

BUILDING UKRAINE OUTSIDE UKRAINE.

Review of Olga Khomenko’s book “The Far Eastern Odyssey of Ivan Svit” (Kyiv, 2021, 584 p.)

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The review is focused on the book “The Far Eastern Odyssey of Ivan Svit” (Kyiv, 2021) of Olga Khomenko. The book contributes to the studies of Ukrainian diaspora in Asia and proposes a systematic approach to a group of people who formed Ukrainian life transcending the boundaries of several countries.

Keywords: Ukrainian diaspora, Ivan Svit, Far East, settler colonialism, nationalism

Olga Khomenko’s book “The Far Eastern Odyssey of Ivan Svit” lies on the crossroads of history of Ukrainian diaspora, transnational intellectual history, and media history of diaspora press. It contributes to the studies of Ukrainian diaspora in Asia which is still an understudied topic in comparison to the studies of Ukrainian diaspora of Northern or Southern Americas. As Khomenko mentions, there are some studies devoted to separate issues of the Ukrainian diaspora in the Far East, but she proposes a systematic approach to a group of people



who formed Ukrainian life transcending the boundaries of several countries. The focus on the life history of one specific actor, journalist and amateur historian Ivan Svit (1897–1989) becomes a methodological solution that allows the author to concentrate her analysis on several countries as the protagonist lived in different places of the region and was connected to a plethora of groups of Ukrainians that sometimes shared opposite ideological and political views. Although the book is titled “The Far Eastern Odyssey of Ivan Svit” and can be read as a biography of one person, it is actually history that covers a much broader field of research in which the life of one person is a connecting point that leads to the discussion of the lives of thousands of Ukrainians that were dispersed throughout Japan, China, the Far East of the Russian Empire, and Taiwan.

Migration from the Russian Empire to the Far East began at the end of the 18th century. Ukrainians became a large part of settler colonialism and towards the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century some of them were dreaming about establishing a Ukrainian colony that would be linked to the independent Ukrainian state. It was a peculiar dream as the people dreaming about their own colony came from the lands that were also to a large degree treated as a colony by the Russian Empire and which became home to settler colonists in line with Russia’s conquest of the northern shores of the Black Sea in the late eighteenth century [Burbank, von Hagen 2007].

The Russian government started transferring Russian peasants to the newly acquired lands in the Far East in 1858 after the Treaty of Aigun to secure the Russian presence there. Soon it became clear that Russia needed more people there and since the abolition of serfdom in the Russian Empire in 1861, during the period of building of the Chinese railway system and during Stolypin’s reforms more and more Ukrainians came to this region. In the beginning of the 20th century there were about 500.000 to one million Ukrainians on these territories [Khomenko 2021, 10]. It is difficult to estimate a concrete number of Ukrainian settlers as many of them had fluid understanding of their belonging. As Khomenko showed in many instances throughout the book many Ukrainians identified themselves with the Russian Empire. It was often first in the diaspora that Ukrainians realised that they differ from Russians in their language, traditions, way of life.

Ivan Svit's life can be seen as an example of diaspora activism. Born as Ivan Svitlanov in Kupyansk of Kharkiv governorate in 1897, he left for Siberia in 1918 fleeing the aftermath of the Russian revolution and hoping to get to the USA. It was the beginning of his long journey in the Far East that lasted up to 1951 when he finally left for Alaska. It was first in Vladivostok and then in Harbin that Svit started his activities directed for consolidation of the Ukrainian community and awakening their national sentiments. There, he found other Ukrainians who believed in the Ukrainian People's Republic and the future of the autonomous Ukraine. Even when the dreams about Ukrainian statehood were crushed, diaspora groups in the Far East were cherishing the dream of statehood. At the same time, these diaspora groups were far from homogenous. On the contrary, they had different ideological preferences and organisational affiliations. Since the 1930s the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists had their members in the East (Omelian Khmeliovskyy, Mykola Mytliuk, Roman Korda-Fedorov) who confronted the "old" diaspora that continued believing in the ideas of Ukrainian People's Republic [Khomenko 2021, 86]. It should be noted, though, that the majority of people were not engaged in the political activities of the diaspora. The national agenda was shared rather by a group of intellectual and activist minority. And even this minority was divided.

Khomenko highlights the relation between Ukrainian groups and the local and state authorities in each of the analysed countries. What is common in many of these contexts is that local authorities shared suspicion towards Ukrainians and saw them as a nationalist threat without distinguishing between different ideological groups that in reality existed within each of these diasporas [Khomenko 2021, 68–78].

The central part of the analysed material is played by "A short history of Ukrainian movement in the Far East (Asia)" written by Ivan Svit and dated by 1938. This document was lost and forgotten, and Khomenko thoroughly analyses and reconstructs the life of the Ukrainian diaspora in the Far East around and from within this document. The author also analyses the press published by the diaspora groups, their printed material (books and brochures), and official documents of local state administrations. Khomenko's knowledge of

the Japanese language and deep understanding of the context makes the book into an invaluable and nuanced study that uncovers a little-known history of Ukrainians in the Far East. The supplements that include a full edition of Ivan Svit's "A short history of Ukrainian movement in the Far East (Asia)", illustrations, lists of geographical and proper names, as well as short biographical notes of Ukrainians registered in Shanghai by the Ukrainian Representative Committee and Ukrainian Club (1945–1948) present a rich untapped material that will be of interest to many specialists of Ukrainian and transnational history.

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