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Kazanova, Yuliya

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‘The instinct of resistance to evil’: Postmemory and the Ukrainian national imaginary in Oksana Zabuzhko’s novel *The Museum of Abandoned Secrets*

Yuliya Kazanova

University of Groningen, The Netherlands

Abstract

Building on Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory, this article examines Oksana Zabuzhko’s latest novel *The Museum of Abandoned Secrets* as postmemorial fiction, which articulates the trauma of Soviet political repressions in the post–World War II period and in the 1970s via the perception of the second and third generation. The affiliative postmemory about World War II in Ukraine from the viewpoint of Ukrainian Insurgent Army partisans is emplotted via an original generic combination of contemporary Holocaust fiction and romances of the archive. Postmemory is used in the novel to shape a mythologised alternative historical narrative that reconceptualises the country’s difficult past as a story of heroic resistance.

Keywords

Oksana Zabuzhko, postmemory, Ukrainian contemporary novel, Ukrainian Insurgent Army, World War II

Oksana Zabuzhko’s latest award-winning novel *The Museum of Abandoned Secrets*, a story of three generations of Ukrainians from 1940s to 2004, explores various aspects of the country’s difficult past, including the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), the Ukrainian famine of 1947 and Soviet persecution of ideological dissidents. The novel’s protagonists Daryna and Adrian, a Ukrainian couple in their late thirties, find that their present reality is being progressively overpowered by the past of their parents and grandparents. Scenes of contemporary life on the brink of the Orange Revolution of 2004 alternate with two earlier temporal planes: World War II Lviv seen by UPA partisans, one of whom is Adrian’s great aunt; and the Soviet stagnation era from 1960s to 1980s, recreated through Daryna’s recollections and her parents’ traumatic life stories. In this article, I shall explore this multi-layered historical novel as postmemorial fiction produced by the generation of Ukrainians who are working through personal and collective traumatic memories about their country’s Soviet past. I will analyse two types of postmemory represented in

Corresponding author:

Yuliya Kazanova, Faculty of Arts, Department of European Languages and Cultures, University of Groningen, Oude Kijk in ‘t Jatstraat 26, 9712 EK Groningen, The Netherlands.

Email: y.kazanova@rug.nl
The Museum: the familial postmemory of political repressions in Soviet Ukraine of the 1970s and the affiliative postmemory about WWII and its aftermath in the 1940s and early 1950s. In the final section, I will consider how this postmemory contributes to Ukrainian national identity, building on Wallo’s concept of ‘national imaginary’.

Touching upon the most fiercely debated aspects of Ukrainian history, The Museum is deeply enmeshed in the post-Soviet memory wars raging since early 2000s. Hrytsak (2011) succinctly described the evolution of Ukrainian historical memory as a progression from amnesia via ambivalence to an explosive activisation of historical debates after the Orange Revolution of 2004, which deeply polarised the Ukrainian society and its elites. So far, Ukraine has developed a pluralist historiography (Hrynevych, 2005), dominated by two competing narratives – the Soviet and the national(ist) one. The latter can be seen as postcolonial ‘reclamation of the past’ (Kuzio, 2002) that rewrites the Soviet narrative and creates a ‘nationalised history’ (Kasianov, 2009). Portnov (2013) noted the dangers of this situational ‘salutary pluralism’ of memory, which results in ‘a collision of different, closed and quite aggressive narratives that exist because they cannot destroy their competitors’ (p. 248). The national(ist) historical narrative and the corresponding ‘defensive’ national identity (Portnov, 2014) have been bolstered by the turbulent events of 2014: the Revolution of Dignity, Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of the Russian–Ukrainian war. Analysing recent changes in Ukrainian historical politics, Kasianov singled out the activisation and cultivation of the anti-Russian heroic narrative and interest in the history of militant struggle, including the UPA (Novoye Literaturnoye Obozreniye, 2019). In particular, president Petro Poroshenko (2014–2019) prioritised the specifically Ukrainian national identity project, seeing through the official recognition of OUN-UPA as WWII combatants and the parliamentary approval of decommunisation laws. However, his successor Volodymyr Zelensky, elected in 2019, endorsed memory politics based on opportunistic pluralism with pro-Russian leanings, often seen as an unravelling of Poroshenko’s project. As Khromeychuk (2013) put it, ‘successive Ukrainian governments replace[d] one set of interpretations with another, leaving no room for a neutral discussion of Ukraine’s controversial historical pages’ (p. 166). Consonant concerns were also voiced by Zhurzhenko (2014: 256) who argued that instrumentalization of historical memory in electoral politics hindered the formation of a strong national identity.

Meanwhile, the need to come to terms with the recent past has been actively addressed by imaginative literature. In Ukraine, this trend is spearheaded by Oksana Zabuzhko, one of the most celebrated writers and public intellectuals of the day. She identifies herself as a representative of the generation that inherited a ‘burden of silence’ and whose mission, like that of Shakespeare’s Fortinbras, is to record the tragic story of the dead for the next generations (Ukrainian Institute London, 2020: 22:32–22:58). This intention to voice the silenced traumas correlates with the trend in Ukrainian historiography to combat historical amnesia and create a national historical narrative. Furthermore, Zabuzhko argued that ‘there are three generations of people in Ukrainian history whose lives were not memorialised, not talked or mourned over – tentatively speaking, from the generation of Holodomor and the Great Purge and onwards up to the 1980s’ (Ukrainsky Palimpsest: Oksana Zabuzhko u Rozmovi z Izoiu Khruslinskoiu, 2014: 340). She summarised The Museum in similar terms: as ‘a story about three generations, which . . . spans over sixty years of Ukrainian history’ (Ukrainsky Palimpsest: Oksana Zabuzhko u Rozmovi z Izoiu Khruslinskoiu, 2014: 304) and would accomplish this delayed work of articulation and commemoration. Moreover, her emphasis on the need to memorialise and mourn the silenced dead in fiction links The Museum to the type of post-Soviet writing described by Etkind (2013) in Russian contemporary fiction, in which texts act as carriers of traumatic memory of Soviet terror and undertake the formerly obstructed work of mourning. Furthermore, Zabuzhko’s vision of the Soviet period via the prism of generational theory and trauma is characteristic for Ukrainian variant of the post-Soviet novel,
which, according to Hundorova (2012: 10–11), embodies the post-totalitarian cultural memory via depicting the breakdown between generations. The Museum is also intertextually connected with an earlier Ukrainian intergenerational novel, Sweet Darusia by Maria Matios. Hundorova (2015) identifies the latter as an attempt of a postcolonial trauma novel in Ukrainian contemporary fiction, which traces the origins of the trauma of Sovietisation of Ukraine and its reverberations through the second generation. This genre of the post-Soviet and trauma novel is utilised by Oksana Zabuzhko, as well as other contemporary Ukrainian writers, such as Serhiy Zhadan, Yuri Andrukhovych, Taras Prokhasko, Ievheniia Kononenko and others, in order to articulate, mourn and work through the difficult past in Soviet Ukrainian history.

A major point of contention in the Soviet Ukrainian past is the divergent legacies of WWII, encapsulated in two mutually exclusive historical narratives. The Soviet historical narrative centres on the myth of Great Patriotic War, that is, the German–Soviet conflict of 1941–1945 within WWII. It glorifies the heroic fight of the ‘Soviet people’ against fascism, the victory of the Red Army and its liberation of Europe, denouncing the UPA as ‘fascist collaborators’. Opposed to the Soviet myth is the Ukrainian nationalist counternarrative of the anti-Soviet underground that included the UPA and is depicted as national resistance movement, engaged in a heroic fight against the Nazi and subsequently Soviet occupation. Yurchuk (2017) pertinently argues that the articulation of the UPA narrative follows the postcolonial logic of ‘reclamation of the past’: it focuses on omissions of the dominant Soviet narrative, such as the UPA story, which was preserved in individual family memory. Portnov (2013: 248; 2017: 350) points out the imbalances in both narratives, which marginalise the Holocaust and avoid responsibility for pogroms, repressions and punitive operations; for example, the nationalist narrative glosses over the involvement of the UPA in Nazi collaboration and the Volyn conflict of 1943. As Himka (2015: 130, 136) noted, elements of the UPA narrative have been appropriated for the new vision of Ukrainian identity that underlay the Revolution of Dignity of 2014; however, he rightly doubts whether it is ‘possible to adopt the nationalist legacy as the national legacy and just forget about its dark side’. This question is also relevant for Zabuzhko’s novel, as its focalisation of WWII through the perception of UPA fighters in Western Ukraine visibly adheres to the nationalist historical narrative. However, although based on the idealised young partisans, Zabuzhko’s image of the UPA also problematises issues of authority abuse and treason, explored via the character of the cruel partisan commander ‘Stodolia’, and touches upon a less widely discussed theme of the Holocaust on Ukrainian territories. The Soviet narrative is fleetingly glimpsed at the end of the novel in the monologue of Pavlo Bukhalov, the adopted son of the Soviet secret services officer who commanded the counter-insurgency cleansing operations, in which the above-mentioned partisans were killed. The clash between the values, held by these diverse characters, contributes to a nuanced literary representation of WWII narratives and other key points of Ukraine’s Soviet history and brings into spotlight the crossover between various types of (post)memory in the novel.

Postmemory, a concept coined by Marianne Hirsch, refers to the transmission of traumatic memories by Holocaust survivors to subsequent generations. Hirsch (2012) defined it as ‘a structure of inter- and transgenerational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience’, ‘a consequence of traumatic recall . . . at a generational remove’ (p. 6). Although initially this term was used within the realm of Holocaust studies for the analysis of visual culture artefacts, such as Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel Maus, its historical scope has been lately prolifically expanded. Alden (2014) has explored postmemory in British contemporary fiction, specifically in Pat Barker’s Regeneration trilogy and Ian McEwan’s novel Atonement, arguing that both authors wrote postmemorial novels inspired by the war experiences of their family members, WWI and WWII veterans accordingly. Geoffrey Maguire (2017: 3) explored the political implications of postmemory in artistic works, created in and after 2000s by the Argentine post-dictatorship generation. Moreover,
Hirsch (2012) envisaged her concept ‘in dialogue with numerous other contexts of traumatic transfer that can be understood as postmemory’ and involve intergenerational transmission, such as ‘Soviet [and] East European . . . communist terror’ (pp. 18, 19). Developing Hirsch’s idea, in this article I shall explore the concept of postmemory as a means to work through the trauma of Soviet political repressions in Zabuzhko’s novel.

Born in 1960, Zabuzhko identifies herself as a representative of the last generation of the Soviet intelligencia (Ukrainsky Palimpsest: Oksana Zabuzhko u Rozmovi z Izoiu Khruslinskoiu, 2014: 97). Acknowledging a close bond with her parents, she draws on their memories and life stories in her book-length interview and in The Museum, which bears a dedication to her mother and recreates the Lviv of the 1940s as remembered by her parents. In Oksana Zabuzhko’s words, her father Stefan (1926–1983), whom she sees as a key influence on her personality, was ‘not a dissident, but an average Ukrainian intellectual of that generation, a victim of the Soviet system and the KGB’, one of the ‘tens of thousands’ who didn’t feature in monographs about the dissident movement (Ukrainsky Palimpsest: Oksana Zabuzhko u Rozmovi z Izoiu Khruslinskoiu, 2014: 26–27, 44). As an undergraduate, Stefan protested against having lectures in Russian and not in Ukrainian; he was arrested and sent to a Siberian prison camp in 1949 for ‘eternal exile’. Rehabilitated after Stalin’s death in 1953, he came back to Ukraine but was kept under close scrutiny of the KGB (Committee for State Security) ever since, with periodic interrogations and house-searches. These resulted in two more arrests, a politically motivated dismissal from his university post in Ukrainian Studies and a KGB-imposed lifelong ban on practising his profession (Ukrainsky Palimpsest: Oksana Zabuzhko u Rozmovi z Izoiu Khruslinskoiu, 2014: 28, 25, 41). It is this experience of the preceding generation, including her father’s memories, which Zabuzhko fictionalises in her texts, recreating the late Soviet period with its oppressive atmosphere of incessant ideological surveillance.

A notable instance of Zabuzhko’s postmemory, significant for The Museum, is Stefan’s prison camp recollection, to which she attributes her initial interest in the UPA. According to Hirsch (2012), postmemory

\[\text{describes the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. (p. 5)}\]

Zabuzhko (2009: 11–14) recounts her father’s story in the foreword that opens her collected essays Chronicles from Fortinbras and again in Palimpsest, emphasising its utmost personal significance for herself. In the autumn of 1954, the young Stefan had a narrow escape from death in the Siberian prison camp. The inmates jailed for criminal offences attacked him but drew back their knives and retreated immediately upon realising that he was a ‘political’ convict – most likely due to the rumours in the aftermath of the Kengir uprising that broke out earlier in the same year. It was largely initiated and sustained by Ukrainian ‘political’ detainees, mostly captured UPA partisans, who created the first precedent in the history of Soviet forced labour camps (GULAG), when ‘political’ and ‘criminal’ convicts jointly confronted the prison authorities. As she puts it,

\[\text{but for the UPA, whose warriors then got into GULAGs, my dad wouldn’t have returned from Siberia. He was rescued by that myth that enveloped the Ukrainian partisans who were political prisoners in Siberia. (Ukrainsky Palimpsest: Oksana Zabuzhko u Rozmovi z Izoiu Khruslinskoiu, 2014: 27)}\]

This interiorised memory coming from her father kindled Zabuzhko’s interest in the UPA and she spent 7 years doing archival research and collecting interviews from the living witnesses of the
period, which lay the foundation for *The Museum*. Thus, in Hirsch’s classification, this novel stems from two different types of postmemory: first, Zabuzhko’s *familial* postmemory as the child of parents who underwent Soviet repressions and passed down their traumatic stories, and second, *affiliative* postmemory of the UPA period. This latter type is mediated via Zabuzhko the father but comes from outside the close family circle through the collected stories of surviving UPA veterans and their families.

**Familial postmemory: Soviet dissent and repressions in *The Museum of Abandoned Secrets***

*The Museum of Abandoned Secrets* explores the themes of memory and trauma transmission in the context of Ukraine’s Soviet past and its impact on individual and national identity narratives. Like Oksana, the protagonist in Zabuzhko’s debut novel *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex*, Daryna in *The Museum* is a woman in her thirties who resents her father, a representative of the sixties’ generation, who was psychologically and physically maimed by political repressions, and whose deterioration has deeply scarred his wife and his daughter. The story of Daryna’s father fictionalises actual episodes of state persecution of two nonconformist Ukrainians, one a little-known architect and the other a celebrated dissident, and thus sketches a collective portrait of persecuted Ukrainian intelligentsia based on Daryna’s postmemory about political repressions.

The story of Daryna’s father, a gifted architect whose life and career were cut short by repressions, is based on the biography of Kyiv architect Viktor Narizhny. As the head of a design institute in early 1970s, Narizhny managed a team of architects who planned the reconstruction of the cultural centre ‘Palats Ukrayina’ in Kyiv. After the unveiling, the centre was deemed too luxurious because it eclipsed Moscow cultural venues – a grave political error for a subordinate Soviet republic like the Ukrainian SSR. The centre was hastily shut down for alterations that stripped away its splendour and reduced it to its ‘proper’ provincial level. Scapegoats had to be found; but rather than take the blame and confess to non-existent project flaws, Narizhny committed suicide (Shpak, 2015). In Zabuzhko’s novel, this story is represented via Daryna’s father, the fictional fresh graduate employed as a junior architect in this project. After the suicide of the ‘guilty’ principal architect, Daryna’s father was the only one who broke the conspiracy of silence, which kept the matter hushed up and rushed into a quixotic battle with the Soviet bureaucratic machine. He filed petitions and attended countless meetings with high-ranking party officials to prove that the project had no initial flaws. He was first ignored and rebuffed, then threatened, and finally forcibly taken to a psychiatric hospital and released incapacitated. His death 3 years later left the uncomprehending teenage Daryna with a lingering sense of shame and resentment against her father. Her knowledge about the repressions that ruined their lives comes from the behaviour of her parents, her mother’s stories and the ‘four bulging folders knotted shut’ (Zabuzhko, 2012: 240) with father’s futile petitions.

Daryna’s familial postmemory about Soviet repressions includes the key elements singled out by Hirsch (2012): these are the ‘experiences [she] “remember[s]” only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which [she] grew up’ (p. 5). Apart from flashbacks of several happy family moments, she recalls her father only as a broken man slowly dying at home after forced treatment at a mental hospital. She also recollects her mother daily hand-washing bed linen until midnight, driving herself into the state of unreflecting fatigue to avoid facing the situation.

For the first time in her life, Daryna realizes she had never tried to imagine . . . how, in fact, her mother lived all those dark years . . . How did she endure, frozen into Snow Maiden’s trim, upright form, Father’s entire hopeless struggle, and the crushing bulk of her environment, and the fear creeping under the doors,
the bandits in the stairwell, vans with red crosses on them, the Dnipropetrovsk asylum, and afterward – three years of wandering in and out of hospitals with the urine-soaked remnant of what once had been the man she loved [. . .]. (Zabuzhko, 2012: 240)

This encounter with Soviet punitive psychiatry, which many political dissidents at the time went through, has parallels with the persecution of Leonid Pliusch. A sane man, he was locked in an asylum solely for his anti-Soviet political views and was ‘treated’ with high doses of antipsychotic medications; however, unlike his fictional counterpart, Pliusch was eventually discharged thanks to the international political pressure and was allowed to emigrate. His autobiography, History’s Carnival: A Dissident’s Autobiography, is listed by Zabuzhko (2012: 714) at the end of her novel as further reading for those interested in Soviet Ukrainian history. He was also one of the first readers of The Museum who, in a laudatory review, enthusiastically endorsed this novel and, by extension, its portrayal of Soviet dissenters and their persecution (Pliusch, 2010).

The adult Daryna is unable to see her father’s traumatic story as a teleological narrative, although her own life is overshadowed by his. As Hirsch (2012) observed, this inability is also characteristic for the postmemory of the descendants of Holocaust survivors whose life ‘is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension’ (p. 5). Daryna’s decision to work on TV as a host of ‘Diogenes’ Lantern’, the human interest show that celebrates ‘ordinary heroes’ in everyday life, is her subconscious attempt to compensate for her inability to narrativise her father’s life: she celebrates the commonplace and yet somehow remarkable Ukrainians by reshaping their lives into a coherent TV-format story. As her TV channel, one of the few remaining flagships of high ethical standards, is swamped with paid journalism and low-quality entertainment, her show is terminated as ‘excessively high-brow’. Instead, she is offered a suspiciously well-paid role of a presenter of a TV beauty contest, which, as it turns out, will serve as a smokescreen for luring the participating underage girls into prostitution. Although her sense of self is inextricably linked with her profession, Daryna quits journalism. Infuriated and appalled, she vows to spare no effort in disrupting the launch of the new TV contest. Only after she makes her ethical choice in this liminal situation does she glimpse the significance of her father’s life for her own identity:

She really had no inkling, before yesterday, of how powerful the instinct of resistance to evil would prove to be in her – more powerful than any desire or longing . . . And it wouldn’t have been this strong if her father hadn’t died because of it. And if her mother hadn’t approved of his choice. [. . .] [S]ometimes, the thing that does kill us makes our children stronger. (Zabuzhko, 2012: 278, 279)

In a moment of epiphany, she is finally able to understand the meaning of her father’s life and grasp that her own work on TV is a continuation of his noble quixotic crusade:

But the thing is that there was another person who did not get lucky that time – the one of whose posthumous truth my father became the keeper, until he perished himself: the man who created the magical palace of my childhood fairytale, and then hung himself – right in time not to see his creation crippled. [. . .] I wonder why it never occurred to me before that I, basically, spent my entire journalistic career doing what my father gave his life for – defending someone else’s essentially deleted truths? I gave voices to the lacunae of intentionally created silences. (Zabuzhko, 2012: 611, 612)

In the long run, Daryna works through her familial postmemory and comes to appreciate her parents’ decisions, when she faces a similar challenge to her moral integrity. Her postmemorial connection to her parents’ traumatic Soviet past proves valuable as it endows her with moral resilience in making a crucial existential choice that further forms her identity.
At first sight, Daryna’s acceptance of the postmemory of her parents’ traumas caused by Soviet repressions seems to lie in the markedly apolitical existential plane: their unflinching nonconformist resistance equips her with the ‘instinct of resistance to evil’ and readiness to defend her own and other people’s truths without yielding to social and state pressure. However, as Daryna’s decision to speak up in the situation that infringes upon her personal morality code echoes the same resolution made by her father in his youth, there is also an implicit parallel between the political circumstances of their choices: the two cadences of Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma (1994–2005), known for their increasing state control over the media, are likened to the Soviet stagnation era of 1960–1980s with its oppressive state censorship. Significantly, the novel ends on the eve of the Orange Revolution of 2004, a peaceful civil demonstration that ended Kuchma’s rule – similarly to the non-violent Revolution on Granite of 1990, a first major student protest in the Ukrainian SSR, which facilitated the collapse of the Soviet Union. Thus, Daryna’s ‘instinct of resistance to evil’ and moral integrity, shaped by her familial postmemory of Soviet repressions, ultimately acquire not only personal but also public significance. The postmemory of Soviet non-conformism in the novel functions in a similar way to Mink’s reactive memory, evoked on the threshold of the Orange Revolution in the context of intergenerational transfer of the experience of political resistance to the new generation.

Affiliative postmemory: the UPA narrative

Like the author of The Museum, Daryna has no familial ties to UPA veterans so that her interest and the subsequently acquired postmemory are affiliative by nature. She comes across an archival photograph of an UPA partisan unit and, out of curiosity, decides to investigate the fate of the only woman in the photo, Olena (Helia) Dovgan. She then meets Olena’s great nephew Adrian Vatamaniuk and falls in love with him. Together with his father, Adrian shares with Daryna their family recollections about Olena, which are understandably quite scarce and disjointed due to the generational and temporal distance: she was the sister of Adrian’s grandmother who died under unknown circumstances in her early twenties, more than 30 years ago. However, in a climactic scene of the novel, Daryna and Adrian have a mystic shared dream, in which they live through Helia’s and her friend Adrian’s memories before their death, eventually becoming ‘witnesses by adoption’ – a position attributed by Hartman (1996: 8) to the authors of third-generation Holocaust literature. In the finale, Daryna resolves to make a documentary film about Olena and her fellow UPA fighters and thus perpetuate her affiliative postmemory. Whereas the chapters of the novel dealing with familial postmemory about Soviet repressions used conventional narrative techniques, such as the protagonist’s interior monologue and temporal flashbacks within the mainstream plot, the emplotment of affiliative postmemory in the text is technically more complex, because it involves a combination of sophisticated generic strategies drawing upon Holocaust fiction and romances of the archive, as detailed below.

First and foremost, Daryna’s affiliative postmemory shares key thematic and plot features with the second- and third-generation Holocaust novels. Hoffman (2004: 188) pertinently observed that, unlike Holocaust survivors’ memoirs, written from memory, the works of their descendants are about memory, specifically the uncertainties of recollection, and the difficulties of knowing the past. In second-generation fiction, ‘intimate history is not so much given as searched for; the processes of overcoming amnesia and uncovering family secrets, of reconstructing broken stories or constructing one’s own identity, are often the driving concerns and the predominant themes’ (Hoffman, 2004: 188). The central plot framework in The Museum is a similar reconstruction of the ‘broken stories’ and untold secrets of Daryna and Adrian’s intertwined family histories, which eventually feed into their passionate relationship and shape their further identity choices. Adrian,
our contemporary, learns that he was named after Ortynsky, the UPA partisan who fought alongside Helia against the Nazi occupation and afterwards against the Soviet regime. Adrian Ortynsky and Helia died together when they chose to explode themselves with a grenade to avoid being captured by the raid of the Soviet secret police (MGB). In her turn, Daryna comes to know that she owes her life to Helia’s charity: in a spontaneous gesture that put her in grave personal danger, Helia the partisan gave to an unknown starving family a sack of flour, which enabled Daryna’s will-be mother, a teenager at that time, to survive the famine of 1947.

This thematisation of memory and difficulties of its reconstruction are embodied in the quest plot with elements of documentary fiction, which is typical for second- and third-generation Holocaust fiction. Third-generation Holocaust literature is ‘characteristically shaped by the literary conceit of the quest, a pursuit beginning and ending with the intersection of history and personal stories’ (Aarons and Berger, 2017: 12). The layer of the novel that deals with Daryna and Adrian’s attempt to recover the memories of Adrian’s great aunt puts them in an analogous position to the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors who ‘must reconstruct events from . . . incomplete, oblique, cryptically coded, and elusive knowledge . . . in an attempt to create a unified narrative out of fragments’ like ‘competing and broken memories’ (Aarons and Berger, 2017: 5). As a result, Zabuzhko’s novel, like the works of third-generation authors, has to rely on mediated information and research involving ‘combing through documents’ (Aarons and Berger, 2017: 17). However, although research and documentary evidence play a prominent role in third-generation Holocaust texts, a typical quest centres on the narrative of return: the trip of the survivors’ grandchild to the site of their ancestors’ residence before the Holocaust or traumatic Holocaust experience (Aarons and Berger, 2017: 12). A demonstrative example of this model is Jonathan Safran Foer’s novel *Everything Is Illuminated*, which revolves around the journey of a young American Jew to the site of his grandfather’s village in Ukraine that was liquidated by the Nazis. Whereas *The Museum* includes a marginal motif of return (Daryna makes plans to travel with her filming crew to the Lviv woods where Helia and Adrian died), it predominantly follows a different model – a metaphysical research quest, which utilises and simultaneously subverts the conventions of the romance of the archive.

According to Suzanne Keen (2003: 11, 24), romances of the archive, popularised in contemporary fiction by Umberto Eco’s best-selling historical novel *The Name of the Rose*, combine conventional features of romance (an adventure formula, love story and supernatural elements) with characters-researchers, research as ‘a kernel plot action’ and specific ‘settings . . . that contain archives of actual papers’. *The Museum* deftly interweaves multiple story lines that include the above elements. The UPA episodes of the novel unfold an adventure plot that follows the partisan commander Adrian Ortynsky, starting from his daring escape after an undercover attempt to assassinate a top Nazi official in the occupied Lviv and ending several years later with his doomed run from Lviv into his woodland hideout, after his identity had been exposed by a double agent and his partisan unit is about to be besieged by an MGB raid. This action plot is complemented with two intersecting romantic love stories: the tender affection between our contemporaries, Helia’s great nephew Adrian and Daryna, redeems and fulfils Ortynsky’s unrequited love to Helia. In present-day episodes, Daryna assumes the role of researcher as she collects materials about Helia’s life and mysterious death, visiting archives and analysing the recollections of Adrian’s father and grandmother.

However, whereas most contemporary romances of the archive analysed by Keen make ‘the evidence available and intelligible’ and reveal ‘material traces of the past holding the truth’, *The Museum* deviates from this pattern. In the finale of the novel, Daryna is left with the same physical proof that sparked off her quest, a faded archival photograph of Adrian and Helia’s partisan unit. Her attempt to retrieve more information about Helia from the former KGB archive
falls through because Helia’s file was incinerated along with other potentially incriminating documents in politically motivated purges of the archives – so that no other material evidence of the partisan’s life story survives into the present. This problematisation of excavating history and im/possibility of knowledge, termed ‘the aesthetics of ignorance’ by Ann Rigney, links The Museum to third-generation Holocaust novel The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million by Daniel Mendelsohn. In her analysis of this text, Rigney (2016) perceptively noticed that the ‘impossibilities and difficulties of reconstructing [the past] sixty years later’ emphasise ‘a lack of information that is itself symptomatic of the violence perpetrated on the subjects of [the] narrative’ (p. 120). This observation about postmemory in Mendelsohn’s novel is also illuminating for Zabuzhko’s text, as Helia’s violent death in an MGB ambush is echoed in the destruction of all records about her in the KGB archive, resulting in her complete physical and documentary annihilation and making her story impossible to reconstruct by conventional fact-based methods.

However, the failure of traditional documentary evidence prompts the continuation of Daryna’s research quest outside conventional reality, activating the supernatural elements inherent to the romance mode. After they move in together, the contemporary Adrian finds that his sleep is consistently invaded by strange dreams, which turn out to be snatches of partisan Ortynsky’s key recollections and thoughts in the last year of his life. In the pivotal scene of the novel, Adrian and Daryna fall asleep after making love and witness a shared dream that replays Ortynsky and Helia’s death. As the present-day characters realise, they enter a mystic ‘infinite . . . vault, an archive of things once witnessed, of footage that wants to be watched’ (Zabuzhko, 2012: 134), and live through the memories that the deceased want to share with them. Aarons and Berger (2017: 24) pinpointed a similar ‘dream-state transmission of transgenerational trauma’ in third-generation Holocaust fiction, specifically in Julie Orringer’s novel The Invisible Bridge and Margot Singer’s The Pale of Settlement: Stories. In The Museum, this spiritual intergenerational bond is augmented by Gothic intrusion of the past into the contemporary reality: in a strange telephone call, Adrian hears Helia’s voice asking Ortynsky for forgiveness shortly before it is cut short by the sound of fired shots. However intangible, these oneiric insights successfully complete Daryna’s research quest about Helia’s life and circumstances of her death.

Therefore, as the reliance on truth preserved by the archival evidence is frustrated, the only way for the third generation to establish a postmemorial connection with their traumatised ancestors is an unverifiable revelation, such as a mystic phone call from the dead or a dream, which fades away in the morning daylight. This outcome, when ‘proof and the facts, once grasped, then shimmer and disappear like mirages, or go up in flames’ (Keen, 2003: 55), seemingly qualifies Zabuzhko’s novel as a postmodernist romance of the archive in Keen’s classification. Indeed, one of the few remaining material proofs of Adrian and Daryna’s dream (and their newly acquired postmemory) is a seemingly irrelevant truism that Adrian jots down on a cigarette pack in the middle of the night: ‘Women won’t cease giving birth’ (Zabuzhko, 2012: 426). However, in fact, this phrase neatly wraps up the two love plots: Helia’s tragic mistake of rejecting Adrian’s love and sacrificing her unborn child is redeemed by the vicarious love between the contemporary Adrian and Daryna, who come to know that they are expecting a child, conceived in the night of their shared dream. Thus, refusing to embrace total postmodernist uncertainty in the absence of the metanarrative of a grand Truth, The Museum asserts the value of micronarratives of human lives with their cycle of bearing and rearing children that make up the next generations. Whereas public mnemonic institutions, such as purged archives, have been proved unreliable, this postmemorial transmission and redemption takes place in the private microcosm of family.

However, the significance of uncovered traumatic memories is telescoped from an individual family history into the public sphere. Alden (2014) identifies consonant concerns with personal family past in the novels by contemporary British writers of the second postwar generation,
highlighting their ‘use of protagonists whose quest to understand or recreate the past mirrors the reader’s and the author’s, or of narrative forms which force the reader directly into the questing role’ (p. 7). In *The Museum*, the pattern of a quest into the past merges the figures of the author Oksana Zabuzhko and her protagonist Daryna, who are both seeking for an affiliative connection with the UPA period, and thus activates the readers’ family memories. The literary scholar Vira Aheieva (2010) described this process:

> as evidenced by myself [and] my friends who have already read the novel, I know that immediately, outside our own will, the plot ‘switches on’ family recollections. Our parents or grandparents . . . told us something. Our family albums retain photographs, from which you can learn or guess something.

In other words, the reader of Zabuzhko’s novel becomes implicated in the fictional familial postmemory, which, for them, functions as affiliative, but reactivates their own familial (post) memories. This idea in *The Museum* parallels Hirsch’s observation that the ‘[f]amilial structures of mediation and representation facilitate the affiliative acts of the postgeneration’ (Hirsch, 2012: 39). Crossover between these types of postmemory is embodied by the circular plot: in one of the final episodes that deftly loops back to the beginning of the novel, the pregnant Daryna feels that she has been accepted into Adrian’s extended family by Helia and his other female ancestors, so that her affiliative postmemory is about to become familial; she will then disseminate and transmit it in a documentary film about UPA partisans, which will promote the affiliative identification of the viewers. Interpreting Hirsch’s concept of postmemory, Rigney (2016: 114) underlines a similar shift in ‘the scales on which postmemory operates’: namely, ‘as time passes, and the transmission of memory becomes increasingly dependent on media and narrative, the difference between filiative, affiliative, and adoptive witnesses becomes less strict’. This interaction between various types of postmemory acquires a special significance in view of the impact of Ukrainian literature on national identity.

**Postmemory and national imaginary**

To analyse the contribution of Zabuzhko’s novel to Ukrainian national identity, I follow Wallo’s interpretation of nation and national imaginary, based on findings by Benedict Anderson and James Wertsch. Wallo (2020) contends that nation can be conceptualised as a Wertschian ‘textual community’ organised around ‘cultural and historical myths and narratives, symbols, and values circulating in this community and continually defining its “identity” as well as producing its national imaginary through acts of collective remembering’ that rely on narrative texts (p. 14). Wallo’s theory accords with Hoffman’s claim that Zabuzhko uses culture as a nation-building argument and thus professes cultural nationalism, defined as a network of references, names, narratives, events and cultural objects that serve as a master narrative and are based, among others, on memory symbols and literary texts (Hofmann, 2016: 108, 111). Furthermore, Wallo (2020) argues that Zabuzhko used her works to ‘generate and deconstruct various national plots, and . . . explicitly analyse and critique Ukraine’s master-narratives’, and thus intervene in the national imaginary (p. 15).

Zabuzhko’s contribution to the Ukrainian national imaginary via postmemory in *The Museum* follows several vectors. First, she continues to critique the reliance of Ukraine’s national identity on victimhood, which has already been fiercely challenged in *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex*. In *The Museum*, this master plot is ultimately rejected via what Hundorova (2012: 117) describes as ‘the re-evaluation of the recent Soviet past, namely the experience of parents and grandparents’. As a result, Daryna’s need to reconsider her father’s story enables her to reconceptualise it as ‘heroic, even if ultimately failed, resistance to the colonial system’ (Wallo, 2020: 123). On a larger scale,
this produces what Wallo (2020) termed an ‘alternative history project’: ‘a search for an articulated and heroic history of Ukraine – rather than one of silence and continuous victimization’ (p. 123). The milestones of this alternative history, plaited into the biographies of major characters, include the Holodomor of 1933, WWII with the focus on the UPA struggle, the postwar famine of 1947 in Ukraine, Soviet Ukrainian dissidence of the 1960s and 1970s, and the Revolution on Granite of 1990. Daryna’s TV show, which highlights the quiet heroism of seemingly commonplace Ukrainians, embodies this idea on contemporary material and thus attempts to create a continuous alternative history that continues to the brink of the Orange Revolution of 2004. In her interview, Zabuzhko drew attention to this didactic aspect of her novel by calling it ‘a textbook on Ukraine and Ukrainian history’ (Faryna, 2011). This alternative history includes events marginalised in the Soviet Ukrainian historical narrative and is based on the metaphysical ‘dream archive’ of lost secrets, which are transmitted to the present-day characters as postmemories. This usage of family postmemories as Lyotard’s micronarratives for building a national historical narrative transcends Hirsch’s vision of postmemory as a private phenomenon because these recollections are brought into the public realm and become affiliative (post)memories. On the metatextual level, the novel itself functions as a virtual museum that records and perpetuates an alternative narrative of the postcolonial and repressive past, based on postmemories, and co-opting its readers to become adoptive witnesses.

However, despite the grounding in historical facts, documentary evidence and oral witness reports, the major historicising strategy of the novel is mythologisation. As Hundorova (2012) argued, Zabuzhko’s novel undertakes ‘[m]ythologisation of the great national history . . . based on sacralisation of new alternative histories’, such as the history of the UPA or the Holodomor (p. 116). This tendency was also discerned by Wallo (2020: 124) who argued that The Museum was ‘very consciously’ emplotted with the aim to ‘lay mythic foundations for a nation that has not been in a position to write its own history until very recently’.

This historicising strategy is prominent in the depiction of the UPA in the novel. The romanticised portrayal of the insurgents, which clearly leans towards the nationalist as opposed to the Soviet wartime narrative, was predictably criticised for glossing over the contested aspects of the UPA history. The Polish historian Grzegorz Motyka (2013) concluded that Zabuzhko’s novel created ‘a mythologised vision of the Ukrainian underground, depicting its participants as “ideal heroes” and thus leaving out the killings of the Jews and Poles that they committed during the war’; the scholar also remarked on the stereotypical portrayal of the Poles, overemphasis on the atypical and unverifiable story of the Jewish partisan Rachele and a superficial treatment of the Volyn conflict. These controversial omissions were also noted by Hofmann (2016: 125) and Gerosin (2011). Kononenko (2010) remarked that Zabuzhko’s novel negated the Soviet narrative, within which the insurgents were branded ‘a gang of outlaws and outcasts’, and swung instead to an anti-Soviet portrayal of the UPA as ‘freedom fighters [and] the warriors of Light in the style of Soviet soldiers who rescued Europe from fascism’. A similar point was voiced by Gerosin (2011) who argued that the idealised portrayal of UPA fighters mirrors Soviet ideological clichés. These critical observations pertinently indicate imbalances in textual representation of the UPA as a historical phenomenon and hence treat the novel as flawed realistic fiction (a work of ‘nationalistic realism’, in Gerosin’s words).

However, as Wallo (2020) noted, Zabuzhko’s text reflects the perception of the UPA narrative as one of ‘foundational national myths’ in independent Ukraine (p. 124). According to Marples (2010), this myth of UPA fighters highlights their ‘idealism, self-sacrifice, bravery, and valor’, as well as ‘commitment to the Ukrainian nation [and] self-sacrifice’ (pp. 36, 40). Zabuzhko’s image of the UPA is structured as a myth; however, to use Northrop Frye’s terms, this myth is displaced into high mimetic and romance mode, in which characters are ‘superior in degree to other men’ (Frye, 1957: 33). The depiction of partisans as ideal heroes, criticised by the reviewers, can
be explained by this displacement of the myth and the prevalence of romantic and tragic mode, infused with elements of realistic documentary fiction. Engaged in a plot with supernatural plot elements derived from the romance mode, Helia and Adrian have the characteristics of tragic heroes as conceptualised by Cedric Whitman (1951): their downfall and death are caused not by a tragic mistake but by fundamental virtue (*arete*), that is, their devotion to the cause. Similar to the story of Daryna’s father, the UPA narrative follows a classic tragic plot, depicting the protagonists’ doomed but heroic resistance to an overpowering force, which Marples (2010) summarised as ‘a battle against overwhelming odds during which the freedom fighters struggled against two powerful totalitarian states’ (p. 40). The motif of heroic resistance, which is common to both historical planes and is transmitted to the next generations via postmemories, is pivotal to Zabuzhko’s version of mythologised alternative history. It is also extended to Daryna’s historiographic method: her ‘archival work . . . [accomplished] purely out of devotion to what you do . . .’ is referred to as ‘resistance in its purest form’ (Zabuzhko, 2012: 706). In Aleida Assmann’s terms, Zabuzhko shifts the emphasis from traumatic to heroic type of victim memory. The traumatic aspects of the memory of Soviet Ukrainian past in *The Museum* are depicted via the techniques of contemporary Holocaust fiction, particularly thematisation of memory and the difficulties of its reconstruction, embodied in the quest plot. The heroic aspects are emplotted within the tragic and romance *mythos*, specifically within the generic framework of the romance of the archives. The latter’s melange of adventure, documentary and fantastic elements creates a vivid and emotionally available post-memory of the controversial WWII period. Although based on trauma, this postmemory of the UPA resistance, embodied by Helia and Adrian Ortynsky, acquires heroic connotations; as Assmann (2016) explicated, the ‘victim memory of soldiers is encoded within the semantics of heroic nationalism which has absorbed the religious meaning of martyrdom’ (p. 56). This heroic postmemory feeds into Zabuzhko’s concept of mythologised alternative history, which contributes to the Ukrainian national narrative.

While it would be difficult to gauge the extent to which *The Museum* has indeed influenced the identity-shaping processes of the Ukrainian nation, its wide public and critical appeal made this novel a significant contribution to the mnemonic landscape of contemporary Ukraine and Europe. Within Ukraine, the publication of the novel became a significant literary event, and the first run of the book was reportedly sold out by the end of the book launch presentation; as of 2021, the novel has gone through eight editions and has solidified its reputation as a renowned contemporary classic. Its acclaim outside Ukraine – the prestigious Angelus award in 2013 and nomination as the book of the year in Germany and Switzerland – also indicates that it has tapped into topical memory processes in Eastern and Central Europe.

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**ORCID iD**

Yuliya Kazanova [https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5282-6766](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5282-6766)

**Notes**

1. The protagonists of both novels are named Daryna; their lives have been affected by the tragic family story connected with the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). Recurring in both novels is also the morbid suicide of a female character who hangs herself on her own braid after an interrogation by MGB officers (Matronka, Darusia’s mother, and the Jewish UPA partisan ‘Rachele’). Kononenko (2010) ridiculed this motif in *The Museum* as ‘a stolen image’ and a highly unrealistic detail; however, I see it as an intentional allusion that signals the continuity of Zabuzhko’s work with Matios’ generic model of trauma novel.
2. Hoffman’s claim about Zabuzhko’s cultural nationalism is opposed by Hnatiuk (2005: 166) who, on the basis of Zabuzhko’s essays, persuasively argues that the writer emphasises not the distinctive specificities of national culture but universal values that enable the moral revival of the nation.

3. The exact size of the print run of the first edition is difficult to establish: the number of copies is not specified in the back matter of the book, and the publishing house Fakt no longer exists. In her report on the book launch on 26 December 2009, Shevchuk (2009) mentions 300 copies in total, which were sold out by the end of the event, with more promised by the publisher after the Christmas holidays. According to a news report on Zaxid.net (2010), during her book presentation in late January 2010, Zabuzhko said that the first run was indeed small and was fully sold out within 3 days. This arguably indicates that the above-mentioned 300 copies comprised the whole first print run. In line with the publisher’s promises, the second edition was signed off for publication on 4 January 2010 in twenty thousand copies (Zabuzhko, 2010).

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**Author biography**

Yuliya Kazanova holds a PhD in English from the University of Leeds. Her research interests include twentieth-century English fiction and contemporary Ukrainian literature. She taught Russian language and Slavic literatures at the University of Leeds, and is currently working at the Department of European Languages and Cultures at the University of Groningen. She is a Chartered Linguist (CIOL, Translation and Education), and translated into Ukrainian *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* by Daniel Belgrad (Kyiv: Fakt, 2009).