

Historical memory and national perspective in contemporary Ukrainian literature for children and youth

Tetiana Kachak

Vasyl Stefanyk Precarpathian National University, Ivano-Frankivs'k,
Ukraine

tetiana.kachak@gmail.com

Abstract

This article investigates the artistic verbalisation of historical memory and of a national perspective in contemporary Ukrainian literature of children and youth. Specifically, it examines Ukrainian young adults' literature as representing a "past-present-future" paradigm. Four types of literary works give young readers an idea of events, figures and places that are spiritual and socio-cultural components of national memory: 1) historical prose, 2) autobiographical texts, 3) realistic prose, the plot of which is set in a historical period with its characteristic features of public life, ideological principles and attitude to the national, and 4) anti-utopian fantasy. Links between forms of fictional retrospection, the experience of contemporary generations and visions of Ukraine's future as represented in the discussed narratives are analysed. These links can be found in thematic Ukrainian-centric emphases and in representations of Ukrainian patriots as national heroes, of the problem of "national harassment" and of strategies for overcoming post-totalitarian traumas.

Keywords: historical memory, literature for children and youth, national perspective, postcolonial studies

Introduction

Contemporary Ukrainian literature for children and youth describes difficult yet defining historical periods of Ukrainian state-building, reflects the national historical memory, and assists in developing young readers' national identity. Furthermore, it explores socio-cultural problems that have bearing on the near and distant future of Ukraine.

This essay examines Ukrainian young adults' literature as representing a "past-present-future" paradigm. The texts analysed in this study include:

- 1) *Dzhury kozaka Shvaiky* [*Pages of the Cossack Shvaika*] (Rutkivs'kyi, 2012), an example of historical fiction with elements of adventure, that verbalises historical memory;
- 2) *Iak ia ruinuvala imperiiu* [*How I Wrecked the Empire*] (Menzatiuk, 2014), a realistic novella that features the theme of childhood during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods;
- 3) *Varvary* [*Barbarians*] (Protsiuk, 2016), a realistic novella about the lives of young people in Soviet totalitarian society that contains descriptions of historical events, crimes, and underground national struggle;

4) *Vitrolomy* [Wind-breaks] (Protsiuk, 2015), a realistic novella that portrays the life of young Ukrainians in a postcolonial and independent state;

5) *Ty vse zminysh uchora* [You Will Change Everything Yesterday] (Savotina, 2021), an anti-utopian fantasy novella that explores the national perspective on Ukrainian society.

The use of cultural and historical research methods as well as a postcolonial theoretical approach (Pavlyshyn, 2002) makes it possible to demonstrate some links between fictional retrospection, the experience of contemporary generations represented in the narratives discussed, and visions of Ukraine's future. These links can be found in thematic Ukrainian-centric emphases, representations of Ukrainian patriots as national heroes, explorations of the problem of "national harassment" (Syvokin', 2003, p. 8), discrimination, russification, and regionalism (Hrabovych, 1997, p. 37), and ways of overcoming post-totalitarian traumas.

This essay is structured as follows. First, I consider the artistic retransmission of Ukraine's past and the verbalisation of historical national memory in adventure narratives for children. Second, I analyse the totalitarian and post-totalitarian experience of national self-identification of child heroes of realistic stories. Finally, I discuss the national perspective on Ukrainian society outlined in fantastic anti-utopian literature.

Artistic interpretation of Ukraine's past: historical and national memory in narratives addressed to children

In contemporary Ukrainian literature for children and youth the history of Ukraine and of the Ukrainian nation is a leading theme. This is the case in Volodymyr Rutkivs'kyi's works *Storozhova zastava* [The Stronghold], *Syni vody* [Blue Waters] and his tetralogy *Dzhury kozaka Shvaiky*; Mariia Morozenko's stories about Ivan Sirko; Olexandr Havrosh's series *Muzei Pryhod* [Museum of Adventures] and his stories about Ivan Syla and the robber Pyntia; Iaroslav Iarish's *Samiilo*; Olexandr Zubchenko's trilogy *Peremahaiuchy doliu* [Defeating Fate]; and others.

Volodymyr Rutkivs'kyi's prose was trendsetting for Ukrainian historical fiction for children and youth. The author set high artistic standards. His books were innovative in their depiction of historical events and figures, in their adventure poetics and their images of child protagonists as participants in historical events.

Rutkivs'kyi covers the life of Ukrainians and historical events of the Kyivan Rus' period (*Storozhova Zastava*), the Cossack era (*Syni vody*, *Dzhury kozaka Shvaiky*) and World War II (*Poterchata*). He creates historical adventure narratives for young readers, describes difficult and crucial periods of Ukrainian statehood and refers to historical facts that were concealed or misrepresented during the period of the totalitarian regime. Rutkivs'kyi's novels can be called anti-colonial. Colonialism tabooed and eliminated the memory of individuals and events in the history of the culture that contradicted the idea of Ukrainianness as provincial and derivative, whereas anti-colonialism emphasised and privileged them (Pavlyshyn, 1994).

In the tetralogy *Dzhury kozaka Shvaiky* the writer tells of the origin of the Cossacks. The children Sanko, Hrytsyk and Demko are the protagonists of this Cossack saga.

They perform the tasks set for them by the Cossack Shvaika faithfully and with dignity, fearlessly defending their lands from attacks by Tatars. In the first novel of the series, titled *Dzhury kozaka Shvaiky* like the tetralogy as a whole, the author describes in detail scenes from the struggle between Cossacks and Tatars. He depicts the first Cossack settlements and groups of Ukrainians who, fighting for independence and justice, confront enemies both external (the Tatars) and internal (slave-trading traitors). In the second novel, *Dzhury-kharakternyky* [*The Wizard Pages*], the young protagonists participate in military training with adult Cossacks. A boy wizard, Telesyk, appears in the novel with his children's gang, enabling Rutkivs'kyi to show the role of Cossack wizards in Ukrainian historical myth. In the third novel, *Dzhury i pidvodnyi choven* [*The Pages and the Underwater Ship*] the boys defend Kyiv, overcome the impregnable Dnieper rapids and explore the underground secrets of the island of Khortytsia. The author describes the storming of the Ochakiv fortress and the courage of the Cossacks and his young heroes. In the fourth novel, *Dzhury i Kudlatyk* [*The Pages and Kudlatyk*], historical and modern times are closely intertwined, and fantastic and mystical elements become even more prevalent than in the preceding volumes of the tetralogy.

Rutkivs'kyi verbalises the historical memory of Ukrainians. In memory studies, the main object of inquiry is not the past event as such, but the memory of it – the image of the event as it was recorded in the minds of those who experienced it, then transmitted to the consciousness of their immediate descendants and reconstructed in future generations (Artiukh, 2016). Rutkivs'kyi presents an image of the past of Ukraine to the imagination of his contemporaries, endeavouring to shape their historical memory as one dimension of a collective cultural memory. For his artistic translation of the historical past the author chooses a narrative type with children as protagonists against a background of historical events.

In the tetralogy Rutkivs'kyi relies on social, collective and external experience, while in others of his novels (*Poterchata*, for example) the basis of verbalisation of historical memory is autobiographical memory: in the first instance, the author's own memories (Kachak, 2021). These works are valuable not so much for their reconstruction of the past but for their reflection of the way the past is directly comprehended by the writer. In the contrast between the tetralogy and *Poterchata* we encounter the distinction between history and memory as it was discussed by R. G. Collingwood in his 1928 lecture "Outlines of a Philosophy of History" (Collingwood, 2005, pp. 426–496).

Rutkivs'kyi's Ukraine-centric position and his conscious promotion of the national self-identification of his novel's heroes may well influence children's and young people's perspective on historical events, to some extent determining their "memory frameworks" (Halbwachs, 1975). This is the value-orientation of Rutkivs'kyi's texts. The historical memory verbalised by this writer is always national memory, where national memory is understood as a "particular phenomenon of social consciousness: the complex of knowledge, ideas and judgments concerning historical events that decisively influenced the nation's formation, identity, its civilisational achievements and its attainments in the realm of state-building" (Soldatenko, 2011, p. 56). Rutkivs'kyi showed that Ukrainian history contains narratives not only of defeats but also of victories worthy of imitation; heroes to admire and follow; and examples of national unity in the struggle for the homeland's independence, which should inspire descendants and increase their spiritual experience, awaken national consciousness and educate patriots.

Andrusiak notes that in Rutkiv's'kyi's novels "conscious national self-identification and not drum-beating but living, natural patriotism ... goes hand in hand with deep, sincere and natural friendship and respect for other nations, including the 'enemy'" (Andrusiak, 2011). Marchenko emphasises that "the story in Rutkiv's'kyi's works lives and is created within the framework of children's worldview: protagonists are described as they are perceived by a child unconstrained by adult experience" (Marchenko, 2014, p. 337). But the most important aspect of *Dzhury*, according to the researcher, is "the unmistakably chosen author's position: in the text, as in historical documents and folk art of the time, there is anger, there is pain, there is humour, but no hatred" (Marchenko, 2014, p. 336).

National memory consists of knowledge and respect for national heroes, understanding of the victorious and tragic pages of history as lessons in the struggle for national freedom, and awareness of the right to cultural identity and self-sufficiency. As Assmann notes, not only the collective memory of victories but also the remembrance of defeats can serve as a mobilising force for the people (Assmann, 2011). This problem is especially acute in the context of the totalitarian past of Ukrainians and traumatic historical memory.

From totalitarian to post-totalitarian: traumatic historical memory and national self-identification of post-communist children

The history of Ukrainians, like some other Eastern Europe nations, is associated with the traumatic events of the twentieth century – the Nazi and Soviet occupations, pogroms, terror, the Holocaust, the Holodomor, and Stalin's repressions. According to Ulanowicz, these events still haunt the living memory of Eastern Europeans (Ulanowicz & Świetlicki, 2021, p. 373).

Ukrainian writers are beginning to comprehend these tragic pages of history, to raise the issue of the Holodomor and World War II (as, for example, in Rutkiv's'kyi's *Poterchata* or Radysh-Maryniuk's *Toi shcho khmary moloty* [He Who Threshes the Clouds]), to describe the Soviet totalitarian regime and to actualise traumatic historical memory. And it is they who can write about such topics, because they "possess the language and cultural references that may immediately speak to both child readers and the adult guardians who often share books with them" (Ulanowicz & Świetlicki, 2021, p. 374). Ulanowicz suggests that attention to these historical events is only now growing because "there is a generational delay between the occurrence of a traumatic event and its aesthetic representation" (Ulanowicz & Świetlicki, 2021, p. 378). Until 1991, under Soviet communism, these topics were banned. But now the issue of historical memory in the literature for children and youth, as well as on strategies for describing traumatic experiences and their consequences, have become foci of attention (Michułka, Świetlicki & García-González, 2021, p. 25).

Stepan Protsiuk's realistic novella *Varvary*, Zirka Menzatiuk's *Iak ia ruinuvala imperiiu* and Olena Zakharchenko's *Khutir* [*The Hamlet*], stories about the lives of young protagonists in the Soviet totalitarian society, describe historical events, crimes and the active national struggle that took place underground. The protagonists of these works are, on one hand, victims of the regime and, on the other, the personification of

a free young generation. Such works represent the traumatic national past for young readers.

In the novel *Varvary* (2016) Protsiuk describes terrible times characterised by ideological violence, physical and psychological terror, massacres of “unreliable” persons and “accomplices of mercenaries of imperialist intelligence,” and the omnipresence of punitive Soviet authorities and their ideological collaborators with their hatred for Ukrainians, their culture and language. The description of the Soviet system is more than a background for the events and characters of the story. It is one of the plotlines, a historical digression that presents itself as baring the dramatic and tragic truth about the recent Ukrainian past. Although the events take place in one school, in one village, what is described is a large-scale panorama of barbaric crimes against the Ukrainian people throughout the country.

Another dimension of *Varvary* is the author’s psychological representation of the characters of the young protagonists, their feelings and experiences of growing up and falling in love. The personal world of each of the heroes stands in opposition to the barbaric space of a totalitarian country. The schoolboy Ivan Doroshchuk is the personification of the young generation and the revival of the nation. His love for his native land and all good people is a force that can resist barbarians.

Varvary is a mosaic realistic novel: the story of the events of the 1970s is interspersed with narration about the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, documentary facts (for example, about the KGB’s special operation code-named “Block” of 1972), fragments of mystical legends, elements of school stories and Soviet tales about state and collective farms, as well as the author’s reflections and interpretations. The book is a collection of historical and national memories, generally traumatic, of the Ukrainian people. Protsiuk’s story reflects a desire to restore objective coverage of Ukraine’s past and to overcome the ideological and biased version of a happy Soviet country. This is a national memory that is opposed to the “altered” historical memory (Shasta, 2011) formed in Soviet society.

Menzatiuk’s *Iak ia ruinuvala imperiiu* (2014) is a work of literary fiction for teenagers that depicts the way of life of the Soviet people, their fears and strivings during the last years of the USSR. The main characters are children of the transitional period: Iaryna, the teenage narrator of the story, and her friends from a village in Bukovyna (Western Ukraine), Pivoniia, Igrek, and Mykola. Other important characters include Aunt Orysia, Iaryna’s parents, her grandmother and grandfather, who was repressed for his nationalist ideas. Iaryna and her parents live in Kyiv, but for the summer holidays she goes to see her grandmother in Bukovyna. With the other teens, she witnesses the socio-political changes in the country and tries to deal with them.

The narrative relates the origin of Narodnyi Rukh (the national movement of Ukrainians advocating for freedom and independence), young people’s participation in protests against the closure of churches, and their struggle for national interests. The children also take part in such events as lighting candles on the spot where a soldier of the UPA (Ukrainian Insurgent Army) lost his life; they help to make items symbolic of Ukraine and attend meetings organised by Narodnyi Rukh. They reject communists and functionaries of the Soviet system.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union is treated as a precondition for the country’s revival, for the restoration of freedom of spirit, and for overcoming the fear of Soviet

power and the communist regime. Menzatiuk depicts the spirit of national revival and the need for social changes which correspond to changes in the young heroes' hearts. Iaryna and Orysia share the same ideas: "It felt as if the militia had disappeared, and KGB agents [agents of the National Security Committee of the USSR], lists of detained people and all the dull 'sovdepiia' [the Soviet style of life], too. There were free people around me and I was free too, I was intoxicated by the unknown, dizzying feeling of freedom!" (Menzatiuk, 2014, p. 260).

Today it is important to rethink the Soviet period and the peculiarities of the so-called "sovok" (Soviet mentality), from which the Ukrainian people are still suffering. Menzatiuk believes that the totalitarian system is a difficult topic for teenage readers, but that by touching upon it in literary works written for them writers can help change the "sovok way of thinking". Timely and reliable information plays an important role in the formation of national consciousness and national memory of the younger generation, as Menzatiuk has remarked: "Nowadays, when Ukraine is caught in the whirlpool of tragic events, children are in desperate need of books which would reveal the value of democracy; books which would help children to develop in line with social changes in the country" (Menzatiuk & Kundirenko, 2014). Fiction is one of the effective means enabling children to learn about spiritual and socio-cultural components of national memory, because it helps them think, re-think, search for the truth, and form habits of self-determination and national self-identification. The latter manifests itself in language, behaviour, life principles, as well as moral and ethical standards.

Children of the post-communist era have the opportunity to read about history which is not falsified and is free from Soviet ideology. Stepan Protsiuk in *Vitrolomy* (2015) depicts a contemporary teenager who is contemplating his perception of national history and his affiliation with it: "Maksym has recently learned about the Ukrainian students' heroic deed near Kruty. Yes, they all perished. Yes, they could have escaped death. [...] They were like you, Maksym... the dead remain young... there's no need to die for your Motherland, you should live for your Motherland..." (Protsiuk, 2015, pp. 25-26). This episode serves as an example of how literature and history can influence personality and correct the consequences of the perverted collective memory of the Ukrainian people. In the post-communist era, the experience of one's national and cultural identity becomes an issue of great importance.

Protsiuk depicts the generation of children belonging to the transitional post-communist era. He highlights the significance of their upbringing and the difference in values that they can hold. Maksym chooses a conscious national stand and is aware of Ukraine's Soviet past. Most of his peers from Kyiv live in Russian-speaking surroundings and do not care much about issues of language, culture or universal injustice. However, all of them strive for democracy, material wealth, and European living standards.¹

The works of Protsiuk and Menzatiuk analysed above are built both on the collective memory of the Soviet period in the history of Ukraine and on the authors' childhood memories. As Matusiak points out, postcolonial studies pay special attention to the role of historical and psychological discourse in "finding" the memory of the past with the help of postcolonial subjects (Matusiak, 2015). Contemporary Ukrainian authors are such subjects: they are critical of the past, reproducing individual and collective

¹ For a detailed discussion of the literary representation of child characters of the transition period see Kachak (2017).

traumatic memories, and at the same time endeavouring to construct a new democratic reality and “repair” contemporary Ukraine. They adopt a postcolonial position by not simply denying colonialism and endorsing its opposite, but by using both colonial and anti-colonial experience in seeking an understanding of the relationship between these two historical formations (Pavlyshyn, 2002, p. 706).

The national perspective on Ukrainian society in fantastic anti-utopian literature.

National perspectives on the future of Ukraine are not only the subject of political discussions but also a topic in contemporary Ukrainian literature for children and youth, especially in utopian and anti-utopian fiction. In this context, Valeria Savotina’s fantastic story *Ty vse zminysh uchora* (2021) stands out.

The author narrates events of 2066 and 2120. At the heart of the plot is the story of a girl named Iaryna and her family and classmates, who live in a totalitarian country. They are controlled and persecuted for disobeying the authorities. Law enforcement officers are everywhere. Solitary confinement is a common punishment. Adolescents who dare to disobey are brutally killed. Repression and the death penalty threaten anyone who does not live by the rules.

Slavko Stianok, leader of the “SvoDem” party, is accused of causing a war that has lasted more than half a century and is considered to be the main enemy of the state. He did not obey the authorities and consolidated elements hostile to them. He is held responsible for the country being in ruins. His crossed-out portrait hangs in every school and is everywhere a reminder that the government is determined to destroy its enemies. Iaryna admires him as a national hero and shares his ideas, and this puts her life in danger. Iaryna’s mother decides to send her from the city to the farm to save her. Instead, Iaryna travels back to 2066 to meet Slavko Stianok. She wants to warn him and save him, but it is impossible to change the course of history. Iaryna cannot save Slavko, but she continues his work in her own time, in 2120.

Savotina builds up a background for the story that involves such future achievements as advanced digital technologies and artificial intelligence. But the author describes an anti-democratic, totalitarian, ruined country. I believe that this choice is an echo of the traumatic collective memory of the times of the Soviet empire and a sign of fear that the same things could happen again. *Ty vse zminysh uchora* was one of the first works of contemporary Ukrainian literature for children and youth to deal with the theme of national leadership in the struggle for democracy, freedom and national independence. The author’s young protagonists are patriots in opposition to the totalitarian system. The story contains allusions to the politics of modern Ukraine. It mentions mass public meetings, terrorist attacks, attempts to seize power and victims of such endeavours. Echoing a recurrent motif of Ukrainian folklore (present, for example, in the tale “Kotyhoroshko”) and Ukrainian history, Slavko’s best friend betrays him.

The main message of the story is the statement that, as long as there are those who are ready to oppose authoritarianism or totalitarianism, there is hope for freedom and a bright future for the people and the country; the future of the nation depends on each of its members.

Conclusion

Historical and national memory are components of the national consciousness and self-identification of peoples. Without them the formation of the Ukrainian nation would have been impossible, and processes of the formation and development of an independent state would be under threat. Literature helps to preserve such memories. Historical novels about Cossack times, the period of the totalitarian regime and the postcolonial period, and even about a national future as a fantastic anti-utopia shape our understanding of Ukraine's past and present; they are among the vehicles of historical memory that help construct social and national identity.

Four types of literary works that give young readers an idea of spiritual and socio-cultural components of national memory are: 1) historical prose, 2) autobiographical prose, 3) realistic prose with historical elements, and 4) anti-utopian fantasy.

Contemporary Ukrainian writers artistically visualise the past, present and future of the Ukrainian people, society and state. Their works may be read as intending to open Ukraine and Ukrainians to other peoples and cultures, but also as seeking to contribute to the formation of the collective historical, national and cultural memory of new generations of Ukrainians in the conviction that the future and prospects of Ukrainian society depend on their national position, awareness of the historical past, and present national orientation.

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