstacles. He famously wrote, “I think that the greatest patriotism is to write and to tell one’s own people the truth” and “I was a bad historian because I tried to write and speak the truth – the truth about Ukraine and the Ukrainian nation – not only to foreigners, but also to my own people”. [14]

After reading these claims, it is logical to ask what Dashkevych understood by the word “truth”. I contend that the Lviv historian by this meant not a factual truth, but a certain dogma or higher truth in the terminology of the philosopher Bernard Williams, [15] and the analysis of Dashkevych’s contribution to the public debate proves this interpretation:

Regardless of different attempts at philosophizing, historical truth is one and single, and scholarly research methods exist in order to learn it. This is why haggling with different “alternative” truths has nothing in common with historical science. Therefore Ukraine’s history textbooks must be based on historical truth. The main idea of the textbooks – the statehood of Ukraine and the Ukrainian nation, which was achieved due to the people’s long-term struggle for independence. [16]

Elsewhere he writes:
In spite of all this, I believe that the true history of Ukraine, the history of the struggle of the Ukrainian nation against occupiers and collaborators of all hues for the construction of a truly independent Ukrainian state, will be written and will become the reference book for every honest politician, every honest statesman, every Ukrainian. [17]

As can be seen from these quotations, the truth of which Dashkevych speaks is a narrative of Ukrainian history that refers to the struggle of the Ukrainian nation for its own state against occupiers and collaborators. This was Dashkevych’s higher truth, and most of his texts written in the role of public intellectual aimed at promoting or defending it. From this perspective, it comes as no surprise that in the Lviv historian’s articles together with the key word “truth” one often encounters mentions of “falsifications,” “stereotypes,” and “myths” – the promotion of truth was closely interrelated with its protection from errors or distortions.

On the one hand, one might say that there were many good reasons for such a position. In the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, historians had to struggle with numerous Soviet and then Russian imperial historical myths that tended to reject the very existence of Ukrainian history or proposed distorted pictures of historical events. The problem lies, however, in the fact the despite his frequent mentions of “true evidence,” Dashkevych most often opposed one dogma with another. This, in turn, led to a proliferation of foes in his writing: the Soviet and Russian historical myths were soon supplemented by the Polish historical narrative, liberal democracy, postmodernism, and globalization, each of which viewed as threatening “true” Ukrainian history and the “correct” development of Ukraine in the present.

Summing up this short analysis of the Lviv historian’s views, one can say that texts written by Dashkevych in his role of public intellectual affirmed Ukrainian national identity and patriotism, but in a very narrow and exclusive form. Instead, they contribute very little to the understanding of those problems and challenges which Ukrainian society is facing. In fact, Dashkevych, like other conservative intellectuals, had acted in the paradigm introduced by the East European intelligentsia of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, seeing his main function in upholding of the ideological consolidation of society – in this case, through its cultural Ukrainization. Using the distinction between intellectuals-legislators and intellectuals-interpreters proposed by Bauman, one might say that conservative intellectuals might be included in the former group, because they seek to set certain ideological and cultural standards which the rest of society should follow. Taking into account the condition of contemporary society, even contemporary Ukrainian society – which is already quite emancipated, and expects from the intellectuals not general lectures but recipes for solving concrete problems and challenges – the efficiency of this approach raises serious doubts.

The situation with liberal and leftist intellectuals is different. However, if we consider only Ukrainian academic historians, we have to deal only with the former category. The new leftist intellectuals have been quite active in Ukraine during last several years, but as yet they are represented by philosophers, sociologists, specialists in cultural studies, writers, but not historians.
Those historians who can be identified as liberal public intellectuals have shown different strategies and motivations for their participation in public-intellectual work. In a similar way, the quality of their contributions varies greatly. However, we can distinguish two main tendencies. One group of public intellectuals, who deal primarily with historical topics, is concerned with unmasking the myths and stereotypes of the national paradigm. The desire to expose and correct errors of the traditional narrative of Ukrainian history and collective memory was often the main force driving their work. As a rule, they limit themselves to critique and deconstruction, sometimes proposing ways of improving the situation or possible variants of historical policy in a certain sphere. Among this group have been those whom Mychailo Minakov once called “cynicist intellectuals”, i.e. intellectuals who question certain ideals and values, and do not propose anything in their stead. I do not go into details here, suffice it to say for now that both “critical” and “cynicist” liberal intellectuals have deserted the tradition of East European intelligentsia because their activity aimed at questioning those communities which the intelligentsia sought to create and strengthen. Rather they fall under the rubric of Foucault’s “specific” intellectuals as they use their expert knowledge for criticism of the dominant regimes of truth. No doubt, this role has been necessary and important, but probably it was not sufficient, taking into account Ukraine’s situation of “transition” which required from intellectuals in the first instance positive solutions.

Another group of liberal intellectuals has come closer to achieving this goal. These intellectuals did not limit their contribution to the public debate to strictly historical themes, like the Great Famine, the OUN-UPA, communist repressions and so on. They also attempted to opine on current events or processes of political or ideological significance, putting them in a wider context or showing their historical genealogy. Most often, they worked in such genres as “real time commentary”, “specific and general social criticism” or “social reform”. Such historians as Vasyl Rasevych, Oleksij Sokyrko, Andrij Portnov can be included into this group, but it is Yaroslav Hrytsak who may be called the most consistent and interesting representative of this tendency.

Hrytsak is currently a professor of history at the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv. Initially he was a specialist in the social history of nineteenth century Eastern Galicia. He became widely known in Ukraine on the basis of his innovative synthesis of modern Ukrainian history [18] and numerous studies in the intellectual history of Ukraine, in particular a thorough and brilliant biography of Ivan Franko, a leading Ukrainian writer intellectual of the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. [19] Hrytsak began to address a broader audience in the late 1990s with contributions to the intellectual journal Krytyka. After the Orange Revolution, he opened a blog on the popular website Zaxid.net and wrote columns and articles for the newspapers Hazeta-po-Ukrains’ky and Express. Polemical or popularizing texts devoted to such historical topics as the OUN-UPA, the Holocaust, the Great Famine of 1932-1933, Ukrainian national memory and so on constituted a considerable part of his contribution to the public debate. At the same time, he has quite often commented on current events or processes of political or ideological significance such as the Orange Revolution, manifestations of anti-Semitism in Ukrainian society, current changes in the Ukrainian political scene and so on. In these texts, Hrytsak sometimes combined “real-time commentary” with “general social criticism” and/or “social reform”, putting current events in a broader comparative context and showing their historical genealogy, trying to expand the horizon of the debate and to show another, more productive way of discussing the problem.
A characteristic example of this approach is Hrytsak’s contribution to the public debate on the reasons for the failures of political, social, and economic transformations in independent Ukraine. In a series of articles written for the website Zaxid.net and then republished in his book “Life, Death, and other Troubles”, [20] and summarized and revised in his most recent book “26 Per Cent, or How to Overcome History”, [21] the Lviv historian concludes that the traditional approach of explaining Ukrainian problems by means of the varying national identities of different regions doesn’t work because the majority of the population in southern and eastern Ukraine doesn’t think in national categories. In his view, the critical concept for understanding the specificities of the Ukrainian situation is not identities but rather values. On the basis of existing sociological surveys on values in Ukraine and other countries, Hrytsak shows that both western and eastern Ukraine are dominated by the values of a closed society. This fact constitutes one of the obstacles to a successful transformation. The author then uses the classic historian’s toolkit to explain how the specific historical development of Ukraine led to this situation, and at the same time, assesses the opportunities for change in Ukraine that his analysis reveals. [22]

It is worth mentioning that, as far as I know, Hrytsak is the only contemporary Ukrainian historian who has attempted to reformulate the role of the intelligentsia and intellectuals in Ukraine’s current situation. In his view, the main specificity of the Ukrainian intelligentsia is their close attachment to the articulation of the nation and nation-building, which gave them a sense of important mission, but seriously limited the intellectual component of their activity. Now, the situation has changed, Ukrainians do have their own state, and intellectuals should “overcome the force of national gravity”. The primary goal of intellectuals today is “to articulate the new situation in accordance with changing circumstances of society”. Debunking of old or old-fashioned myths that hamper the society’s development is an important part of this articulation. However, he specifies that the mere deconstruction of traditional biases and myths in this case is not enough, because “deconstruction without construction borders on irresponsibility.” [23] Hrytsak also calls attention to the important obstacles for public-intellectual work in Ukraine. Due to the small number of public intellectuals, they must – much more often than their Western-European or North-American colleagues – go beyond the sphere of their scholarly expertise, which affects negatively the quality of their contribution to public debate. Another constraint is the underdevelopment of the Ukrainian public sphere which forces to combine public-intellectual work with development of institutions which support the public sphere and with making a public as such. [24]

It seems to me that Hrytsak’s diagnosis is, in principle, correct; however, it requires some additional elaboration. We have to distinguish between the duties and responsibility of a historian as a scholar and as an intellectual. As a scholar, he must, first of all, establish the truth about the past, whereas, as an intellectual, within the limits of his professional expertise, he is co-responsible for the creation and maintenance of the public sphere in which a debate on politics is conducted. This debate leads to the formation of critical public opinion, which should constitute the basis for taking political decisions. Politics is understood here in a broad (ancient Greek) sense as a debate about living in a common world. I recognize that it may sound a bit elitist, but still I have to emphasize this point: In principle, all citizens can and should take part in this debate, but such categories as scholars, writers, journalists – because they are better prepared for this – are entrusted with the special task of moderating it.
As far as academic historians are concerned, their role might be the following. Because many of the problems and challenges faced by societies have important historical and comparative dimensions, many of them unknown to politicians and ordinary citizens, historians might focus on demonstrating these broader contexts. From this perspective, the main task of historians is not to make correct predictions about future developments or to find ready-made solutions for current problems, but to formulate new, more appropriate questions that enable the public to expand their horizons and discover other, possibly more productive, ways of discussing problems.

Returning to the question to what extent historians’ participation in public-intellectual work reflects the dynamic of the internal historiographic discussion on the social relevance of history, one might note that the approach represented by Hrytsak and other liberal intellectuals might constitute an important alternative to the dominant currents. Despite the fact that neither Hrytsak nor other Ukrainian historians have yet provided a full-fledged theoretical argument for this approach, one can clearly discern a potential interesting alternative both to affirmative and critical (deconstructionist) histories and to the “history for its own sake” approach to the past. The historian who works in this new vein performs important positive functions in contemporary society while upholding the core principles of historical inquiry at the same time. Another important feature of this approach is that it does not demand a practical program for all subfields of historical studies. It acknowledges that there are topics and problems generated by the internal logic of the development of academic history writing. At the same time, it encourages historians to pay attention to those themes and problems that are important for contemporary society. However, in both cases the researcher should uphold the core principles of historical inquiry, even if in the case of critical public history his work might more often take the form of historical synthesis than of original research.

A theoretical basis for this approach can be found in the recent works of those western European and American historians who are concerned with the diminishing social relevance of academic history-writing in contemporary Western societies. The concepts of “critical applied” or “critical public” history by British theorist of history John Tosh is of particular interest in this regard. [25] Tosh speaks about the crucial importance of “critical public history” for the normal functioning of liberal democracy, and this point seems especially relevant in the case of countries undergoing transition from state socialism to full-fledged democracy. For historians themselves, this approach provides an opportunity to find their place in a new globalized world in which the traditional nation-state has lost its former importance, without betraying the core principles of historical inquiry.

**Footnotes**


2. Ibid., 36

3. Ibid., 6

4. Jan-Werner Müller, *German Intellectuals, Unification and National Identity*, Yale
5. Ibid., 13-15


8. Ibid., 244-5.

9. Ibid., 245


16. Dashkevych, op. cit, 366-7

17. Ibid., p. 297


21. Yaroslav Hrytsak, 26-i protsent, abo iak podolaty istoriiu Kyiv, 2014


24. Ibid., 24


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