
Reviewed by Yevhen Yashchuk (Oxford University)

Published on H-Ukraine (July, 2024)

Commissioned by Francis Kirk (Leibniz Centre for Contemporary History)

Vigorously competing national projects in East Central Europe have left a wealth of sources and potential topics for historians of the region’s nineteenth century to explore. Over the past few decades, a steady stream of works on nation building, national consolidation, national violence, and national indifference have materialized, often reflecting the interests of those investigating the entangled histories of diverse actors who coexisted in familiar localities. Narratives attempting to capture the multicultural cities erased by the tragedies of the twentieth century run parallel to the accounts of activists whose ideas and practices aimed to realize dreams of nationhood among the sea of undefined “masses.” Some of the most visible of these activists later achieved important places in the national pantheons of interwar and postsocialist states in East Central Europe. Others were forgotten, on purpose or by accident, and only incidentally appear in local histories of the distant past. The cities they lived in have become palimpsests, where the traces of previous inhabitants have been overwritten by the presence of new, unrelated generations. Only posing the right questions and a degree of luck may allow historians to write activists’ stories against the epoch they were busy creating.

Among the many attempts to discuss nation building in Eastern Europe, Fabian Baumann’s *Dynasty Divided: A Family History of Russian and Ukrainian Nationalism* stands out. The book examines the extraordinary fate of Shul’gin/Shul’hyn family, whose members influenced the political and intellectual face of imperial Kyiv and beyond from the mid-nineteenth century onward. Putting provincial contexts at the center of the narrative, Baumann showcases the advantages of writing a history of nationalism through the personal stories of its protagonists. Combining several generations into a single narrative, his microhistorical account highlights the everyday aspects of nation building, imperial policies, and the gray zones in which two branches of the same dynasty were in-
teracting. Rejecting any sharp distinctions between the public and the private, the reader is invited to reflect on the interplay between conscious choices, enforced reactions, and gendered peculiarities that influenced Ukrainian and Russian nationalist activism in the Russian imperial province for decades. The mixed chronological and thematic structure leads us through parallel processes of personal, intellectual, and political development that appear to be as intertwined at the end of the eight-decade journey as they were at the point of departure.

Baumann's use of family as the central unit of analysis frames the book’s narrative. In the first chapter, he tackles the “crossroads” and “bifurcation” of the mid-nineteenth century that preceded the later split of the dynasty, focusing on the role of the “Little Russian” bureaucracy in the creation of new national communities of local intellectuals. The figure of Mykhailo Maksymovych is portrayed as an intellectual “grandfather” for what later became two branches of the Shul’gin/Shul’hyn family (p. 20). Socialization appears to be a central theme in this context, but the author does not merely explain the fates of his protagonists through the lens of hindsight. Instead, he presents a range of possibilities that were opened for the Kyiv-based intelligentsia. The acceptance or rejection of these possibilities led to the first major clash between Iakov Shul’gin and his uncle Vitalii Shul’gin around 1876. The parallel stories of these two family members highlight one of the biggest advantages of Baumann’s work: by bringing in various figures at once, the reader is given the opportunity to reflect on how education and early-life networks may have shaped the life paths of important figures in the process of nation building. Those factors are not entirely new for historians of the region employing a biographical approach. For example, in his 2005 intellectual biography of Mykhilo Hrushevskyi, Serhii Plokhy already drew attention to the close relationship between the study of history and the process of nation building.[1] Still, for Plokhy, the connection was almost self-evident, while Baumann brings the ambiguities of choices made by the protagonists to the foreground. Moreover, he shows how the Shul’gins’ political choices did not lead to the complete break within the family, highlighting the variety of experiences that provincial actors faced.

The entanglement of family connections and political decisions becomes even more evident in the second chapter, which discusses the realities that self-proclaimed Ukrainian nationalists had to face in the post-Ems Ukaz Russian Empire. Choosing 1876 as a starting point, Baumann looks at the routine of national activism in a situation where national institutions were all but nonexistent. With Iakov Shul’gin’s life story in focus, he shows how Russian imperial policies left “nationally framed domesticity” as the only space for imagining the nation, allowing the role of women in activism to become prominent (p. 48). The emphasis on women’s prominence in the development of nationalism in East Central Europe is one of the book’s cornerstones. Baumann explicitly questions their omission in other works and often puts them at the center to demonstrate shifting gender roles among the late imperial Kyiv intelligentsia. In so doing, the book is able to examine “domestic life as a political arena” (p. 78), which led to the split between the two branches of the family and the further radicalization of nationalists by the beginning of the twentieth century. Balancing between coverage of family’s story and general political developments, Baumann shows how the “space of experience” (to use the historical category that was proposed by Reinhart Koselleck along with “horizon of expectations” to explain the temporalities of the past and the temporal differences with current time), had a particular impact on relationships between different members of the families, even if they continued to help each other navigate imperial micromanagement.[2]

The emphasis on the domestic activities of the family’s Ukrainian nationalists is balanced by the public activities of its Russian nationalists, with
Dmitri Pikhno and Vasilii Shul’gin as the main protagonists of the third chapter. Focusing on Pikhno’s intellectual and political activities, Baumann traces the emergence of new ideas about sociopolitical transformation in Yugo-Zapadnyi Krai. These included reactionary nationalism, persistent local patriotism, opportunism, and the personal relationships that helped provincial newspaper owners to exercise high influence in the imperial capitals, while failing to implement the ideal policies they envisioned on the ground. The family appears as a “social model” (p. 149) again, but here it is presented as pragmatic, showing how its members used nepotistic ties to advance up the late imperial career ladder. Baumann brilliantly plays with the paradoxes of this situation, which helped protagonists to get ahead individually but did not allow them to bring their ideas to the broader population of the Russian Empire. Provincial Russian nationalism was dominated by a small circle that relied mostly on internal networks.

The feeling of failure and attempts to deal with it in retrospect are given space in the book’s final chapter, which is also the shortest one. It unfolds around three memoirs written by family members, each of which portrays individual agency as having been subjugated by “much more significant historical processes” (p. 228). Differences in how these authors saw subjugation manifested themselves through the differing narrative voices, which depended on the protagonist’s gender, belonging, and postrevolutionary life circumstances. The pessimism and loneliness that Baumann highlights show how the defeat of nationalist activism by “militarized politics” had long-term consequences for those who were involved in idea creation in imperial-era Kyiv.

The strong emphasis on intertwined personal stories is the key value of the book. Baumann is able to empathize with his protagonists while making their stories speak for the wider changes that were occurring as nationalism gained prominence in East Central Europe. He puts himself in dialogue with activists’ portrayals of themselves, pointing out pitfalls they appear not to have noticed and critiquing statements that they made. The prominence of the author’s voice in the narrative sharpens his arguments, making the dynasty’s history more recognizable and self-reflective while helping to avoid presentism (against which the author openly positions himself).

Baumann’s work stands alongside similar attempts to study history through the lens of the family, of which Marci Shore’s article about the Berman Brothers is particularly relevant for the context of East Central Europe.[3] Similarly to Shore, Baumann uses the memoirs of his protagonists as sources for their early life and a means of analyzing their reflections after their active involvement in political affairs ended. History and memory are intertwined to present an unusual story of one family’s split as a part of more familiar narratives about nation building.
However, the question of what constituted the “family” for the protagonists themselves is one that Baumann does not address directly. While recognizing the importance of looking at the family as a social unit, he does not explain why the split must be seen as something significant for the milieu in which it happened. Baumann points out other instances in which families became divided, but the question of why and how far family connections mattered to the protagonists is left open. The concept of “dynasty” appears to be an appropriate analytical tool, but this may have changed over time between generations; it is unclear how far genealogy mattered to the Shul’gins/Shul’gyns in the 1920s, when the divide was self-evident. Bringing women into the narrative by emphasizing the nationalized domestic sphere makes it even more complicated to define what “family” was, given that many of the women covered married into the “family” from other contexts. While the case of Ekaterina Shul’gina shows how the family’s identity was accepted and the position of women was negotiated, it is still unclear what her relationship might have been in relation to the other branch of the “family.” In part, it may be impossible to answer this question because her personal narrative focuses on the loss of the past while the “space of experience” defines the perception of the present again. Slightly beyond Baumann’s attention, however, is the corresponding “horizon of expectation” that, apart from a few references to protagonists’ despair about the state of affairs they observed, is not visible in the book.

Overall, Baumann presents a fascinating microhistorical account of one particular family situation in one particular imperial city, broadening our understanding of multi-edged nationalism, hybrid imperial contexts, and the omnipresent gray zones that affected the lives of individuals who decided to become nationalist activists. The attention to detail and innovative engagement with archival materials in the book are of particular value for historians of the era, although many of those materials are currently not accessible due to the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war. *Dynasty Divided* opens up a lot of discussion points about how actors reacted to changing historical circumstances and tried to build their envisioned national communities. The number of these individuals was modest, yet the experiences they left behind, including on the margins of their nationalist activities and personal narratives, make them invaluable for scholars looking to examine the period, as Baumann’s excellent work shows.

Notes


If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
https://networks.h-net.org/h-ukraine


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=60929

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.