



Cybriwsky, Roman Adrian.

*Along Ukraine's River:
A Social and Environmental
History of the Dnipro.*

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Reviewed by Roman Lozynskyi

Into the Heart of Ukraine

How do people and nations interact with rivers and what is the social and cultural role of this interaction throughout history? In his book Roman Cybriwsky provides a comprehensive and holistic consideration of the river Dnipro, from its source to its entry into the Black Sea, with a focus on the meaning the river has played for Ukraine and its people. The main Cybriwsky statement is that the Dnipro river is a national river involved in the country's variable experiences throughout history and one of its central national identity pillars. As a result of extensive place visiting, the author, in addition to historical information, describes cultural landscapes around the river as a reflection of past experiences and the current state of Ukrainian society. The book has an introductory nature and at the same time is rich in essential details, written in a light style, a good balance of scholarly writing and travelogue, ingested with wit (a rare phenomenon in Ukrainian academic and semi-academic literature), which makes it interesting and reachable for a wide audience.

Roman Adrian Cybriwsky is an American cultural urban geographer from Temple University known for his research on neighborhood change under neoliberal conditions in Philadelphia and Tokyo, and more recently on Kyiv's urban transformations after the collapse of the Soviet Union (see *Kyiv, Ukraine: The City of Domes and Demons from the Collapse of Socialism to the Mass Uprising of 2013–2014*), and a new book of essays, *Ukrainian Panorama: Dispatches from the Road About People, Places, Progress, and Problems*. Having a personal passion for rivers and an awareness of their role for people, the economy, and culture, Cybriwsky considers the Dnipro not only as a natural object, but foremost as a cultural and historical phenomenon containing symbolic meaning and playing a significant role in the nation building process. Cybriwsky utilizes a mix of approaches—a descriptive tradition of American regional cultural geography and the

idea of “reading landscape” by extensive place visiting and observation—while omitting theoretization. The author’s aim is to shed light on “terra incognita” for “outsider” readers in the way first explorers did. Roman Cybriwsky stresses that although the Dnipro river has cultural significance for Ukraine and other Slavic nations and is the third largest river in Europe (after the Volga and Danube rivers) it is not well known in the world and no book exists about the Dnipro even in Ukrainian or Russian. Without posing a research question, Cybriwsky focuses on the description of a wide range of topics, which makes book eclectic: important historical details about cities and towns on the Dnipro’s banks, symbolic landscapes and place renaming, the representation of the river in art and literature, people’s recreation and water use of the river, and its physical geography and ecology. The author confesses his dislike of postmodern “language,” which he directly states in the book’s preface. Thus, you will not find a critical attitude to the idea of nation and Cossack identity as a social construct or to the “democratic” West and Europe, the Europeanization process as a cultural, political and economic hegemony, or how the Dnipro river was involved in the maintenance of patriarchy through art and literature. However, Cybriwsky’s attitude towards the shrinkage of public space and access to the riverfront and beaches shows a clearly radical geographical approach with a focus on the topic of social justice and inequality.

Cybriwsky structures his book in both a temporal and spatial way, beginning from Greek times when the first “knowledge” about the river appeared, up to the time of Maidan unrest, and from the river source in Russia, through Belarus and Ukraine to the place where river flows into the Black sea. In the first chapter Cybriwsky provides arguments about the main point of the book—that the Dnipro river is a national river and plays a significant role in Ukrainian identity as well as in the affiliation of Ukraine with European and more broadly, Western civilization. Although the Dnipro river flows through Russia and Belarus, and was involved in Russian imperial and especially in Soviet economic and cultural projects, Cybriwsky compares the Dnipro with other nations’ rivers and important cities on their banks such as the Mississippi and the cities of New Orleans, Memphis, and St. Louis in the USA, the Nile and the cities of Cairo and Memphis in Egypt, and terms the Dnipro “Ukraine’s river” because of geography, history, and its depiction in the arts, literature, and song. Geographically it flows through “the heart of Ukraine” for one-half of its length and the main course of the river is entirely in Ukraine. As well, the Ukrainian capital and other important cities are located by and highly related to the river. It is an important source of water and electric power, a transportation line and a place for recreation. The Dnipro river is much more present in Ukrainian history, art and literature than in those of neighboring countries, for instance in Ukraine’s national anthem and especially in the poetry of iconic Ukrainian figure Taras Shevchenko (1814–1861), who was symbolically interred on a hill over the river as he requested in his poem “Zapovit” (Testament). In addition, Cossacks—rebels against foreign rulers—were largely defined by the river’s natural characteristics, namely the Dnipro rapids (*porohy* in Ukrainian) and the islands protecting them. For Slavic nations the Dnipro river has special religious significance as here the baptism into Christianity occurred in 988 during the rule of Prince Volodymyr

the Great. Although the river physically divides Ukraine into two parts—the right and left banks (west and east of the river respectfully) with obstacles for transportation—the Dnipro mentally unites the country. As Cybrivsky puts it, “the river is the heart of Ukraine and not, as some would claim, the dividing line in a divided country.” The Dnipro river is a part of the geographical lexicon of Ukraine in the naming of a region, *Naddnyprianshchyna* (the lands on both side of the Dnipro), and the historical term *Velyka Ukraina* (Great Ukraine), which in the nineteenth century was also referred to as *Dnyprianshchyna* (Dnipro Ukraine), entrenching the idea of the Dnipro as the Ukrainian center. Cybrivsky explains that the ethno-linguistic and political situation presented in elections results do not match the placement of the river, the river thus, not being a dividing element. Thus, the Dnipro is a strong cultural and symbolical icon that unites Ukrainians and is emblematic of the nation. The author gives Mathew Omelesky notice about an ironical coincidence (or not) of the main Ukrainian river’s flow vs. the flow of the main Russian river, correlating these flows with the geopolitical orientations of the countries. The Dnipro river flows into the Black Sea and through the Mediterranean Sea connects with the Atlantic Ocean and entire world. The Volga, Russia’s largest river in the European part of the country, which has its source close to the Dnipro, flows into the isolated Caspian Sea, matching Russia’s political orientation.

Chapter 2 contains a short overview of the histories and economies of cities located on the Dnipro’s banks, along with physical characteristics of the river, its tributaries, dams, canals and reservoirs, from its source to its entry into the Black Sea. During Soviet times the river was significantly transformed with the construction of six dams and a reservoir chain, making it one of the most humanly transformed rivers in the world. Chapters 3 and 4 feature a comprehensive review of Ukraine’s history beginning with the first Greek writings about the Scythians, through Kyivan Rus, the Cossacks, Russian imperial colonization, and are less about the river itself. The Dnipro river was especially significant as a trade route for the Varangians, and its islands and cataracts were strategic military locations for the Cossacks. During Russian imperial rule the Dnipro again became an important avenue for commerce, mainly through its tributary, the Prypiat river. In the eighteenth century canals were built as private business projects to link the upper Dnipro with different parts of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and the river’s importance as a transportation line declined with the emergence of railroads in the nineteenth century. At this time the Dnipro river appeared in literature as a metaphor for Ukrainian independence. Chapter 4 is focused on the rebuilding of the river for new needs as part of the Soviet industrialization and collectivization project—the construction of dams and reservoirs with the forced resettlement of people. The chapter ends with the description of the river as a popular public space for rest and regulated tourism advertised in Soviet guidebooks, and the Chernobyl disaster. Chapter 5 provides a more detailed look at the river’s ecology and its deterioration in the past half century.

In chapter 6 Cybrivsky looks at Kyiv and its interaction with the river with a focus on cultural landscapes and their main landmarks, and the level of public access to the waterfront for recreation. The cultural landscapes reflect how different powers

through history exploited the river's right bank hills and created their own scenery loaded with symbolic meanings—from the domination of religion and churches as the main landmarks in Kyiv's scenery to giant Soviet ideological monuments, names of streets, squares and parks, and more recently, after Ukrainian independence, the domination of wild capitalism with rampant corruption and nepotism reflected in “monster” buildings and the shrinkage of public and green spaces and access to the waterfront. In chapters 7 to 10 we are invited to join the author's travels along the river from Kyiv to the Black Sea and to get to know the history, landscape, and economies of cities, towns and villages along the way. This includes the building of DniproHES during the Holodomor, Zaporizhia as a model city and how it was used in propaganda, the largest Jewish complex in the world in the city of Dnipro, Swedes and an ethnographic group from the Carpathians in the village of Zmiivka, and finally the beauty of the steppes of the south of Ukraine.

In the last chapter Cybriwsky provides short “recommendations” for Ukraine. Those related to the river Dnipro include: addressing environmental problems, including improving water quality and freeing the Dnipro of dams, a project that should become as the author terms it, a “national crusade”; improving living conditions in industrial towns along river; ensuring public access to the riverfront especially in cities where there is a tendency toward privatization and the fencing off of beaches; and introducing multi-day river-length cruises as an international tourist attraction.

Cybriwsky's book with its holistic approach will be a valuable introductory text for international readers and Ukrainians as well—Ukrainians remain unfamiliar with their own country, especially with its small towns and countryside. Although Cybriwsky's work does not make a contribution from a theoretical point of view (which was not its aim), the book is an essential introduction because of its comprehensiveness, featuring a measured balance of historical detail and insight that can only be found by being in the field and doing rigorous landscape observation, with the researcher's “eyes well connected to the brain.”