

Lecture Timothy Snyder (Yale University, Fall 2022)

The Making of Modern Ukraine

22 - Ukrainian Ideas in the 21st Century

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yz6MSiGZQCU>

- 00:00 All right, we're getting close to the end.
There's this lecture, which is gonna be about culture very broadly understood.
And then the next lecture, which is gonna be a kind of review of the ideas of empire and Europe.
You can think of both of these lectures as helping you think through some of the main issues of the class as you prepare for the exam.
'Cause I understand that as Yale students, you would prefer actually not to be in class, but to be studying for the exam, and I'm here to tell you, you can do both at the same time, right? Especially the essay questions in the exam give you a lot of room to think through and make arguments, right? Think through and make arguments.
And so in these last couple of lectures, we'll mostly be doing interpretation.
So this lecture is about culture.
- 01:01 I'm not gonna try to define what a culture is.
We've got the whole anthropology department for that, but what I have in mind here is the very broad notion of, let's say, a set of self, a set of mutually reinforcing notions of what a people might be.
So by Ukrainian culture here, I'm not gonna have time to get into, with some exceptions, the details of Ukrainian literature and Ukrainian poetry.
What I'm mainly concerned with is the notion of people.
So I'm going all the way back, if you remember, all the way back to September in the first couple of lectures when I tried to specify that the modern legal notion of genocide rests on the equally modern notion of a people or a nation, and that these two things are in a kind of uncomfortable relationship, one with the other.
And as we complete this course during a war, which certainly has genocidal aspects to it, it's worth thinking about that relationship.
- 02:10 So the Genocide Convention in 1948 assumes that there is such a thing as a people, right? It assumes that there is a society which has a top and a bottom, which has some way, which has some kind of a border where people are in or people are out.
So the convention acknowledges of people in law by presuming that they exist.
You can think of the act of genocide as a different kind of acknowledgement, right? You don't destroy something if it doesn't exist.
You don't seek to destroy something if it doesn't exist.
But the slightly tricky part about this is that very often, the act of destroying to people begins with the explicit verbal negation of its existence, right? And so, one of the larger points I want to try to make in this lecture, maybe the large point, is that Ukrainian culture, the notion of what Ukraine is, where it begins and where it stops, can't really be done outside of this larger notion of an encounter.
- 03:13 It can't really be done outside of the notion of an encounter with the Russian Empire, with the Soviet Union and contemporary Russia.
Now, as I try to make this argument, I wanna be clear about something very specific about this encounter, something which makes it a little bit different from the other

encounters we've talked about in this class, which is that this is an encounter which denies that it is taking place.

Okay.

This is, like, I'm sure you've all had moments like that in your lives, right? Perhaps on a Saturday night, encounters where, okay, that was like a really low, going really low, really fast, (students laughing) really early on a really important point.

All right.

But there's a certain strangeness to an encounter, or there's this, let me put this, there's a specific character to an encounter where one side denies then an encounter is actually taking place.

04:08 A third party looking in will say, "Well, yes, the encounter is happening," but there's nevertheless something specific about this.

So as a way to start, I want you to just remember that moment in the third quarter of the 19th century in the Russian Empire where the existence of the Ukrainian language is being denied.

It's a very specific thing to do, right? To go out of your way to deny something exists is a very specific form of action.

The Valuev decree of 1863 includes the famous passage that I'm quoting now, "The Ukrainian language never existed, does not exist, and shall never exist," right? So, or as we say, in Ukrainian, (speaking Ukrainian) Right? So I don't know. That was kind of a joke.

05:02 But there's a very specific, there's a very specific thing going on here when an encounter is being denied, right? So if it never existed, why would you refer to it, right? If it doesn't exist now, why are you banning it? But maybe the most interesting thing is the claim that it never will exist.

It never will exist.

There's this very specific kind of omniscience going on when I make the claim that something will not happen, right? I'm denying the basic unpredictability, or at least, the contingency of everything which is going to happen after I issue this decree.

In other words, this decree is doing a very specific kind of work.

The relationship between the emerging Russian imperial culture and the Ukrainian culture, which exists at the time, is taking on a very specific form.

06:02 Because of course, it's not as logically contradictory or silly as maybe I'm suggesting, the idea that the Ukrainian culture or language doesn't exist means that its existence can only be described as part of Russian culture, right? So it's not that there are no, it's not that there's nothing there, it's rather that it can only be described as existing as part of something else, right? And so when I say that you don't exist, what I'm really doing is that I'm saying that I do exist, right? So there's a fancy term for this, which is like Constitutive Other, which you're welcome to note down and use to impress your friends.

But the idea that you don't exist is how I show that I do exist.

What you are doing has no character of its own.

It is a version of what I am doing, right? And so there's a very specific thing which is going on here, whereby Russian culture as it emerges, is being defined not exactly against Ukrainian culture, but somehow riding along on top of Ukrainian culture.

07:14 Anything that seems to be Ukrainian is actually Russian, and anyone who denies this is moved out of history.

So this is where the categorical part of never will exists comes in.

So this class has been all about encounters, a basic argument about the nation in this class has been that no nation comes from nowhere, right? That's why all the founding stories are so implausible, like the one with the lady and the snake, and the one with the guy.

The founding stories are all really implausible, right? They're fun, they're silly, they don't make any sense.

All the stories of ethnogenesis, including the ones involving the aliens, they're all implausible, right? There's always some encounter.

And the whole argument of this class about how something specific emerged on the terrain that's now Ukraine involves, it involves the Khazars and the Vikings and the Byzantines and the Slavs and the Lithuanians and the Poles.

08:11 And of course, it also very much involves the Russians and the Soviet Union.

But there's something very specific going on from the 19th to 21st centuries where this encounter has an ideological quality to it that the others don't.

Or in the case of the Polish one, I would say, no longer have, no longer has, but in Russia, it clearly does.

So in order to get ourselves to see this and maybe get ourselves out of it, we have to kind of look at some trajectories in the Russian encounter with Ukraine, not from the point of view of how a Russian national ideology would see them, but just to note what this encounter looks like, right? So this very special thing, this is the overall special thing.

09:03 There have been lots of European empires, right? But they all have the feature, and write this down 'cause it's important, of starting in Europe except for one.

You see, what's very different about the Russian Empire is that it becomes an empire by going into Europe, right? By going into Europe.

The Russian Empire becomes the Russian Empire in 1721, having moved from Asia into Europe as a result of the cataclysm of 1648 onwards.

Remember that, and then there was that whole lecture about the 18th century and the collapse of Poland-Lithuania, the collapse of the Cossack states, the collapse of the Crimean Tatar state, all those things happening in the 18th century, leaving Russia in Europe.

But it's not a European empire that went outwards, right? It is a state which was centered at the edge of Europe in this relatively new city called Moscow, which first went south and east, and then its final stage of development went into Europe.

10:11 And the ambivalence of the relationship with Kyiv is built into that.

Because on the one hand, on the one hand, you become European by claiming Kyiv, right? 'Cause Kyiv has all those European things that you might want.

It has the old baptism, it has North European history, it has the Renaissance, it has the Baroque, it has all the European references.

It's just older than you are.

And by a lot, I mean by five centuries, right? Kyiv is four or five centuries old than Moscow.

It is a millennium older than St. Petersburg, right? That's a lot.

So the ambiguity is you become European by going to Kyiv.

But since you are the empire, you can't acknowledge that the periphery is better than you.

11:02 So this tension is built in from the very, very beginning.

On the one hand, we are European because Kyiv, but on the other hand, the people who are around Kyiv have to be the periphery and are therefore inferior.

That tension is built in from the moment that Kyiv, Chernihiv, these places come into the Russian Empire, and it's still very much present today, right? So the Russian Empire vis-a-vis Ukraine is simultaneously inferior and superior at the same time, right? It's superior because it's big and powerful and it's the empire, but it's also inferior because this is the place that actually allows us to become the Europeans, right? This is the place that allows us to become the Europeans, but we can never say that.

That can never be said out loud, right? So there's this deep tension which is built in to all of this.

12:01 Okay. So one part of this is the timing, right? Another part of this has to do with an encounter in religion.

There probably hasn't been enough religious history in this class, and it's an important element of the history of Ukraine, in particular, distinctiveness between Ukraine and Russia, not just because there's a Greek Catholic church in Ukraine and not in Russia, not just because church participation is much higher in Ukraine than it is in Russia, but maybe mainly because in Ukraine, there is not a clear relationship between church and state the way that there is in Moscow, both at present and historically.

For many centuries, the relationship between the church and the state, and including the last 30 years in the lands of Ukraine, has been rocky and uneven.

The church has been repressed by the state.

It's been a part from the state, but it's never been seamlessly woven together with the state, and that's an important difference.

13:05 But from the point of view of Moscow, this curious things happens, which I mentioned in the 17th century, but it's very, it's an important example of this dialectic.

The Russian Orthodox Church, such as it is, and now, I'm leaning very heavily on a dissertation by the wonderful Yale PhD graduate, Ievgeniia Sakal, the Russian Orthodox Church, such as it is, takes on its form and its own narration of what it is in an encounter with Ukraine.

So if you remember back to the 18th century when the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth collapses, there are all of these educated churchmen in places like Kyiv and Chernihiv and they've been having these debates with each other, and they've been having debates with the Catholics and the Protestants.

They've been besieged by the Counter-Reformation.

They've been dealing with the Jesuits for decades.

These are very erudite men, and suddenly, they're confronted with this new situation in which there's no longer the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to deal with, no longer the reformation, Counter-Reformation, all that's gone, but there are these fellows in Moscow, and they're suddenly subordinate to them.

14:06 So what is the story that you tell? There's a political story, I'll return to that, but there's also a religious dispute which takes place.

And then this religious dispute, authorities in Moscow and authorities in Ukraine have different ideas.

And the authorities in Moscow have the power.

The authorities in Ukraine have the arguments.

But what happens over time, and this is all verges on being a general truth, the people with the power will eventually figure out the arguments and they will eventually use them.

So within the space of a generation, the church authorities in Moscow are also using the same sources and the same kinds of arguments that the church authorities in Ukraine are using.

In other words, the church authorities in Moscow, by way of Ukraine, start reading the French and the Latin, and they start borrowing the arguments from the Western theologians, and they start disputing and doing all the things that the Ukrainians are doing, and what they come up with is this interesting claim.

They claim, well, the reason that we are different, and we are right about theological matters, is that we, the Russian Orthodox Church, are basically the unbroken, continuation of the Byzantine church that nothing has really happened.

15:11 It's just all a placid pool of non-events.

"We are pure." Right? And this is, if you know anything about Western Orthodoxy, this is the account to this day, right? That it's a non, basically a non-historical institution, but this argument that they're a non-historical institution emerges as a result of historical encounter with Ukraine, very much like the political point, which I made in the lectures a couple of weeks ago.

The idea that Kyiv and Moscow are somehow connected, organically connected, that Moscow fulfills itself in Kyiv and vice versa and all of this, That is also an argument which

was made by Ukrainian churchmen in the late 17th century facing a new position of power, right? And you'll remember, it's a pretty clever argument, at least in this short term.

16:03 If you are in Kyiv, and suddenly you're being ruled by Moscow, you make the argument, "Hey, you and Moscow, everything actually came from us in Kyiv.

"Therefore, we're very important." But given a generation or two, that argument will be turned around against you, and it will become something much more like Kyiv fulfills itself in Moscow.

It all began in Kyiv, but everything fulfills itself in Moscow.

And so now, the role of Kyiv is to be subordinate to Moscow.

But the point is that that whole argument never emerges without Ukraine, right? So all of these important steps in the history of what's going to become Russian culture are deeply, organically connected with Ukraine.

Take a literature, right? Take a literature.

Okay. Who's the first important Russian writer besides Pushkin? - [Student] Gogol? - Yes, Gogol.

Who is from? - [Student] Ukraine.

17:00 - As everyone knows, from Ukraine, right? And his first stories are about Ukraine, and his family is Ukrainian.

Gogol is the turning point where the bilinguality stops being Ukrainian-Polish and moves towards being Ukrainian-Russian, right? From the point of view of the 20th or the 21st century, you might think, "Well, the Ukrainians and the Russians, they've always been together, blah." No. It was Ukrainian-Polish was the normal bilingual character situation for a long time.

In the 19th century, Ukrainian-Russians starts to become the normal one, and you have these Ukrainians who write in Russian.

If you don't know Gogol, by the way, after exams, I know, but you might wanna start reading some of his short stories.

If you like the grotesque, if you have a taste for things like Edgar Allen Poe or Kafka, it's truly extraordinary, wonderful stuff.

But the cliché is that we all come out from under Gogol's overcoat, which is a play on words because like an overcoat, but also, "The overcoat" is one of Gogol's most important, one of his funniest and most important stories.

18:03 But Russian literature comes from this Ukrainian story, right? So in all of these levels, we have the same problem.

Another is with educated elites.

So again, by the 20th century, there are very impressive Soviet educational institutions.

And by the 19th century, early 20th century, Russian imperial ones as well.

But when these two societies merge, the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy and Kyiv is far more important than any educational institution in the Russian Empire.

And so during the 18th century, graduates to the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy are flooding Petersburg, which is the capital after 1721, with the educated elites who help govern the empire, right? So in all of these ways, the Ukraine is what's needed to make a Russian self-assertion, but that Russian self-assertion has to negate its own sources, right? It has to negate its own sources, or else, it will seem incomplete.

19:03 Something related happens at the level of history where the Russian story, as I've just described it, it has to be a story about political legitimacy, right? And again, you can see an extreme version of this in Putin today where Russia exists and has the right to rule because of baptism in Kyiv in 988.

Nothing that's happened between then and now really matters.

What you have is an unbroken right to rule as a result of a kind of metaphysical event a long time ago.

It's a version of, I mean, it is actually very much like and is a version of these medieval or early modern stories where a family says, "By the way, we're descended from wolves, and not just any wolves, but the ones who founded Rome," or whatever, right? I'm sort of, that's kind of a Habsburg joke.

20:00 But when families, in families, you have families, you may know this.

Families have these kind of, probably from your family tells you this story, like you had this great uncle, he actually invented the airplane.

If you let families go on like that, they eventually just, everybody comes, has descended from some king or whatever.

I'm making a serious point or trying to, which is that history begins with a genealogy that legitimizes eternal power, right? So if you're a family, you have trouble getting at keeping power, getting power, not so hard, blood and treasure.

It's keeping power which is hard, and that requires some kind of legitimating ideology and the idea that you're gonna keep power forever into the future makes more sense if you can explain why you've had power or should have had power forever into the past, and so there's some kind of story about how, what, where you came from, right? So a lineage of power, and that's where political history comes from, okay.

So now, if you're in the 19th century and it's Ukraine, the move that you make is you counter political history with social history, and that's Hrushevsky, right? That's Mykhailo Hrushevsky.

21:05 You then say, "No. History isn't just about some kind of legitimating story that makes sense to the people who are in power.

It's about actual continuities in culture." Right? That history is about the people, okay.

Then you get into this conversation, which continues to this day where if I say, "History is not about the power, it's about the people." Okay. At first glance, that might seem very much a matter of justice.

But the obvious question is, okay, who's the people then? Are the Jews the people? Are the Poles the people? Is everybody who's on the terrain the people? Or is it just the people who know, if history is about the songs and the stories and the language, what about the people who don't know the songs and the stories and the language, but live on the same territory, right? So this is where there begins in Ukraine, but not just in Ukraine.

It's just Ukraine's a very interesting and clear case of this.

22:01 And Ukraine begins this, forgive me, like this dialectic where neither of these positions is, it can be exactly right, right? The idea that history is about the people is attractive, right? But if you push it to an extreme that makes history just about the ethnicity and it becomes ethnic nationalism, then there's a counter argument which says, "No, the people are defined by action.

The nation is a daily plebiscite." And so it doesn't matter whether they're Jews or Germans or Poles or whatever, it's about participation, and cooperation, and things like this.

That's the political nation.

But if you push that all the way to this extreme, then everything is politics.

Why can't I make compromises with some other nation? Maybe I can just take money from this guy over here.

What's wrong with that? It's all part of me being political.

And this is the political nation, right? And so neither these positions can quite be correct, at least take into an extreme.

They're in some kind of communication with one another the entire time, and that discussion is going on today.

23:02 It has to do partly with the Jews, the Jews in Ukrainian history, which is an example of culture which we have to spend at least a moment on.

The Jews of Ukraine are there because of currents in Polish history.

The Jews of Ukraine become Russian imperial subjects after Ukraine ceases to become part of Poland.

The Jews of Ukraine, see over the course of the 19th century, their traditional way of life essentially broken down as a result of the military draft and other things.

And the Jews of Ukraine, or some of them in the late 19th century build up a kind of a modern Yiddish literature.

The most important example of this, which you will have heard of, if you come from these traditions is all of Sholem Aleichem.

Sholem Aleichem is basically, and now, I'm stealing idea from my colleague, Amelia Glaser.

but what Sholem Aleichem is basically doing is he's taking Gogol and his portraits to the Ukrainian countryside and making them gentler, and bringing the Jews into the center of the conversation, whereas Gogol at the beginning of the 19th century was very much about taking mystical pre-enlightenment beliefs and working them into modern literature.

24:23 What Sholem Aleichem was doing was taking Yiddish language.

That's important. He's writing Yiddish.

Yiddish language literature and using it.

Yiddish, which is an old language and only newly a literary language, taking Yiddish and using it to write about the problems of modernity.

And what are the problems of modernity? The problems of modernity are socialism, romantic love, right.

So the position in Tevye the Dairyman is that he has these daughters, and you guys know this, "Fiddler on the Roof," right? "Fiddler on the Roof," right.

So it's the problems in modernity from the point of view of a Jewish dad, basically, right? And the girls, all the daughters all have some, they all do something unexpected thing, but each one of the things they do represents modernity, like the socialist, the rejecting the church, but even romantic love itself is a modern idea here.

25:11 Okay.

So this is, so the Jews are, if there's going to be a talk of culture in Ukraine, the Jews and Jewish history have to be part of it, and that includes the broad destruction of Jewish culture at the beginning, not of the second, but the First World War when the Jews of Western Russia were deported, which was one of the causes of the pogroms, which happened most intensively in Ukraine during the war.

We have to also talk about the assimilation of Jews in Ukraine to the Russian language before, but especially after the Bolshevik Revolution.

And then in Ukraine in particular, and I'm just very briefly referring to material that you've read and we've talked about, but the mass murder of most Jews in Ukraine during the Holocaust.

26:00 And then after that, the return of Jew, not, return is the wrong word, but the immigration or the movement of Jews from elsewhere in the Soviet Union to what is now Ukraine.

So Ukraine is now one of the most important Jewish countries in the world, numerically speaking.

It's one of the few, you can count them on one hand, countries that have a Jewish president.

It is the only country in the world that will ever, now, I'm gonna make a prediction, that will ever have a Jewish president elected by 70% or more of the vote.

I don't think that's ever gonna happen, because it won't happen in Israel because there're always two candidates, right? So it's hard to, see, I'm cheating. I'm using math.

But this Jewish Ukrainian culture is a post-war, second, third, fourth generation Ukrainian culture, but it's clearly part of what one could think of as a political nation, right? So the greatest, again, so now, we're in a situation where the greatest Ukrainian warlord in history is a Jew, which proves that God is Jewish and has a sense of humor.

- 27:02 (students laughing) In the Soviet Union, there's a version, and we've talked about this, of how Ukraine becomes the Constitutive Other.
- The Soviet Union needs things from Ukraine.
- The Soviet Union needs for Ukraine to be a nation, but then not to be a nation, right? So it needs for Ukraine.
- So, Ukraine, Stalin, Lenin, they know that Ukraine is a nation.
- They need Ukraine.
- They want as much of Europe as they can, but they have to settle for Ukraine.
- They need Ukraine to be a nation, but they also need it not to be a threat, and so that's the dialectic of the 1920s and 1930s where the Ukrainian nation, Ukrainian literature, Ukrainian people are educated.
- Literature is supported for a while, and then it breaks in the early 1930s.
- 28:01 In a similar way, the Ukrainian economy has to exist and not exist.
- The Soviet Union needs the Ukrainian economy because of, and this is a theme which literally goes back, I mean, a lot of things, people say, "Go back to the ancient Greeks," but mostly, we're just having fun.
- In this case, it really goes back to the ancient Greeks.
- Ukraine is a bread basket, right? Athens depends on grain from what is now Ukraine, just as the Soviet Union depended upon grain from what is now Ukraine.
- It's a bread basket.
- So they need the economy, but they don't want it to be the Ukrainian economy.
- It has to be part of a larger project, right? If they had let the Ukrainian peasants just grow the grain, they would've had bigger yields than they did under collected by as agriculture.
- But collective by as agriculture meant that it was all under control, and it would be the Soviet Union, which would be in charge of the distribution and the exports, right? So the Ukrainian economy has to exist and has to not exist, which is a very brief way of referring to something that we have talked about before, which is the death of about 4 million inhabitants of Soviet Ukraine during the 1930s.
- 29:18 Something similar can be said about Ukrainian culture after the Second World War.
- And again, now I'm reviewing a theme.
- So we need it, but we don't need it.
- And this is, during the Second World War, we need, we is now the Politburo, right? We is Stalin.
- We need Ukraine because the war is being fought in Ukraine.
- And so, we'll talk up the Ukrainian nation.
- We'll even talk about Bohdan Khmelnytsky as being a hero while the war is going on.
- When the war is over, this is all gonna change.
- Under Zhdanov, this is all going to change.
- Ukraine is gonna be suspicious.
- The Western Soviet Union is going to be suspicious.
- And then Khrushchev is going to find this brilliant solution.
- And I mean, I don't mean that ironically, and as politically, it has been very powerful.
- 30:04 If you need the Ukrainian nation, you need Ukrainian culture, but you also don't need it.
- What do you do? You say it's real, but it's reality is expressed in its merging with Russia into something bigger, right? And so the brilliance of this move in 1954, you remember 1954, it's when they gave out the cigarette, like millions of cigarette packs with the words, 300 years, on them.
- Also, nightgowns, socks too, I think.

The brilliance of that is that you're acknowledging that Ukraine is real, but you're just saying Ukraine's history went in a certain direction.

In 1654, Ukrainians made this choice and it binds on them forever.

It's been done, right? So let's just remember that.

And the Soviet Union is a version of this choice, which was made 300 years ago.

So Ukraine is real.

It's just that Ukraine's existence is now meaningful as part of a larger unit with Russia, and that is the version of how to think about Ukraine, which works extremely well in Soviet Russia and in Soviet Ukraine for a lot of Soviet Ukrainians for a very long time.

31:13 Something like that, some version of that from 1954.

And this is an expression, again, these things aren't just made up.

These things are expressions of the actual politics of the actual Soviet Union.

So this might come as a surprise, but there haven't actually been that many Russian leaders of Russia in the narrow sense of Russia, right? So if Russia claims the ancient dynasty from Kyiv, I mean, they were Scandinavians.

And then the Romanovs, at least after Catherine, I mean, the only Romanov we can be sure of after Catherine was Catherine because you always know who the mother is, right? I really have to stop because I don't have enough time to talk about Catherine the way that I'd like to talk about Catherine.

32:09 But in the case of the Romanovs, the only Romanov, I mean, this is dead serious now about the succession.

The only Romanov you can be sure of after Catherine is Catherine herself, and Catherine was a German.

So that's not a Russian origin story, right? And then the Bolsheviks, okay, Lenin is maybe the most famous Russian of the 20th century, but how many Russian grandparents did he have? That was like a high level question.

I'm looking at the TAs.

One, one.

Stalin's a Georgian.

Khrushchev is from Russia, just barely but he grew up in Ukraine.

Brezhnev, as Jenny has taught me, was born in Ukraine and had Ukrainian nationality as his passport nationality, and changed it to Russian, changed it to Russia.

So you have to get, oh, and Gorbachev, half Ukrainian family from southern Russia, and I am old enough to remember people in Moscow making fun of his accent and saying that, "He's actually from Ukraine, this guy." So you have to basically get to Yeltsin or Putin before you're talking about Russians in an unambiguous sense running Russia, right? And so the story of how we need them, right? We need them, but we can't say we need them, actually reflects the history of the Soviet Union in all of these ways.

33:30 It also reflects that the history of Soviet industrialization, where much of what is important is in Ukraine, the coal and the steel, and then later, the rockets.

A lot of what is important is in Ukraine, and so we need Ukraine.

We need Ukraine.

We need it more than we say we can need it.

And so that's why what we need has to be incorporated into this story about how what we need doesn't really exist on its own, exists with us.

And in case I forget to say this, the point of all of this is that one can't talk about Ukrainian culture without all the encounters, but this is a specific kind of encounter, right? This is a specific kind of encounter.

34:12 It's a little tiny bit like US history where, with the attitude of whites towards Blacks where, "We are us because of you.

You're what makes us different, but we can't acknowledge you for that reason, you see."

The different, see, that's like, it's that same kind of pattern.

The difference is the Europe part, right? That the Europe part plays out differently, but it's that kind of move, right? It's that kind of move.

So just in case I forget to say that that's the argument, that it's an encounter, but it's not like other encounters.

It's not like other encounters.

But the point of culture is also, and now, we're gonna get, now, we're gonna talk a little bit more in depth for the next 15 minutes about the late Soviet period in the contemporary period.

The the point of culture though, would be that even though all these things, all these contingencies I'm insisting on are true, that if you're creating culture, you're trying just to create, like you're trying to create, right? You're trying to create.

35:11 And much of the protests that happen from the sixties onward are kind of in that spirit where the notion of Ukrainian culture is not that we're trying to defend Ukrainian national culture, we're just trying to defend culture.

We're just trying to be ourselves.

And the move that Ukrainian dissidents make, especially in the 70s, is they say, "Look, it's not about Ukrainian culture, Russian culture writ large.

It's not even really primarily about Russian culture and its hegemony, although that's a problem.

What it's really about is the individual." This is the move they make in the 70s, right? They say human rights includes the right to be from the culture that you're from, and that's something inside you as a person, right? And so that has to do, so that is your normality.

36:04 So I'm gonna mention a couple of crucial examples of this, and there's only really time for a couple, but one is 1965 when, this is early Brezhnev, Ukrainians are being persecuted, and at the same time, a film comes out, which I urge you to see, called "Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors" which is by a Georgian Armenian, Sergei Parajanov, but it's based on a story by a Ukrainian writer called Kotsiubynsky, and it's set in the extreme West Carpathians, extreme west of Ukrainian.

It's not only in Ukrainian, it's in Carpathian dialect of Ukrainian.

It's not socialist realism.

It's magical realism.

And it's quite weird.

It's quite weird and beautiful, and it's one of the very best Soviet films, if that's even the word.

37:01 Apropos of this film, there were protests about the oppression of Ukrainians.

One of the people who took part in these protests was a poet called Vasyl Stus, who loses his job as a result.

I'm gonna read to you one of his poems to make this point that sometimes culture is just trying to be culture, right? And that a lot of the defensive culture in the late Soviet period was on that basis, that all these things that I've been explaining to you, people understood.

That was there. That was sorted out.

But then, somehow it's all meaningless unless there's a, there, there, right? Unless the culture itself is there.

So Stus goes to the Gulag twice.

He ends up dying after a hunger strike in 1985.

But this is the kind of poetry he wrote.

This one is called "A Stranger Lives My Life and Wears My Body." "It seems to me that it is not I who live, but another someone lives for me in the world taking my shape, no eyes, nor ears, nor hands, nor feet, nor mouth, estrange to my own body.

38:11 And a chunk of pain and closing myself, suspended in the abyss.
 And you, though born, just burned and never grew into the body.
 You never entered the flesh.
 Just a passerby between the worlds, having sunk to the bottom of before in existence.
 A hundred nights ahead, and a hundred nights behind, and between them, a mute doll,
 burned white from self-inflicted pain like a speck of hell.
 The laconic cry of the universe, a tiny ray of the sun trapped and estranged in the body.
 You are awaiting another birth for yourself, but death entered into you long ago." That's
 my translation from yesterday.
 It's much prettier in Ukrainian.
 I'm gonna resist the temptation.
 It's really nice in Ukrainian.
 (speaking in Ukrainian) It's very nice in Ukrainian.

39:01 Learn Ukrainian. Read it in Ukrainian.
 So Stus goes, is sent, is imprisoned.
 He's released.
 By the time he comes out, there's a human rights movement, the Ukrainian Helsinki
 Group, he defends it and then joins it, is sent to the Gulag.
 Again, he's sent to Perm.
 The Gulag in the 70s is much smaller, but it still exists.
 Perm is where I think four members of the Ukrainian Helsinki Group die.
 He is one of them after a hunger strike.
 I'm gonna read you another one of his poems.
 We're just gonna do him as a poet today.
 This is not my translation.
 This is Alan Zhukovski translation, which was just published a few months ago.
 This one is called "The Lord Has Started Being Born Within Me." "The Lord has started
 being born within me, and half-recalled and half-forgotten, waits till I depart from life.
 It looks as if he is outside me, at the edge of death where living people should not dare
 to enter.

40:00 My grandchild and my ancestor, God waits.
 Together on my own, that's how we live, how we exist when nobody is near.
 Misfortune thunders like a cannonade.
 He is salvation, so, white-lipped, I say, 'Please save me for a second, Lord, and then,
 recovered, I will save myself alone without assistance.' But he wants to leave my borders
 and desires to finalize my demolition by salvation, seeking to force me from myself amid
 the gusts of chilling winds, a saber from its scabbard.
 He bides his time and wants to get outside to make the candle of my pain go out so that
 the darkness of obedience would save me by the touch of Otherness, another form of
 life, another name no longer mine, along with countless people inside the kingdom of the
 frenzied God who wishes to be born from deep within me, but I'll preserve that healing
 flame for longer, to not get caught too early by the darkness.
 My pain's black candle fills my road with light and represents my stealthy victory." So
 culture carries a shadow with it, right? Culture stands for itself.

41:03 These poems are, they're not about politics, but culture stands for itself, but there's a
 shadow alongside it.
 The shadow from the 1860s from the Valuev Decree, the shadow from the 1930s from
 famine and terror, the shadow of the 1970s of the assimilation and the forced integration
 from the top, which means that when Ukraine emerges as an independent state in the

1990s, culture is pursued very, very gently.

There is no strong Ukrainization policy in the beginning.

Kyiv and Ukraine are characterized by bilinguality, by code-switching, by surzhyk, which is the mixing of the two languages.

The Europe is portrayed in the beginning.

Oh, there's another thing which is very important about Ukrainian culture, which is, especially at the beginning, oligarchical pluralism, oligarchical pluralism by which I mean when you have several different oligarchs with several different foundations and several different TV stations and several different this and that, that's a different situation from when you have one.

42:18 It may not be the ideal situation, but it does mean that different views emerge about art and history and other things with different patrons.

That was very characteristic of Ukraine in the 1990s, right? And remain, it's coming less so, but it's still, it's a feature, it's a feature of Ukraine.

Okay.

So the early attitude towards Europe, I mentioned one novel, which is again, for fun, Yuri Andrukhovych, "Perversion." In this novel, Europe figures as this kind of postmodern, very distant, beautiful thing, which we never might, which we probably never get to, or if we get to, it'll be a result of all kinds of improbable drunken adventures.

43:03 That's like the postmodern carnival version of where we are.

We are this outskirts.

We are this province.

We reach Europe with our spectacular literature basically.

This changes, I would say, around the time of the Maidan about what you've read a book and had a lecture where Europe starts to become much more practical.

where Europe is not, because the politics of wanting to join Europe follows the culture of wanting to join Europe, right? And the culture of wanting to join Europe has to do with younger people who see Europe as a future.

And so Europe becomes, somewhere around the 2010, it's ceasing to become a kind of strange thing which is desired, a strange object of desire and more kind of practical place where we might go.

And a key figure here would be Serhyi Zhadan, Serhyi Zhadan, who in Kharkiv, in 2014 had his skull broken for, this is, I mean, it could not be more symbolic of the themes of this lecture, had his skull broken after he refused to bow down to Russians in a quite literal sense.

44:12 Zhadan is a great novelist and also a great poet.

He also has a ska band, which is a rare threefer, I have to say.

And when he does win the Nobel Prize for literature, I want that ska band right in the middle of what they, all right.

Okay.

So Zhadan would be an example of something else, which is very important, which is the eastern re-anchoring of Ukrainian culture, right? So I've made this point, which is slightly awkward if you're from Ivano-Frankivsk or Lviv which is that the historical function of Galicia was basically 1870s to 1970, 1980s, maybe 1990s.

45:01 Right. There was a very special wolf for Galicia in that time, and it remains a kind of repository, a safe place to go, so to speak, in Ukrainian culture, but Zhadan is from a Russian speaking environment, and he chooses to write only in Ukrainian and express himself in Ukrainian absent emergency situations.

So Zhadan was doing that the entire time.

Zhadan, by the way, is also someone very much worth reading, remarkable short stories if you don't wanna invest in a whole literature.

Tremendous, what is the title, Jen? Like the last, "The last," or is it "The First Gay Club?"

Do you remember? (student speaking away from mic) Okay. He has like, among of the things, he has really good stories about, he has really good stories about things which approach being political without quite being political, right? So his story about the gay club is a good example of that.

46:00 Anyway, this eastern anchor point is very important because some people were doing it all along, but then 2014, in Maidan was a turning point where major figures in Ukrainian culture realized that they weren't really welcome in Russia anymore and made a kind of turn.

One of them was someone called Svyatoslav "Slava" Vakarchuk, who is the lead singer of Okean Elzy, which is the biggest rock band.

Traditionally, a very big following in Belarus and Russia.

After 2014, this became awkward.

Another was the comedian and writer, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who up until 2014, had a very big following, a very big career in Russia, and appears in Russian television until I think early 2000, maybe late 2013, early 2014, but then he realizes something has changed, right? So this is a turning point for a lot of people.

And then in 2022, we've reached a more dramatic turning point, extremely dramatic turning point and where things are happening so quickly and so violently that it's hard to characterize what's happening, but a dramatic example of this is, is the writer, Volodymyr Rafeienko, who was here at Yale a couple of weeks ago.

47:08 Volodymyr Rafeienko who wrote only in Russia, who didn't even know Ukrainian, which is unusual, and who ceased communicating in Russian entirely with this war and is now a Ukrainian language writer, which is not an easy thing to do, not an easy thing to do.

It's kind of a remarkable thing for him to be doing.

He said something very interesting when he was at Yale.

He said, "We don't choose language. Language chooses us." And it's a strange kind of freedom, which like, there's profundity, there's profundity in that.

What's that? - [Student] You don't master language.

- Yeah, you don't, right.

Yeah. "You don't master language, language masters you." Right. "You don't master language, language masters you." Yeah.

(speaking in foreign language) So another example of this would be another writer who was just at Yale, Stanislav Aseyev, also from an entirely Russian speaking background, a writer now in Ukrainian, and a Ukrainian writer whose most recent book is about torture, and it's actually one of the best bits of prison writing that's been produced, I think in Eastern Europe or maybe anywhere else.

48:19 So the final point that I wanna make about culture is that we're looking, okay, two more points, indulge me.

We're looking at a new centrality of Kyiv, a Kyiv is something that hasn't been before.

It's a Kyiv which is asserting itself as a European capital, and that is something new.

Kyiv has been many things but a European capital among other European capitals in a modern sense is new, and a proud Kyiv is something new.

And I'm gonna read a poem from Stus, which is about Soviet Kyiv, and you'll see why I'm doing this.

49:06 It's "Thousand Year Old Kyiv," and this is from, translated by Bohdan Tokarskyi and Uilleam Blacker.

"One-thousand-year-old Kyiv, fancied, feeling young again.

Suddenly, Kyiv was aware of hotels, trolleybuses, trams and trains, the Paton Bridge, the ungainly buildings on Khreshchatyk.

Kyiv licked the rough asphalt with its pagan tongue, the slopes of the Green Theatre became overrun by martens, squirrels, aurochs, and the god Yarylo's roaring heathen laughter drove the Dnipro's waves.

Kyiv coughed asthmatically.

Through the metro's drafts, the electric trains fearfully rattled, as a dozen layers of ground, white from human bones, horses' skulls, and gray ash of funeral pyres, rippled like the skull of an angry bull's neck.

Kyiv strained but then gave up, just how the devil to lift this whole assemblage of new-builds, avenues, motorways, and the stately birthless bellies of the inhabitants? May sacred forces strike you down, heathen Kyiv hurled a curse.

But then it saw a pack of pioneers, and, ashamed, it bowed its head.

It hid itself away without a peep." Pioneers, you have to know.

50:01 Pioneers means communist youth group, right? So Kyiv finally submits.

That Kyiv of is now gone, right? The people who are now in charge of the government in Kyiv, the people are now in charge of culture in Kyiv are of a different generation that isn't just post-Soviet or anti-soviet, it's just something else.

And the very last point that I wanted to make is that, although it's too soon to evaluate what this war means for culture, one of the very striking things about this war is the production of culture within it.

So other people have noted that this is the most recorded war of all time, which is true.

I would note that that act of recording by a journalist is also an act of culture, which requires corporeal risk-taking as well as intellect, but just the culture itself is going on.

Not to sound too romantic or pathetic about it, but right down to and including in the trenches, right? I have colleagues who are still giving their lectures from where they are right in the trenches, and the production of poetry and other forms of culture goes on.

51:02 So I'm just going to read you one more poem.

Please indulge me.

This is from Yuliya Musakovska, who's a mom who works in IT.

She wrote this in late March, 2022 for her collection, which is published under the title "Iron." Her poem goes like this, this is March.

"Such problematic, such frightful poems, full of anger, so politically incorrect.

No beauty in these poems, no aesthetic at all.

The metaphors withered and fell to pieces before they could bloom.

The metaphors buried in children's playgrounds under hastily raised crosses, dead in unnatural poses by the gates of houses covered in dust.

They prepared meals over an open fire.

They did try to survive.

It was a dehydration that they perished under the rubble.

Shot in a car under a white flag made from a sheet with colorful backpacks over their shoulder.

52:06 They lie on the asphalt face down next to the cats and dogs.

I'm sorry to say so, but such verses are all we have for you today.

Dear ladies and gentlemen, spectators of the theater of war.