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KNOWLEDGE AND OVERCOMING OF “SOVIET MAN”

(a peer-review of the monograph: Soviet Identity: Formation – Rooting – Deconstruction: Collective Monograph / Scientific Editor O. A. Koliastruk. Vinnytsia: Tvory, 2025, 352 p.)

ПІЗНАННЯ І ПОДОЛАННЯ “РАДЯНСЬКОЇ ЛЮДИНИ”

(рецензія на книгу: Радянська ідентичність: формування – вкорінення – деконструкція: Колективна монографія / за наук. ред. О. А. Коляструк. Вінниця: Твори, 2025, 352 с.)

The formation issues and features of the soviet identity have long been in the focus of the Ukrainian historians, anthropologists, psychologists and linguists, who comprehend the influence of soviet totalitarianism and the socio-cultural environment on several generations of “the soviet people”. In April 2025, the ninth all-Ukrainian scientific seminar “Everyday Life: Visions and Senses” was held in Vinnytsia, the materials of which formed the basis of the monograph “Soviet Identity: Formation – Rooting – Deconstruction”. Its authors are famous Ukrainian historians and cultural scholars, and the editor is Professor Olha Koliastruk, one of the most famous modern researchers of the Soviet everyday life.

Structurally, the monograph consists of four chapters. Chapter 1 “Formation of “the Soviet Man” and Formation of the Soviet Identity” contains six subsections, which deal with terminological, historiosophical, and conceptual theoretical aspects, as well as practical mechanisms for formatting the soviet model of “a new man”. Olena Stiazkina emphasized that in the 1910s – 1920s the term “sovietism” in Ukraine was not identical to “soviet” and was even condemned as a separate movement. From the mid-1920s, everything Moscow/Russian began to be identified with “soviet” (“radiansky”), and after World War II these concepts actually became synonymous with “Russian” (p. 30).

In the next paragraph, Larysa Yakubova emphasizes that the soviet identity is still manifested among the Ukrainians and gives examples of people who knowingly committed treason during the Russo-Ukrainian war, switching to the enemy’s side and motivating their act with the desire to revive the USSR. One of them is Hennady Paraskevych, a sixty-year-old military pensioner (a doctor). He was not at the top of power and is not the son of the soviet general. It is a man who lived in military garrisons, served in Belarus, Ukraine, eventually ended up in the Russo-Ukrainian war, and has served in the Armed Forces of Ukraine since 2022, supposedly saving the lives of Ukrainian soldiers. And two years later, he was exposed as the FSB agent who gave away the positions of Ukrainian troops. L. Yakubova called him “an absolutely classic mold of the soviet person”. In his interview, without any emotions, he said that he liked “that project” (i.e. the USSR), he felt like an organic part of it. He worked for the Russian Federation not for money, but “at the call of the heart”. On the one hand, the man treated soldiers, saved their lives, and on the other – guided missiles at the positions of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. The motives are voiced by H. Paraskevych as follows: “I am a supporter of the former great country. I started serving in it and decided to continue serving. I had no selfish goal” (pp. 34–35).

L. Yakubova notices the phenomenon of “undying sovietism” not only in Ukraine or Russia, but also in the West, where there are many supporters of the “fantastical/fictional soviet system”. One of these, in her opinion, is Professor Rüdiger Kipke, a co-author of the Russian book “A Brief History of the Crimea” (Moscow, 2022). In this book, he relies on the Soviet and Russian historiography exclusively, writing about the Crimea as an integral part of Russia, condemning the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine. In general, he carefully outlined the Kremlin’s version of the annexation of the Crimea in 2014 (pp. 38–41). L. Yakubova notes quite rightly the following: in order to accelerate “the recovery of Ukrainians”, we must call everything we have in our historiographical work in adequate, human language. In addition, to re-examine the algorithms of sovietization used by the Bolsheviks to master the mass consciousness, the methods and tools of constructing the mass “sovitska – radianska – sovietska” person (p. 43).

According to L. Yakubova, only in the 1930s, during the Holodomor and total repressions, Ukraine was forced to enter a dichotomy regime in all social strata: if you want to live, be silent, if you want to live, cooperate. Therefore, the so-called “Great Break”, which meant complete collectivization and Stalinist industrialization, was actually a radical change in the foundations of being, the paradigm of existence (p. 45). Dualism/Manicheanism is an inherited program of thinking of the (post)Soviet man. The foundations of mental and value ambivalence are clear: Ukraine and Ukrainians are still in their post-totalitarian transit – a process of mental transformation, splitting of the previous totalitarian mental/cognitive matrix (p. 51).

In her paragraph the researcher Alla Kyrydon analyzed the concept of “habitus of the Soviet” (according to the concept of P. Bourdieu) and stated that since the independence of Ukraine, “a residual of sovietness” had been observed. Sovietness was not only a political, but also linguistic, cultural, and ideological phenomenon. Therefore, when the state and political system ceased to exist in 1991, linguistic, cultural, and ideological phenomena remained in one or another environment. Sociological surveys often showed remnants of the Soviet thinking among the Ukrainians, 46% of whom regretted the collapse of the USSR as early as 2010. A. Kyrydon suggested defining “sovietness” as a chronoimage of a unique socio-cultural identity and the social matrix of the society existence during the corresponding era (p. 76). Therefore, she developed the periodization of the Soviet person formation: Stage I (the 1920s – the 1930s) – the initial stage of the formation of the Soviet person; Stage II (the late 1930s – the 1950s) – the transformation of sovietism into a stable norm; Stage III (the 1960s – the mid-1980s) – the modification of sovietism in accordance with the period of stagnation with the corresponding characteristics; Stage IV (the mid-1980s – 1991) – sovietism in the context of radical socio-political and socio-economic transformations; sovietism in the context of “cognitive dissonance”; Stage V (from 1991) – rudimentary and latent sovietism/soviet, variability of the characteristics of “sovietism” and formatting of the Soviet chronotype in unison with the nature of events (pp. 78–79).

The historian Olha Koliastruk also focused on the mechanisms of “forming the Soviet person”. According to her, the “homo sovieticus” project in the early soviet era existed simultaneously as an ideological appeal, a poster slogan, and an experimental model; the entire propaganda system, educational and cultural institutions, as well as power structures, worked to materialize it, which were supposed to ensure compliance with the given parameters and prevent unwanted deviations. The soviet person was constructed from above in the course of military and repressive selection, contrary to the natural laws of self-identification, when a person has the right and the possibility of choice (pp. 110–111). In the mid-1930s, the official ideology “soviet people” appeared, and from the mid-1950s, the number of published periodicals in the title of which this concept was used increased. A new wave of using the concept of “soviet people” in official discourse occurred in the second half of the 1970s in connection with the discussion of the new Constitution (pp. 118–119).

A historian Serhiy Kornovenko published the paragraph on the spread of H. Shchedrovtsky’s “organizational and activity games” in the USSR in the late 1970s and early 1990s. According to H. Shchedrovtsky, game-based modelling practices could be useful in solving urgent problems of the time. The field for the application of “organizational and activity games” (OAG) became problematic issues that occurred at soviet enterprises of that time and were related to their effective management, their competitiveness, the election of directors, and the training of managerial personnel at various levels. The services of methodologists were actively used by enterprise managers, representatives of the soviet authorities, etc. In particular, orders for the games came from Moscow leaders, directors of individual factories, economic institutes, and regional executive committees of the CPSU (p. 128). As S. Kornovenko notes, the OAG became a tool for implementing H. Shchedrovtsky’s plans to infiltrate the government. In fact, during the games, methodologists got to know the then state-party and economic Soviet nomenclature, forming their new worldview and thinking (p. 130). Owing to this, a cohort of people was formed who, after the collapse of the USSR, continued to implement H. Shchedrovtsky’s methodology in the form of political technologies in the post-soviet space. They managed to enter the political establishment of

post-soviet Russia, significantly influencing the formation of its system of power, ideology, etc. In the 1990s and early 2000s, they consulted and shaped the thinking of such politicians of the Russian Federation as B. Nemtsov, S. Kyriyenko, I. Khakamada, A. Chubais, V. Putin, etc. They participated in the political campaigns of Yeltsin’s Russia. In the second half of the 1990s and early 2000s, some of them formulated and developed “the Russian world” as the ideology of the aggressor (pp. 132–133).

In Chapter 2 “Soviet Socialization of the Personality: Ways, Tools, Consequences” Tetiana Boriak analyzed the phenomenon of “non-truth” as a component of soviet totalitarianism and social engineering deeply and comprehensively. The author writes the following: “*The non-truth* has become a cover for crimes and totalitarianism, a means of involving the widest possible circle of people in criminal activity against other members of society restructuring the mental settings of tens of millions. *The non-truth* was to fill the void created by the destruction of family ties, religious beliefs, and traditional notions of the Ukrainians with ideology and newspeak” (p. 175). In essence, a simulacrum of reality was formed, which replaced the real world for voluntary and forced participants in the soviet party’s social engineering.

Of a particular interest is Nani Hohokhia’s section “Political Mobilization of Children to Participate in Mass Campaigns of the Soviet Government on the Eve and During the Holodomor”. The author writes about children’s participation in collectivization, the fight against “enemies of the people,” anti-religious measures of the government, and militarization. She notes, however, that not all children in Ukrainian villages during collectivization were a weak-willed material for Bolshevik upbringing. Numerous reports on political sentiment in the village recorded the existence of “anti-soviet sentiments” among children, which the authorities attributed to the “class-hostile influences” of the family. Cases were described when children “voted in whole groups and schools against collectivization, refused to go to classes “in protest against the demand that their parents fulfill the state obligations they had assumed for grain procurement,” participated in speeches against the authorities, led anti-soviet demonstrations, broke windows in village councils, and dismantled stockpiles together with adults (pp. 181–182).

The author describes the involvement of children in political campaigns and agitation during elections. Children were mobilized for propaganda and agitation work: they drew slogans, decorated polling stations with portraits of leaders, held conversations with parents and neighbours, convincing them to vote for the nominated candidates, telling about the success of the authorities in construction. Children were massively involved in the fight against regalia, and were the members of “The Union of Atheists”. Under the influence of aggressive anti-religious propaganda, the pioneers wrote letters denouncing priests and fellow villagers believers (pp. 185–186). The communist party considered it an even more important goal to mobilize the pioneers for large-scale aggressive processes of collectivization, dispossession, the fight against “stealers of socialist property,” and harvest protection. The most tragic aspect was the participation of children in grain procurement and the campaign “to liquidate kulakism as a class”. At the same time as the grandiose criminal attack on the peasants, the authorities formed in the children’s imagination a negative image of the internal enemy – the “kulak” (pp. 187–188). Examples of exemplary children’s struggle against the kulaks were given in reports on the leadership of the Young Pioneers: in Odesa, Dnipropetrovsk, Kherson, Kharkiv and other regions, the pioneers exposed pits with grain, stopped carts on which the peasants tried to take out and hide grain, brought livestock to the collective farm

that the parents tried to hide, exposed relatives who did not hand over grain, refused to accept relatives until they handed over the grain, under the guise of searching for pigeons, climbed onto neighbours' roofs and found hiding places there, which they reported to local party activists. Denouncing fellow villagers was called "a matter of honour" in the press. In 1932 – 1934, the expansion of "the young watchmen of the Bolshevik harvest" movement reached a large number of children in the republic (p. 192).

As N. Hohokhia notes, by setting children against their fellow villagers and relatives who were looking for opportunities to survive under the terrible conditions of the collectivized village, the authorities drove a wedge between different generations of peasants. To make the choice easier for children, the authorities made sure that the official discourse became dominant, excluding alternative possibilities. Issues of national identity were recognized not only as unimportant, but even harmful. The official totalitarian discourse removed all others from the discursive field. In the first place in the hierarchy of identities of the Ukrainian child, the key signs "soviet child", "faithful Leninist" were placed. Children began to position themselves as sons and daughters of the party, the authorities, the state. The child's identity was most actively created through the image of the enemy using the opposition "friend-enemy", "enemy-friend" (pp. 201–202).

In Chapter 3 "Soviet Man as the Object and Subject of History" Roman Podkur attempted to determine the socio-anthropological parameters of employees of the Soviet state security agencies in the 1920s and 1930s. Opening access to personal files, archival criminal cases, and materials of official investigations into state security employees allowed the author to outline "the socio-anthropological parameters of the Chekists". He recorded the following factors influencing the personality formation of a state security officer: military actions that taught a person to kill, formed the primary features of the "image of the enemy", which were later adjusted and gained a voluminous image; the environment of the party-Soviet apparatus; communist propaganda, membership in the Communist Party; constant demonstration of political loyalty to the first person (the party leader); participation in a patron-client group; career prospects; family, in general, the military-Chekist corporation that controlled not only everyday life of the Chekist, but also his family, since the Chekists were formed together with the system of state terror and were at the same time its element and tool (p. 243).

The historian Oksana Hodovanska analyzed the role of soviet teachers in "the cause of educating a person of communist society". Based on archival materials (primary party organizations in schools of Lviv region of the Ukrainian SSR in the 1940s – 1980s, namely, minutes of meetings and sessions, personal meals, explanatory notes of the CPSU members, reports of komsomol secretaries at party meetings), the author concluded that the soviet teachers as a professional community were carriers of collective subjectivity and, at the same time, were a collective object of practical influence from the totalitarian state and communist ideology. In general, according to the author, the soviet teachers rejected individual subjectivity in favour of collective subjectivity. They preferred to avoid self-presence "in the matter of educating a person in communist society," and avoided conscious connection with themselves in favour of a joint multiple performance, for example, joint discussion of all kinds of school events or joint holding of any school events (p. 255).

In the same section, Natalia Kushka published the study on the self-identification of cultural figures (singers, composers) in the Soviet era (pp. 257–270). Serhiy Slobodianiuk showed the emergence and spread of the Ukrainian national communism as a kind of resistance to the Soviet identity (pp. 271–287).

Chapter 4 “Catalysts of Overcoming and Preservatives of Soviet Identity” focuses on various aspects of the modern Russo-Ukrainian war. Thus, Olena Boriak traces the “sovietness” of the Russian occupiers through the prism of residents’ testimonies of Chernihiv and Kyiv regions, who were under occupation for some time in 2022 (pp. 289–300). Nadiya Honcharenko characterized the problems of preserving Ukraine’s cultural heritage in wartime (pp. 301–322). The methodological paragraph by Natalia Voronchuk is noteworthy, in which the author considers how to explain soviet to high school students as alien. She cites the results of an annual survey of Grade 11 students in one of Kyiv schools. To the question “Do you think that soviet is alien to Ukrainians today?”, the number of positive answers increases every year, which is a very encouraging sign. In 2025, 42% of students answered so (p. 343). Of course, overcoming the soviet identity is possible only through education and upbringing, expanding the study of Ukrainian studies disciplines at school, the scope of which is constantly decreasing due to the reform “New Ukrainian School”.

The analyzed monograph also has some shortcomings inherent in all collective works formed on the basis of thematically similar texts. These shortcomings include the lack of clear objectives and, accordingly, holisticity, coherence and holistic generalizations. We think that Professor Yuri Kahanov, the author of the fundamental work on the construction of the Ukrainian version of “the Soviet person” in the post-Stalin era, should have been invited to the authorship team. Despite everything, the peer-reviewed monograph demonstrates the most pressing problems in understanding the phenomenon of “the Soviet man”, suggests new theoretical and methodological principles of the research, reveals previously little-studied mechanisms of “homo soveticus” formation, and shows the features of its socio-cultural behaviour.

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