

# REVIEWS

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Viktor Zaruba, *Polovytsia polovetskykh stepiv. Zhyttia ta naukova pratsia Mariana Dubetskoho u Prydniprovi vprodovzh 1874–1880 rr.* [*Polovytsia of the Cuman Steppes: The Life and Scientific Work of Marian Dubetsky in the Dnieper Region in 1874–1880*], Dnipro, 2023, Lira, 192 pp.

A small, elegant, and richly illustrated book by the well-known Ukrainian historian Viktor Zaruba has recently been published, dedicated to the activities and work in Dnipro (then Ekaterinoslav) of the prominent Polish historian and public activist Marian Dubiecki (1838–1926), whose figure continues to attract the attention of contemporary Polish historiography.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, this figure, with strong ties to Ukrainian lands, is only now beginning to interest Ukrainian historians.

The book's edition is minimal: 20 copies, which makes it immediately a bibliographic rarity. The first thing worth noting as a sign of a professional approach to an assignment is the consistently contextualised presentation of the material. Analysing Dubiecki's contribution to the development of historical science, Zaruba outlines a detailed 'historiographical map' of Ekaterinoslav in the last quarter of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He presents an almost complete picture of Dubiecki's contributions to Polish, Ukrainian, and regional historiography, enabling the precise identification of key research issues. Such an approach prevents the subject from becoming hermetic, situates it in an appropriate historiographical context, and provides a solid foundation for further critical reflection. The subject of the monograph is set in the context of regional history, a domain in which the stay of the Polish historian in the Ekaterinoslav Governorate (1874–80) remains poorly studied due to the limited availability of documentary sources, publications, and archival ego-documents. Moreover, in both regional historical studies and synthetic works on the history of Ekaterinoslav,<sup>2</sup> the role and importance

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<sup>1</sup> See Zbigniew Wójcik, 'Marian Dubiecki – z Wołynia na Syberię', in Wiesław Caban, Lidia Michalska-Bracha (eds), *Polskie dziewiętnastowieczne pamiętniki i listy z Ziem Zabrzanych – rola i miejsce w badaniach historycznych* (Warszawa, 2017), 407–17; Paweł Pryt, 'Powstańcza działalność Mariana Dubieckiego – sekretarza Rusi w Rządzie Narodowym 1863 roku', *Prace Historyczne*, 1 (2024), 73–83.

<sup>2</sup> See Dmitrij Javornickij, *Istorija goroda Ekaterinoslava* (Dnepropetrovsk, 1989), 197; Anatolii Bolebrukh (ed.), *Dnipropetrovsk: vikhy istorii* (Dnipropetrovsk, 2002),

of the Polish community in shaping the urban environment are almost wholly ignored.

The research's source base comprises original archival materials, biographical-historical literature, published documents of personal origin, and Dubiecki's works. What becomes the key reference for the book, however, is a two-volume collection of autobiographical and historical essays by the Polish historian, published in Kyiv in 1914. The second volume contains six essays that, in the free form of memoirs, depict, according to the author, the most important places and events in the history of the Central Dnieper region. Despite a certain degree of fictionalisation, emotional tone, and stylisation of the conversational manner of narration, Zaruba rightly considers these essays to be a valuable source not only for Dubiecki's biography but also for understanding his way of thinking about history and studying the history of the region.

One cannot help but notice that the author is congenial toward his protagonist. As if fascinated by Dubiecki's way of presenting the material, Zaruba gives his monograph the character of a popular narrative in which academic research style blends organically with journalistic reflections, artistic insertions, and fiction treatments.

The book is structured chronologically. The author invites the reader to follow the paths of his hero, one of the active participants of the January Uprising of 1863–64, who, after the Siberian exile, like many other Polish insurgents, returned to the European part of the empire.<sup>3</sup>

The preface provides a concise outline of Dubiecki's long, complicated, and rich biography. We learn that the nobleman from Volhynia, who studied at the history and philology departments at Kharkiv and Kyiv universities, took an active part in the January Uprising and, in 1864, was arrested and sentenced to death, which was commuted to a ten-year term of imprisonment. When the time came to return from Siberia, Dubiecki consciously chose the Ekaterinoslav Governorate since his circle of scientific interests was closely related to the history of this region. He believed that it was essential to become directly acquainted with the area – to see the remnants of the old days and to interview local residents.

From 1874 to 1876, Dubiecki lived in Novomoskovsk (now Samar), and from 1875 to 1880 – in Ekaterinoslav. It is this period – the moment of

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256; Anatolii Bolebrukh (ed.), *Istoriia mista Dnipropetrovska* (Dnipropetrovsk, 2006), 596; Andriy Portnov, *Dnipro: An Entangled History of a European City* (Boston, 2022), 374; Andrii Portnov, Tetiana Portnova, *Dnipro. Biohrafia velykoho mista v stepu* (Kyiv, 2024), 208.

<sup>3</sup> Ołeh Żurba, 'Archiwalia dotyczące uczestników powstania styczniowego w zbiorach Archiwum Państwowego Obwodu Dniepropietrowskiego', *Almanach Historyczny*, xxvi (2024), 175–88.

encounter between the Polish historian and the historical-geographical reality of the region – that constitutes the central point of the monograph. The author seemingly invites the reader to join him on a journey with Dubiecki to recall the old days of Sloboda Polovitsa, to drive through the villages on the left bank of the Dnieper River that were built on the site of former Cossack settlements, to visit the fortress of Kodak, to look carefully at the remains of antiquity, and to sympathise with the tragic situation of Polish settlers in southern Ukraine, who tried to bring civilization to this wild country. Zaruba uses Dubiecki's texts to express his views and interpretations. Moreover, he uses the Polish historian's narrative structure and historical constructs to produce an extramural dialogue, continuing the age-old debate over the primacy of Poles, Russians, or Ukrainians in settling (colonising) the Central Dnieper region.

The first chapter describes a steamboat journey from Kyiv to Ekaterinoslav in 1874. Dubiecki did not limit himself to reporting on the landscapes he observed, but, above all, he floated reflections on the loss of the former borderlands, the sites of Polish glory, and the sinister role of imperial power. He referred with satisfaction to the failure of Prince Grigory Potemkin's plans to make Ekaterinoslav the third capital of the empire. His opposition to the empire's influence was also reflected in the terminology used. He referred to Ekaterinoslav as Polovitsa, Novomoskovsk as Samar, and the region above Samara as Samaria, which was associated with Sarmatia and the 'Sarmatian noble nation' known from early modern Polish chronicles. These chronicles were not only a historical source for him but also shaped his perception of history, becoming a kind of 'spectacles' of the historian's research optics.

The second chapter is devoted to Dubiecki's stay in Novomoskovsk, where he spent less than a year, having already obtained permission to move to Ekaterinoslav in the summer of 1875. During this time, in addition to reading the works of Polish early modern writers and historians such as Marcin Bielski, Alessandro Guagnini, Adam Naruszewicz, and others, he actively travelled, trying to revive in his emotions the pages of ancient history. According to him, they were related to both the heroic moments of the Polish past and the destructive effects of the rule of the Moscow invaders (p. 39). Fascinated by the Polish past, the historian eagerly searched for Polish roots in everyone he encountered, seeking traces of Polish heritage. Comparing the distinctive features of peasant huts in the Samaria region with the descriptions of small Russian towns contained in the works of Nikolai Gogol, he did not forget to emphasise that Gogol himself was of Polish origin.

Ekaterinoslav is the main character of the next chapter. Dubiecki lived here from 1875 to 1880. As Zaruba notices, he consistently ignored signs and symbols of the Russian Empire. He meticulously omitted descriptions of and references to such important memorials to Ekaterinoslav at the time as the Potemkin Palace, the Transfiguration Cathedral, founded by Catherine II, and the monument to the Tsarina herself. The Polish historian cited the

well-known history of the city's founding, but he also recognised the Russian empress, King Stanisław Augustus Poniatowski, and Austrian Emperor Joseph II as its founders.

Zaruba manages to 'drag' his protagonist into a sterile discussion about the date of foundation and the 'real' founder of Ekaterinoslav. By reporting on Dubiecki's account of the detailed biography of Zaporizhian Cossack Lazarus Globa, who, as early as 1743, founded a settlement with mills, fish ponds, and orchards on the site of the future Ekaterinoslav, and by the end of the eighteenth century had become a substantial landowner, Zaruba strengthens his position in this debate. Although, like Dubiecki, he recognises Globa as the real founder of Polovitsa-Ekaterinoslav, he fails to completely 'sever' the city from its imperial roots.

When discussing the Cossacks' attitude during the liquidation of the Sich in 1775, both Dubiecki and his biographer describe it as collaborationist. Both unanimously condemn the "true founder of Ekaterinoslav" for having "gone over to the side of the occupying forces in 1775 to avoid confiscation of their property" (p. 65).

Zaruba notices an important aspect of Dubiecki's writing strategy – the complete omission of the description of the contemporary city. Instead, the historian limited himself to general, mainly negative remarks. At the time, there were dozens of Poles living in the Ekaterinoslav Governorate, just like him – former participants in the January Uprising. After gruelling labour in Siberia, they were exiled to the region, where they remained under constant police surveillance<sup>4</sup> and often found themselves in extremely difficult material conditions. It is hard to believe that in such small towns as Ekaterinoslav and Novomoskovsk, Dubiecki did not meet friends who shared his fate as an insurgent. However, his texts lack any mention of them. At the same time, he established contacts with representatives of the influential part of the Polish community in Ekaterinoslav – businessmen, landowners, officials, and merchants, with whose children he worked as a home teacher and tutor. Carefully observing this environment, he saw its moral decline, spiritual degradation, and gradual distancing from its native language and culture. Nevertheless, Dubiecki left a unique testimony to the unity of the Polish community, whose efforts led to the construction and opening of St. Joseph's Church – consecrated in 1878 – which became an important centre of Polish culture in the region.

The part devoted to the story of the Polish Abramowicz family is separated from the main narrative thread. This family was closely related to the protagonist – he lived with them and acted as the guardian of their children.

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<sup>4</sup> Oleh Zhurba, 'Osobovi spravy uchasnykiv polskoho povstannia 1863–1864 rokiv u Derzhavnomu arkhivi Dnipropetrovskoi oblasti: dzhereloznavchyi analiz ta informatsiinyi potentsial', *Rukopysna ta knyzhkova spadshchyna Ukrainy*, iv (2024), 220–35.

Zaruba uses this theme to present the genealogy of the Abramowicz family, their history of resettlement to Ekaterinoslav in the early nineteenth century, as well as their family ties and social customs. The result is the first historical and genealogical study of a Polish family in Ekaterinoslav, based on rich source material. The author has obtained information from both published sources and manuscripts stored in the State Archive of Dnipropetrovsk Oblast, the Russian State Historical Archive, and the Russian State Military-Historical Archive.

The research focuses on four generations of local officials – the Abramowicz family, which achieved professional success in Ekaterinoslav, raised the next generation, and held a prominent place in the city’s educated community. Zaruba also reflects on Dubiecki’s attitude to the emigration of the Abramowicz family and the fate of Poles in the Central Dnieper lands in general, portraying it as a national tragedy. Dubiecki’s words resound with a dramatic reflection: “The mother of the Polish nation became an orphan, having lost her sons, who went into exile across the vast territories of the neighbouring aggressive empire” (p. 80). The author cites an episode from Dubiecki’s joint expedition with fifteen-year-old Oleksandr Abramowicz to the rapids of the Dnieper River, during which the young man admitted that he did not understand a phrase addressed to him in Polish. Indeed, Oleksandr’s father had already embraced the Orthodox faith and married an Orthodox Polish woman, meaning he was a Pole by blood and bones, but assimilated into the Russian-Ukrainian linguistic, cultural, and religious space. This, as the book’s author writes, “made a huge impression on the ethnically exalted Pole Dubiecki” (p. 81). As if contradicting his hero, the author concludes this chapter by stating that in the early 1920s, after the revolution, the civil war, and the death of their father, Oleksandr Abramowicz’s two daughters, Olga and Maria, returned to their historical homeland, Poland.

Dubiecki gained a significant reputation in scientific circles for his study of the Kodak fortress. A key and indispensable step in this process was his expedition to this southernmost Polish stronghold on the Dnieper River. It became the focal point of both his memoirs and one of the chapters in Zaruba’s book. The text is largely ethnographic and memoiristic. Particularly valuable and unique were the folk accounts contained therein regarding the magical properties of the Kodak ruins and the figure of Marusya-cripple (*Marusya-kalechka*) – these accounts are not found in any other folklore records. In addition, Dubiecki noted traces of the old Polish presence in the peasant consciousness – echoes that had survived for many generations, though they gradually lost credibility over time.

The result of Dubiecki’s visit was the first historiographical study of Kodak’s history.<sup>5</sup> In the later years, it was repeatedly re-published, revised, and

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<sup>5</sup> Marian Dubiecki, *Kudak. Twierdza kresowa i jej okolice. Monografia historyczna* (Kraków, 1879), 91.

supplemented by the author. In 2005, the work was translated into Russian and published in a reprint of *Letopis' Ekaterinoslavskoj uchenoj arhivnoj komissii*.<sup>6</sup> This publication became more than just an important historiographical contribution to the study of the history of southern Ukraine. The discussion of the creative techniques and methods of historical thinking of the Polish historian raises the question of the presence of Dubiecki's ideas, works, and activities in the regional historiographical space. It once again highlights the problem of intellectual, regional, and national identity of historians of Ukraine, their interactions and dynamics.

The goal of M. Dubiecki's next steppe expedition was to search for the site of the 1648 Battle of Zhovti Vody. Equipped with available historical information and having rented a carriage, he set out on his longest expedition – the journey to the village of Zhovti Vody took two days. There, on 19 October 1879, after a two-hour survey of the area, he made what he believed was an outstanding historical discovery: he managed to locate the site of the first battle of the Great Cossack War. He immediately shared his findings with the academic world. As Zaruba aptly noted, the direct survey of the area and its detailed description, the sketches of the allegedly existing fortifications, and also, may I add, a great deal of self-confidence, for many years made Dubiecki a monopolist in presenting the events of the initial stage of the Khmelnytsky Uprising. This notwithstanding, Zaruba's statement that "disputes around the battle site continue even today" does not seem exaggerated (p. 145).

A brief overview of Dubiecki's Odesa period in Ukraine (1880–83) highlights his involvement in the life of the local Polish community and his ongoing work in the archives of the Zaporizhzhya Sich, then owned by Apollon Skalkowski. In 1883, Dubiecki eventually moved to Krakow, where he devoted himself to teaching and research. He lived to see Poland regain its independence and continued his faithful service to his homeland in the field of history.

In the concluding section, in addition to the undoubted merits of his protagonist in updating and resolving the key issues of the history of the Central Dnieper lands and the Polish diaspora in the region, the author of the monograph harshly criticises Dubiecki's historical interpretations. At their core was a hermetic ethno-national approach, according to which local history appeared to be a process of struggle between, on the one hand, the progressive civilizational influences of the Polish state and the Poles, and on the other, Moscow's imperial barbarism, whose victory led to the total backwardness and savagery of the local population. Zaruba demonstrates the limitations of narrowly national perspectives in analysing the region's key historical problems.

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<sup>6</sup> Marian Dubiecki, 'Kodak, pogranychnaya krepost i eyo okresnosti', in *Letopis' Ekaterinoslavskoj uchenoj arhivnoj komissii*, ii (Dnepropetrovsk, 2015), 353–500.

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Zaruba's monograph has every chance of becoming a significant achievement, especially in the field of research on the Polish component of the history of southern Ukraine – demographic processes, the history of the diaspora, family history, and the mentality of local Poles. It significantly broadens understanding of regional historiography as a complex, heterogeneous, multinational cultural phenomenon, in which Dubiecki's work cannot be excluded. After all, he was a representative of one of the national groups of the Ekaterinoslav intellectual elite and society, which, along with others, co-created a unique and specific regional cultural landscape.

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