



MY WIKO YEAR  
ANDRII PORTNOV

---

Born in 1979 in Dnipropetrovsk, Ukraine. Graduated from Dnipropetrovsk (M.A. in History) and Warsaw (M.A. in Cultural Studies) Universities. He wrote his Ph.D. dissertation at Ivan Krypiakevych Institute for Ukrainian Studies in Lviv and defended it in 2005. In the years 2006–10, he worked as Editor-in-Chief of the *Ukraina Moderna* journal in humanities. In January 2012, he co-founded *Historians.in.ua* intellectual web portal and since then has been one of its editors. In the years 2007–11, he lectured or conducted research at the Universities of Cambridge, Helsinki, and Vilnius as well as at the Centre for Holocaust and Genocide Studies in Amsterdam and Centre d'études des mondes russe, caucasien et centre-européen (CERCEC) in Paris. The majority of his publications are devoted to intellectual history, historiography, and memory studies in Eastern and Central Europe. His publications include the books: *Historians and their Histories: The Faces and Images of Ukrainian Historiography in the 20th Century* (in Ukrainian, 2011); *Ukrainian Exercises with History* (in Russian, 2010); “Between ‘Central Europe’ and the ‘Russian World’” (in Ukrainian, 2009); *Scholarship in Exile* (in Ukrainian, 2008).  
– E-mail: [aportnov2001@gmail.com](mailto:aportnov2001@gmail.com)

I.

My pre-Wiko story of a historian, essayist, and editor is not very typical for either post-Soviet or Western academia. After graduating from Dnipropetrovsk University, instead of focusing on writing a dissertation or looking for a job (the path undertaken by all my student fellows), I decided to apply for the master’s program in Cultural Studies at the

University of Warsaw. After my Polish adventure came to an end, instead of trying to stay in Poland and continue research there (the path undertaken by almost all other students from my year from the post-Soviet countries), I returned to Ukraine to defend my Ph.D. thesis. My Polish M.A. thesis was about the Polish images of the Balkans in the 19th century; my Ukrainian Ph.D. thesis was about Ukrainian emigration in 20th-century Poland. But before my Ph.D. defense in Lviv, I accepted the proposal to become a part of the two-year research project on the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth at the University of Trier. When this project came to end, I returned to Ukraine, but not to my native southern Dnipropetrovsk or western Lviv, to which I had already become accustomed, but to the capital city of Kiev/Kyiv. My naive belief that the Polish and German experiences together with the Ukrainian Ph.D. would almost automatically assure me at least some academic position crashed during the year of 2005. So I tried working as an editor of a daily TV political program and as a journalist and translator from English and Polish.

In the year of 2006, my colleagues and I started editing and publishing the new series of *Ukraina Moderna*, a journal of the humanities (I am very grateful to the founder of the journal, Professor Yaroslav Hrytsak, who invited us to work and supported our plans). Our aim was not just to establish the first regular peer-reviewed publication in Ukraine, but to create a space of communication for the people interested in Ukrainian and East European Studies all around the world and for Ukrainian historians from various parts of the country (I would now say that the second task was more difficult than the first one). I think our journal was a real success and it has helped me a lot to experience the variety of academic life both in Ukraine and abroad. It also gave me a chance to feel I was an “independent researcher” in Ukraine. Invitations to various international conferences, seminars, and summer schools have helped me to preserve this status. At the same time, this constellation forced me to move from the topics I preferred in my student years – historiography, the history of old Rus, and early modern times – to the more current issues: memory and genocide studies, identity debates, and comparative research on the post-Soviet transformation.

In the years 2008–11, I published four books, three in Ukrainian (including the rewritten version of my Ph.D. thesis) and one in Russian (an introduction into the debates on history and identity in post-Soviet Ukraine, published by Memorial in Moscow). During those years I also lectured or researched abroad, and my articles were published in English, German, French, and Polish, as well as Russian and Belarusian. I mention this

to stress the peculiarity of my situation: an attempt to integrate myself into both regional and international academic life and not to abandon Ukraine and Ukrainian historiography.

## II.

As you could see from the previous chapter, on the one hand, I have gained relative independence from official post-Soviet academia, unlike the absolute majority of my Ukrainian colleagues, but, on the other hand, unlike my Western colleagues, I have never experienced being a postdoc or enjoying a sabbatical year. That is why the year spent at Wiko was (and still is) so exceptional for me. I decided to devote it to finishing my book about Dnipropetrovsk. The biography of this very special (and my native) place I tend to call “almost capital without myth” is a dream project designed together with my sister, Tetiana Portnova, who is currently working as a historian at Dnipropetrovsk University. We have not finished our book yet, but during the Wiko year we published an article in the journal *Osteuropa* and submitted two other articles to international periodicals (a list of publications and talks is given at the end of this essay).

During my Wiko year I also presented the results of our research to the German colleagues at the Geisteswissenschaftliches Zentrum (GWZO) at the University of Leipzig, at the Institute for Slavic Studies, at Humboldt University Berlin, and at the Mitgliederversammlung der Deutsche Assoziation der Ukrainisten.

I should admit I was not able to limit myself to the Dnipropetrovsk project only. I also published some research papers and participated in a number of conferences on various issues of Polish, Ukrainian, and Russian history. Finally, my Ukrainian publisher has just informed me of the publication of my book on entangled memory studies. I edited this book at Wiko and it too emerged out of the vibrant, provocative, and friendly atmosphere of the Kolleg.

## III.

Wiko and the German academic system are separate, although related worlds. As a Wiko Fellow you may choose whether to involve yourself in the German intellectual life and educational system or to stay aside and just focus on your writing. I chose the first option and delivered a series of lectures to the students at Humboldt University. At the moment there were no other university courses on Ukraine in Berlin, so I enjoyed the motivated

company of the M.A. and Ph.D. students and some people who just happened to be interested. I am very grateful to Professor Susanne Frank for the invitation to give these lectures and for comprehensive support and genuine understanding. Due to my lectures at Humboldt, I also met two prominent and promising Ukrainian film directors, Sergei Loznitsa and Eva Neymann. I also met German historians: Jörg Baberowski, Gerhard Simon, Jan Behrends, and others who introduced me to their colleagues and explained the German system to me.

Among the conferences and seminars held in Germany, the one on 9 November 2012 at the Lew Kopelew Forum in Cologne was of special importance for me. That day I dared for the first time to give my public presentation in German. This brave decision was possible only due to the German language classes at Wiko and the benevolent encouragement of Eva von Kügelgen.

#### IV.

I do not know how to describe my admiration and gratitude to everyone working at Wiko for their understanding, assistance, and friendship. I am deeply impressed by Luca Giuliani's ability to convert every conversation into a pleasure; Thorsten Wilhelmy's eagerness to discuss modern literature from Sorokin to Sebald; Katharina Biegger's and Francisco Martinez Casas' deep knowledge of and genuine intuition about Eastern European studies; Andrea Bergmann's, Corina Pertschi's, Vera Kempa's, Nina Kitsos', and Vera Schulze-Seeger's priceless assistance and support; Sonja Grund's and the entire library staff's ability to get any book you need; and Katarzyna Speder's understanding and cheering up.

In my Tuesday colloquium, I decided to describe and analyze Ukrainian experiences with the Sovietization and de-Sovietization of the humanities and to share my own experience as well. By pointing out the paradoxes of the Soviet and post-Soviet eras, I brought the current situation of Ukrainian academia closer to the international and interdisciplinary Wiko public. I tried to show how different the contexts of the production of the knowledge can be and to stress the necessity to remember the local voices and the achievements of local traditions. I am especially grateful for the critical voices in the discussion, which helped me to complicate the picture and to avoid giving the impression of total admiration of Western academia in my latest publications. I am very happy that the Argentinian art historian José Emilio Burucúa agreed to introduce me; in him I found the

most interested reader of my published research I have ever had. I am also happy that my colloquium became a starting point for a number of very interesting and inspiring conversations with the admirable Wolf Lepenies.

## V.

Grunewald and Berlin are separate, although related worlds. The memory of World War II is something that unites (and divides) this great city. Gleis 17 Memorial at S-Bahn station Grunewald is one of the most impressive Holocaust memorials for me. I have thought a lot about it, especially about the date of the last transport with the deported Jews – 27 March 1945. Not everyone in Berlin knows about this memorial, which is impressive in its modesty. Not everyone in Berlin knows about the huge Soviet memorial complex in Treptower Park. This Stalinist complex is worth visiting both during its everyday emptiness and during the overcrowded 9 May (Soviet Victory Day).

Grunewald is an essential part of Nabokov's Berlin. The only house where Nabokov's family lived has survived the war. It is just a 15-minute walk from Villa Walther (Egerstraße 1). The feeling of living in Nabokov's place never abandoned me during the Wiko year.

I was especially happy to share Berlin, Grunewald, and the Wiko year with my wife Olesia and daughter Nadja. Berlin is the place where our daughter started speaking German and where my wife started learning it with the attentive and kindhearted Ursula Kohler. We explored many very different places in the city together: Spandau and Zehlendorf, Zoo and the flea markets, the Museum of Modern Art and Krumme Lanke, and many, many others.

## VI.

The last part of this essay is the most pleasant and the most difficult at the same time, because I have to write about my co-Fellows. I cannot mention everyone, but I cannot stop myself from mentioning the search for “the mirror and hammer” with Kelly Askew; the stimulating irony and wisdom of Bruce Kogut; the talks on art and exile with Kamal Boullata; on academic inequality with Delphine Gardey and Dominique Pestre; on Bulgakov with Atac and Özlem Imamoglu; on Grunewald insects and Darwinian theory with Jim Costa; on animal rights with Anne Peters; the lively discussions on American and Ukrainian art with Alessandra Russo and Patrice Giasson; on the

(im)possibility of non-Western theory in the humanities with Ussama Makdisi; and on political cynicism and Eastern Europe with Lian Yang and Gábor Demszky. In such discussions I have often played the dangerous role of the only expert on the post-Soviet space. And quite often these discussions became the preludes to a real friendship.

I am grateful to my Wiko co-Fellows and friends who attended my non-Wiko Berlin talks and to Bruce Kogut and Franco Moretti, who supported my current research applications. I am grateful to José Emilio, who asked me to show him the Pole Star. Our search for it in Berlin's night sky is one of my nicest Grunewald recollections. I am grateful to Ussama and Elora, the best neighbors we have ever had. I am grateful to Gillian and Amy, Kelly and Ben, Delphine and Dominique, Sonia and Kendall, Alessandra and Patrice, Bruce and Monika, José Emilio and Aurora for their hospitality. I am happy that Nadja found good friends at Villa Walther: Cecilia, Jasmin, Nur, and, last but not least, Addison. I am very pleased that we all enjoyed the company of Momo and from time to time observed the foxes from the windows of our apartment. And the evenings spent with Daniel and Chava Boyarin and Froma Zeitlin gave Olesia and Nadja and me the feeling of being at home with the closest family. And that feeling fills up my entire Wiko experience.

Publications written and/or edited during my year at the Wissenschaftskolleg

*Історії для домашнього вжитку. Польсько-російсько-український трикутник пам'яті* [The Histories for Domestic Use: The Polish-Russian-Ukrainian Triangle of Memory]. Kyiv: Krytyka, 2013, 324 pp.

“Memory Wars in Post-Soviet Ukraine (1991–2010).” In *Memory and Theory in Eastern Europe*, edited by Uilleam Blacker, Alexandr Etkind, and Julie Fedor, 233–254. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

“Die Herkunft der Rus' in der russischen, ukrainischen und sowjetischen Historiografie: Variationen des Panslawismus am Beispiel der Theorien von Volodymyr Parchomenko.” In *Post-Panslavismus: Slavizität, slavische Idee und Antislavismus im 20. und 21. Jahrhundert*, edited by Agnieszka Gąsior, Lars Karl, and Stefan Troebst. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2014.

“‘Unsere Leute’ identifizieren: Die ‘ukrainischen Territorien’, 1772–1831.” In *Die Teilungen Polen-Litauens: Inklusions- und Exklusionsmechanismen – Traditionsbildung – Vergleichsebenen*, edited by Hans-Jürgen Bömelburg, Andreas Gestrich, Helga Schnabel-Schüle, 201–243. Osnabrück: fibre, 2013.

- “Ukraińskie interpretacje rzezi wołyńskiej” [The Ukrainian interpretations of the Volhynian massacre 1943]. *Więź*, 2 (2013): 158–166.
- “Atminties politikos posovietinėje Ukrainoje (1991–2011)” [The Politics of Memory in Post-Soviet Ukraine (1991–2011)]. In *Atminties daugia-sluoksnis-ķumas. Miestas valstybē regions, Sub*, edited by Alvydas Nikžentaitis, 489–516. Vilnius: Leidykla, 2013.
- “Wołyń 1943: asymetria pamięci” [Volhynia 1943: The Asymmetry of Memory]. *Pamięć.pl* 6 (2013): 34–36.
- “Die ‘jüdische Hauptstadt der Ukraine’”: Erinnerung und Gegenwart in Dnipropetrovsk. *Osteuropa* 10 (2012): 25–40 [co-author Tetiana Portnova].
- “Stalinisme et nazisme.” *Le Débat* 172 (2012): 173–178.
- “Ukrainian (Non)Remembrance of Volhynia 1943.” *Pojednanie przez trudną pamięć. Wołyń 1943 / Reconciliation through Difficult Remembrance. Volhynia 1943*, edited by Aleksandra Zińczuk, 294–295. Lublin: Panorama Kultur, 2013.
- “Истории для домашнего употребления” [The Histories for Home Use]. *Ab Imperio* 3 (2012): 309–338.
- “Ukrajńské obrazy první Rzeczpospolité” [The Ukrainian Images of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth]. In *Jagellonské dědictví. Kapitoly z dějin středovýchodní Evropy*, edited by Maciej Ruczał, 185–196. Brno: Centrum pro Studium Demokracie a Kultury, 2012.
- “Советизация исторической науки по-украински [The Sovietization of Ukrainian Historiography].” *Неприкосновенный запас* 3, 83 (2012): 245–276. [co-author Volodymyr Maslychuk].

Talks given during my year at the Wissenschaftskolleg

- The Volhynian Crime 1943 – History, Memory, Education. Warsaw, Institute for National Remembrance, 27–28 June 2013.
- The Memory of the 20th Century and the Present Day. The Ukrainian Debates on History, Warsaw, Stefan Batory Foundation, 21 June 2013.
- Das Assoziierungsabkommen zwischen Wiedervorlage und Papierkorb? Hat die Ukraine ihre Chance verspielt? Bundestag, Berlin, 14 June 2013.
- “Phantom” and “Real” Borders in Post-Soviet Ukraine, Phantomgrenzen in Ostmitteleuropa. Werkstattgespräch, Centre Marc Bloch, Berlin, 16 May 2013.

- Dnipropetrovsk als Zentrum jüdischer Kultur im 20. Jahrhundert und in der Gegenwart. WISSENSCHAFTLITERATUR, Institute for Slavic Studies, Humboldt University Berlin, 15 May 2013.
- Memory Wars in Post-Soviet Ukraine: Search for an Explanatory Framework, Russian and Ukrainian Nationalism: Entangled Histories. Harriman Institute, Columbia University, 22–23 April 2013.
- Die Ukraine: der steinige Weg nach Europa. Lew Kopelew Forum, Cologne, 11 April 2013.
- Ukraine: Terra Malecognita. A Roundtable on Ukrainian Studies in the West. Ukrainian Institute, London, 5 March 2013.
- Making and Remaking History. A Symposium on Mykhailo Hrushevsky. University of Cambridge, 4 March 2013.
- Brezhnev's Closed City. The Paradoxes of Dnipropetrovsk, Geisteswissenschaftliches Zentrum (GWZO) an der Universität Leipzig, 27 February 2013.
- The Search for Historical and Sociopsychological Explanations for the Rising Ukrainian Radical Right: Nationalismus und Xenophobie in Janukowytsch's Ukraine. Humboldt Graduate School, Berlin, 19 February 2013.
- Choosing between the Two Empires: The Habsburger Austria and Romanov's Russia Mythology in Post-Soviet Ukraine. Symposium TRANSLATIO. Begründungen und Erbschaften des Imperialen. Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturforschung Berlin, 23–26 January 2013.
- Dnipropetrovsk beyond Ukrainian History. Mitgliederversammlung der Deutsche Assoziation der Ukrainisten für das Jahr 2012, 6 December 2012.
- Umstrittene Spurensuche: Topografien von Diktatur und Gewaltherrschaft in Ost- und Südosteuropa und Deutschland. 2. Europäisches Geschichtsforum, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 15–16 November 2012.
- “Unsere” Erinnerungen und die Erinnerungen der “Anderen”. Der schwierige Umgang mit der Vergangenheit in der heutigen Ukraine. Europäische Akademie Berlin, 1 November 2012.
- Die Ukraine nach den Parlamentswahlen. Festigung des autoritären Systems oder Aufbruch zu demokratischen Reformen? Lew Kopelew Forum, Cologne, 9 November 2012.
- Ukraine between “Central Europe” and “the Russian World”. Postgraduate seminar in Ukrainian Studies, University of Cambridge, King's College, 19 October 2012.