Roman Adrian Cybriwsky


Ukraine’s capital city of Kyiv can seem a contradictory place: huge, new skyscrapers stand next to crumbling but beautiful historical buildings; large, black luxury cars clog the streets next to packed, cheap minibuses; constant signs of construction evoke a city in progress. Roman Adrian Cybriwsky’s *Kyiv, Ukraine: The City of Domes and Demons from the Collapse of Socialism to the Mass Uprising of 2013–2014* not only captures the inherent messiness of the city but also contextualizes the cityscapes within Ukraine’s complex postsocialist political and economic shifts.

The book is organized thematically, placing segments about the Communist regime in Ukraine and postsocialist conflicts over the city’s historical memory throughout various chapters. Each chapter is divided into multiple short essays, often based largely on anecdotes or focused on an issue seen through the lens of one person or political group. This organization allows the book to read smoothly and for the author’s voice to guide the reader around the city and its history. Cybriwsky’s range of methodologies is based around extensive participant-observation throughout the city, as well as interviews with interesting figures and city experts and analysis of historical and statistical material. He largely avoids jargon and theoretical arguments, making the book imminently approachable for non-scholars but helpfully explanatory for academics looking to deepen their understanding of Ukraine or postsocialist cityscapes.

Cybriwsky’s research took place mainly under the governance of the Party of Regions, headed by Viktor Yanukovych, who was elected in 2010 and deposed following mass mobilizations in 2013–2014. Cybriwsky examines the relationship between the city and its politics through recurring figures of high-ranking political officials, journalists attempting to uncover truths about Kyiv and risking their lives in the process, and grassroots city activists. These figures intersect with several key themes throughout the book: the city’s increasing gap between rich and poor, the complex and sometimes exploitative relationship between development and preservation, and problematic social attitudes that shape the city’s postsocialist landscape, including racism, sexism, and homophobia (242–247).

Thus, the book focuses on the shifting nature of Kyiv during the Yanukovych years. Many segments examine the relationships of Party of Regions politicians and their businessmen-allies to the city, particularly enhancing the themes of the increasing gap between rich and poor and of the relationship between
development and preservation of the historical city. For example, a helipad on the banks of the Dnipro River in the city center, which restricts residents’ access to the riverbanks, was built for the President but remained largely unused (96–100). It serves as a shorthand reminder for the economic and political prowess of high-ranking politicians throughout the volume. Nearly-empty housing districts in the historic city center present an image of the attractive exterior hiding a shoddy interior that symbolically mirrors the governing regime Yanukovych attempted to establish (200–206). Cybriwsky cleverly uses the city as a gauge for political developments throughout the book, showing that the capital and national politics are seamlessly intertwined.

As deeply as Cybriwsky attempts to penetrate the city’s secrets, he, like many others, faces truly threatening barriers. Describing the risks that contemporary journalists continue to take to expose politicians’ serious exploitation of their positions – for which they have sometimes paid with their lives, most notoriously in the case of Heorhiy Gongadze – the author contributes to the robust challenges to political impunity in the city and beyond (293–295). Cybriwsky himself exposes some of the seedier aspects of Kyiv’s “development,” such as exclusive clubs with “face control” (192–196) and the overt sex tourism taking place in the center of the city (277–279), as well as the racist policing of African merchants at markets on the outskirts of the city (240–242).

Cybriwsky balances these pessimistic experiences with stories of more successful initiatives, including those of one organization called Save Old Kyiv (297). This group spearheaded the protection of an outdoor art space from a development project (301), and its members participated in the takeover of Hostynyi Dvir, a historic trade center in the Podil district in Kyiv that was slated for development into an office space and shopping center (304). Cybriwsky describes the long-term occupation and protests against the development of the building, which, ultimately, seem to have been unsuccessful in preventing any development but will hopefully have a positive impact on exactly how the building will be changed. The examples of the activist work of groups like Save Old Kyiv are a significant counter to the impunity of politicians to make decisions about how to develop the city without citizens’ consent, but the author is forced to leave many of these cases unresolved.

Cybriwsky himself is a strong voice throughout the volume, using his position as a multi-lingual Ukrainian-American scholar to gain various vantage points depending on the context and his interlocutors. His opinions about the negative effects of various development projects, sex tourism, and the impunity of politicians are unavoidable throughout the book. But the author does not claim to be without bias and, indeed, he is able to provide an honest engagement with this complicated city because he does not hesitate to provide his