



Ukraine in travel writing (1994–2024)

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ARTICLE INFO

Handling Editor: Ksenia Kirillova

Keywords:

Imagology

Travel writing

Ukraine

Hetero-images

Borderlands

National identity

Tourism destination image

Literary tourism

ABSTRACT

This article analyses representations of Ukraine and Ukrainians in four travelogues spanning 1994–2024: Applebaum's *Between East and West* (1994), Nicolay's *The Humorless Ladies of Border Control* (2016), Brumme's *Im Schatten des Krieges* (2022), and Orth's *Couchsurfing in der Ukraine* (2024). Combining imagological theory with reflexive thematic analysis, the study traces hetero-images of Ukrainian national identity across post-Soviet, post-Maidan, and wartime periods and reframes Ukraine through liminality rather than the East–West binary. Recurring hetero-images include hospitality, resilience, and cultural distinction from Russia, alongside a diachronic shift from fragmented post-Soviet identity toward war-forged national consolidation. Tourism implications are integrated throughout: the travelogues' destination imaginaries are read alongside Ukraine's emerging memory-tourism infrastructure, including the State Agency for Tourism Development's *Places of Memory* route. The study contributes to comparative literature, imagology, and tourism scholarship on travel writing, with practical relevance to destination image management and responsible tourism in conflict-affected contexts.

1. Introduction

Since February 24, 2022, Ukraine has occupied a position of unprecedented prominence in global consciousness. What was once, for many Western observers, a vaguely defined post-Soviet space – frequently conflated with Russia or dismissed as a peripheral “borderland” – has become the site of Europe's most consequential geopolitical crisis since the Second World War. This visibility has generated an urgent need for understanding: Who are the Ukrainians? What distinguishes their national character, aspirations, and cultural identity? While political scientists, journalists, and historians have rushed to provide answers, travel writing offers a distinct mode of knowledge that mediates between individual experience and cultural generalization, between the embodied encounter and the constructed image. For tourism this question is far from academic: how a place is imagined – especially a conflict-affected one – shapes its destination image long before and long after anyone travels there, and travel writing is among the most durable vehicles through which such imaginaries take hold (Dann, 1996; Hollinshead et al., 2009). Reading these travelogues is

therefore also a way of asking how Ukraine is coming to be pictured as a place one might visit.

This visibility did not, however, arrive ex nihilo. The 2014 *Revolution of Dignity* – the months-long Maidan protests in Kyiv that culminated in the ousting of President Yanukovich – followed by the Russian annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbas, marked the first decisive break with the post-Soviet status quo: a moment when Ukrainian public life rejected an imposed eastward orientation and reorganized itself around European integration as a political project rather than a cultural aspiration. The full-scale invasion of 24 February 2022 must therefore be read not as a sudden eruption but as the eight-years-deep escalation of a contest that began in 2014 and, by extension, in the contested decolonization of Ukrainian identity that followed 1991. Each of the four travelogues explored here is anchored in one of these phases – the suspended-animation post-Soviet transition of 1991–1994, the post-Maidan awakening of 2014–2016, and the 2022–2024 wartime present – making them readable as longitudinal records of how Western observers have construed Ukraine across an arc of accelerating self-definition.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annale.2026.100226>

Received 3 March 2026; Received in revised form 20 June 2026; Accepted 20 June 2026

Available online 30 June 2026

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Travel writing has long served as a vehicle for forming and transmitting national images. As scholars of imagology demonstrate, literary texts do not merely reflect pre-existing realities but actively construct perceptions of the Self and the Other, often through stereotypes that acquire remarkable persistence (Beller & Leerssen, 2007). Ukraine presents a particularly complex case: positioned at what Applebaum termed the “borderlands of Europe”, it has been cast variously as part of Russia’s sphere, a buffer zone between civilizations, a “cleft country” divided between East and West (Huntington, 1996), or an incomplete nation perpetually in the process of becoming. These inherited tropes, rooted in centuries of imperial discourse and Cold War mental geography, continue to shape how Western observers perceive and represent Ukrainian reality – and, increasingly, how prospective visitors imagine the country as a place that might be traveled to.

Despite growing scholarly interest following 2014 and especially 2022, comparative literature has paid insufficient attention to English and German travelogues about Ukraine as sources of hetero-images – external representations of Ukrainian national identity produced by foreign observers. Considerable work has explored Ukrainian auto-images and media coverage of the conflict, but the specific contribution of travel writing to the Western imaginary of Ukraine remains under-explored (Portnov, 2015; Shkandrij, 2001). This lacuna is significant: travel narratives, combining personal testimony, cultural observation, and implicit comparison, serve as powerful vectors for transmitting national images to general readerships.

Tourism scholarship has increasingly recognized travel writing as a vehicle for destination image construction, demonstrating how literary travelogues shape what audiences expect from places they have never visited and how a destination’s reputation circulates through narrative rather than promotional rhetoric (Dann, 1996; Hollinshead et al., 2009; Hudson, 2015; Mansfield & Potočník Topler, 2022). By exploring how four travelogues construct Ukraine’s destination image across three decades, this study contributes to that literature in a distinctive way: it shows how literary travel texts function as vehicles for destination image formation in a conflict-affected context, with practical implications for destination marketing, cultural and literary tourism development, and responsible tourism. We develop these connections inside the analytical sections rather than confining them to the conclusion, integrating tourism-relevant readings into each text-specific discussion and into the comparative synthesis.

The article therefore asks one overarching question – *how have English- and German-language travelogues of Ukraine across 1994–2024 constructed Ukrainian national identity through hetero-images, and what does this construction reveal about tourism imaginaries of liminal post-Soviet space?* – and approaches it through four sub-questions that organize the analysis: (1) how do Western authors represent Ukraine and Ukrainians in their travel narratives; (2) what hetero-images of Ukrainian national identity emerge, and what stereotypes or counter-stereotypes do they mobilize; (3) how does representation evolve across three temporal periods (post-Soviet, post-Maidan, and wartime); and (4) what is the intercultural and tourism-relevant potential of these works for both Ukrainian readers and non-Ukrainian readers seeking to understand the country beyond the headlines?

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Travel writing, imagology, and tourism imaginaries

Travel writing occupies an unstable position within literary taxonomy – a “notoriously raffish open house” (Kaasa, 2019) where autobiography, ethnography, journalism, and fiction mingle promiscuously (Youngs, 2013). This generic hybridity is constitutive: travel writing derives its epistemological claims from its ability to move between registers, combining the authority of eyewitness testimony with the interpretive latitude of personal reflection. Mary Louise Pratt’s concept of “contact zones” – social spaces “where cultures meet, clash,

and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt, 2008, p. 4) – frames the encounters these authors stage. Although the texts do not operate in classical colonial settings, Pratt’s apparatus illuminates the power asymmetries that structure Western representations of Ukraine, and recent scholarship has further sought to recover the agency of “travellees” – the people traveled among and written about (Thompson, 2025) – a dimension that matters here because the authors repeatedly encounter Ukrainian interlocutors who articulate their own readings of national identity.

Imagology, as developed within comparative literature, supplies the analytical framework for parsing what travel writing produces. It studies how national and ethnic identities are textually constructed through images and stereotypes, attending to the mechanisms by which literature produces and circulates representations of Self and Other (Beller & Leerssen, 2007; Leerssen, 2007). The field’s foundational distinction between *auto-images* (how a nation represents itself) and *hetero-images* (how it is represented by outsiders) anchors our reading, which focuses on hetero-images while remaining attentive to moments where external representations incorporate Ukrainian auto-images. Pageaux’s tripartite typology of *mania* (idealization), *phobia* (denigration), and *philia* (balanced appreciation) (Pageaux, 1989) classifies authorial stance. The four authors here generally occupy positions of *philia*, but the variations among them are not incidental: each author’s prior relationship to Ukraine – linguistic competence, kinship ties, length of residence, prior travel experience – shapes which hetero-images are foregrounded, which inherited stereotypes are inverted, and which observations are framed as exceptions to a wider pattern.

Tourism scholarship has increasingly recognized travel writing as a medium that shapes destination image and visit intention. Dann (1996, 1999) identify a repertoire of discursive techniques – languages of authentication, differentiation, and recreation – through which tourism texts discursively constitute destinations rather than merely describing them. Hollinshead et al. (2009) extend this insight as “worldmaking” – tourism’s capacity to bring destinations into being for audiences who may never visit. Wong et al. (2016) demonstrate empirically that narrative transportation moderates both destination image formation and visit intention, while Mansfield and Potočník Topler (2022) and Lean et al. (2014) show how travel writing operates as a form of destination branding that reaches readers through personal narrative rather than promotional rhetoric. The travelogues explored here function simultaneously as literary artifacts and as tourism mediators: their hetero-images of Ukrainian people and places enter the imaginative geography through which prospective visitors form expectations, with direct implications for Ukraine’s destination image in the post-2022 context.

2.2. Liminality and the cleft-country thesis

The concept of the “borderland” carries particular weight in representations of Ukraine. The very etymology of “Ukraine” – often, if contestably, derived from a Slavic root meaning “borderland” or “edge” – has encouraged readings of Ukrainian identity as essentially liminal, caught between larger civilizational blocs. Yet Ukraine’s liminality is not an essential trait; it is the historical sediment of successive imperial occupations – Polish-Lithuanian, Habsburg, Romanov, and Soviet – that have left the country with a stratified linguistic, religious, and architectural inheritance, alongside repeated experiences of statelessness and partition. As Larry Wolff demonstrated in *Inventing Eastern Europe* (Wolff, 1994), the imaginative geography that fixed Ukraine on the eastern margin of Europe was largely constructed by Enlightenment travelers and has proved remarkably persistent, while Shkandrij (2001) traces how Russian imperial discourse worked to absorb Ukrainian cultural production into a metropolitan canon, denying it autonomous standing.

Borderland framings shade easily into the “cleft country” image, which casts Ukraine as internally divided between a pro-Western,

Ukrainian-speaking West and a pro-Russian, Russian-speaking East. Huntington (1996) popularized this thesis, but it has been extensively critiqued by scholars who note that it flattens regional complexity, ignores historical contingency, and serves to legitimize Russian territorial claims (Rjabtschuk, 2006; Zhurzhenko, 2010). Ignatieff (1993), writing in the immediate aftermath of Soviet collapse, identifies a deeper logic in such binaries: what he calls the “narcissism of minor difference”, whereby neighboring peoples sharing much of their language, religion, and material culture invest small distinctions with disproportionate identitarian weight. Ignatieff’s account is itself a travelogue: *Blood and Belonging* records his 1993 journey through newly independent Ukraine – including a return to his great-grandfather’s estate – and there he separates ethnic nationalism, which roots belonging in shared blood and language, from civic nationalism, which binds a community of equal citizens through shared institutions irrespective of ethnicity (Ignatieff, 1993). He locates the engine of such conflicts not in difference as such but in the memory of past domination and the fear of its return, an argument that recasts Ukraine’s supposed East–West cleavage as a historically produced relation rather than an essential divide. We retain liminality as an analytical category because it captures something the East–West binary cannot: the layering and negotiation of multiple inheritances rather than the partition of a country into rival halves – a distinction that becomes consequential when wartime experience reorganizes which inheritances feel claimable and which feel imposed.

3. Corpus overview and methodology

3.1. Corpus description

The four texts selected span distinct generic variants of travel writing, produced by authors with different relationships to Ukraine and writing at different historical moments. Anne Applebaum’s *Between East and West* (1994; 2015 edition with new preface) is the work of an American journalist-historian traveling through newly independent post-Soviet states in 1991–1992. Her text merges travel memoir with popular history, moving from Kaliningrad to Odessa with extended attention to L’viv and western Ukraine. The 2015 preface reframes the text as historical document: “to read *Between East and West* now is to encounter a world that no longer exists” (Applebaum, 1994, p. xi). This retrospective framing – acknowledging that her descriptions had become history rather than journalism – is itself significant for imagological analysis.

Franz Nicolay’s *The Humorless Ladies of Border Control* (2016) is a punk tour diary by an American musician who accesses Ukraine through subcultural networks. Married to a Ukrainian woman who serves as translator and cultural mediator, Nicolay visits post-Maidan Ukraine in summer 2014, when the tent city on Kyiv’s central square was transitioning from revolutionary occupation to “quasi-military camp” and the Donbas conflict was escalating. His access to young, urban, English-speaking do-it-yourself music scenes produces representations of a specific generational slice of Ukrainian society (Nicolay, 2016).

Christoph Brumme’s *Im Schatten des Krieges* (In the Shadow of War, 2022) is a war diary written from Poltava between January 25 and May 1, 2022. Unlike the other authors, Brumme is not a traveler but a long-term resident with deep personal ties – a Ukrainian partner and son – to the country. His dedication “to the Armed Forces of Ukraine and all volunteers, thanks to whom I was able to write this book” (Brumme, 2022, p. 5) positions him as partisan witness rather than neutral observer. Stephan Orth’s *Couchsurfing in der Ukraine* (2024) documents travels through wartime Ukraine – Kyiv, Kharkiv, Dnipro, Chernihiv, Vinnytsia, Chernivtsi, and the Donetsk region – by staying with local hosts encountered through the Couchsurfing platform – a non-commercial peer-to-peer hospitality network connecting travelers with private hosts. His Ukrainian partner, whose father is a front-line soldier, is both logistical anchor and cultural mediator: her bilingual competence and family ties open access to wartime ordinary life that conventional reportage rarely reaches (Orth, 2024).

3.2. Methodological approach

The study employs reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2023) as the operational coding procedure, situated within the conceptual frame of imagology (Beller & Leerssen, 2007; Leerssen, 2007). The pairing is purposeful: reflexive thematic analysis supplies a transparent protocol for moving from textual passage to thematic category while making the analyst’s interpretive role explicit, while imagology supplies the categorical scaffolding for sorting themes into hetero-images, auto-images, and the relational positioning of Self and Other. Pageaux’s typology of *mania*, *phobia*, and *philia* (Pageaux, 1989) guides our reading of authorial stance.

The four texts were selected against three constraints. First, all four are linguistically accessible to the research team in their publication language, allowing close reading without translational mediation. Second, English and German are among the largest Western European book markets shaping public imaginaries of post-Soviet space, and the German-language strand has received scant comparative attention. Third, the texts span three historical configurations – post-Soviet transition (1991–1992), post-Maidan awakening (2014), and full-scale war (2022 onward) – enabling diachronic analysis. We acknowledge that the corpus is small and that book-length published travelogues exclude digital-native travel writing and travelogues in Slavic, Romance, and other languages that would extend the comparative reach.

Coding proceeded in four phases. First, each author read all four texts independently, marking passages that represent Ukrainians as a collective. Second, the team consolidated themes through iterative comparison, naming candidate hetero-images and resolving disagreement through retranslation of passages across English, German, Ukrainian, and Russian. Third, each candidate was classified along three dimensions: *stereotype* – an inherited attribution with a traceable history in Western discourse on Eastern Europe; *counter-stereotype* – a deliberate inversion or refutation of such an inherited image, often performed through extended counterexample; and *narrative function* – the work an image does within the travelogue’s argumentative arc. Fourth, themes were compared across texts to identify diachronic transformations and durable elements. Disagreements over contested terms – particularly those surrounding the Russian–Ukrainian linguistic continuum and contested toponyms – were resolved by consulting source-language originals and by deferring on phrasing to the team member with the strongest contextual familiarity.

3.3. Reflexivity and positionality

Smyth and Robinson (2001) argue that researching violently divided societies imposes ethical and epistemological obligations distinct from those of fieldwork in stable contexts: the researcher’s positionality and emotional stakes are part of the data, not extrinsic noise to be filtered out. We write from within such a society. The four authors are affiliated with a Ukrainian university in central-eastern Ukraine, and conducted the analysis during active war; three are Ukrainian scholars working on language, intercultural communication, and literature, and the fourth works on digital education and comparative literary analysis. We therefore acknowledge that our reading occupies a position of *philia* toward the texts insofar as their hetero-images affirm a Ukrainian self-understanding many of us share. This positionality sharpened our attention to passages in which Western authors articulate Russian–Ukrainian distinction, and to moments where their characterizations resonate with or depart from Ukrainian auto-images. Making this stance visible is not a departure from our method but a requirement of it: reflexive thematic analysis is reflexive by default, treating the analyst as a knowing researcher whose interpretive choices are part of, not extrinsic to, the analytic apparatus (Braun & Clarke, 2023).

4. Analysis: Applebaum (1994/2015)

4.1. *Ukraine as borderland*

Applebaum's text captures Ukraine at a singular historical moment: the immediate aftermath of Soviet collapse, when the newly independent state existed in "the strange state of suspended animation" (Applebaum, 1994, p. xi). Writing for Western readers unfamiliar with Ukraine as a distinct entity, much of her text is devoted to establishing that the borderlands exist as something other than "Russia" – "within a few decades the West no longer remembered that anything other than 'Russia' lay beyond the Polish border. Kiev was thought to be a Russian city" (Applebaum, 1994, p. xx). Her task is fundamentally pedagogical.

The "borderland" functions as the organizing trope, announced in the title and elaborated throughout the narrative. Ukraine appears not as a bounded nation-state but as a zone of transition: "The borderlands lie in a flat plain, crushed between the civilizations of Europe – and those of Asia... For a thousand years, the geography of the borderlands dictated their fate" (Applebaum, 1994, p. xv). This geographical determinism participates in a long tradition positioning Eastern Europe as passive terrain. Yet Applebaum is attentive to heterogeneity: her borderlands are densely layered palimpsests where "the waves of invaders washed over them, mingled, receded, and washed over them again" (Applebaum, 1994, p. xvii), leaving traces in architecture, language, and custom.

4.2. *The Ukrainian linguist: articulating national paradox*

The most theoretically significant representation of Ukrainian identity comes through Applebaum's encounter with an unnamed Ukrainian linguist in Vilnius. His formulation captures the central tension: "We are a very old nation, but never ever in our history have we had our own state. It has been our fate always to exist beneath the rule of others. And so it has been our fate to be described by others" (Applebaum, 1994, p. 193). This encapsulates a vision of Ukrainian identity as simultaneously ancient and incomplete, rooted in deep historical continuity yet lacking the institutional forms that would consolidate and legitimate that identity.

The linguist also emphasizes Ukrainian diversity – "There are many Ukrainians" – cataloguing regional variations that Soviet homogenization sought to destroy: Kyiv with its "most lovely, most pure Ukrainian"; eastern Ukraine where "the language is even lost"; Crimea and Odessa as Catherine's "Novorossiia"; and western Ukraine where "you could probably get away with speaking Polish" (Applebaum, 1994, p. 191). "All of this variety", he insists, "that is the beauty of Ukraine. Variety, that is its treasure" (Applebaum, 1994, p. 192). His concluding reflection positions Ukrainian identity as inherently mediated, constituted through external representation: "to read the history of your country as if you were reading it through an outsider's eyes" (Applebaum, 1994, p. 193) – authorizing the Western traveler's account as contribution to Ukrainian self-understanding.

4.3. *Key hetero-images in applebaum*

Several recurring hetero-images emerge. *Ukraine as fragmented multiplicity*: rather than a unified nation, Ukraine appears as a collection of regions with distinct histories, languages, and orientations, presented both as cultural richness and obstacle to national consolidation. *Ukraine as historically victimized*: the recurrent emphasis on foreign rule and the absence of statehood constructs Ukrainians as objects rather than subjects of history. *Ukraine as distinct from Russia*: throughout the text, Applebaum emphasizes Ukrainian difference – through Habsburg architectural legacies, Greek Catholic religious traditions, and the testimony of historical travelers who found Ukraine unmistakably distinct. *Ukraine as uncertain about itself*: the linguist's inability to articulate what Ukraine "is" – "I am sometimes at a loss when I am

asked to talk about my own country" (Applebaum, 1994, p. 193) – suggests a national identity still in formation, lacking the settled self-understanding of established nation-states. These hetero-images, produced at the moment of Ukrainian independence, would be significantly transformed by subsequent events. Read against tourism scholarship on post-socialist destinations, Applebaum's borderland frame anticipates the destination-image difficulties Hall (1999) identifies for Central and Eastern European countries: an imaginative geography that prospective Western visitors carry with them and against which any subsequent destination marketing must work.

5. Analysis: Nicolay (2016)

5.1. *The punk tour diary as subcultural travelogue*

Nicolay's text occupies a distinctive generic position: a tour diary by a working musician whose access to Ukraine is mediated through subcultural networks. This positioning grants entry to young, urban, countercultural, English-speaking demographics oriented toward Western cultural forms – while necessarily excluding other perspectives. When Nicolay generalizes about "Ukrainians", he is often, in practice, generalizing about a specific milieu. This limitation he occasionally acknowledges but does not systematically address. His interlocutors are predominantly people whose worldviews have been formed in independent Ukraine and who participated in or witnessed the Maidan revolution. His narrative captures a specific and volatile historical moment: the summer of 2014, months after the Euromaidan revolution, when the tent city on Kyiv's central square was transforming and the Donbas conflict was escalating.

5.2. *Generational shift and the meaning of independence*

One of Nicolay's most significant contributions is his attention to generational differences. His Kyiv contact Tanya – a Ukrainian woman whom he meets through the punk-music network and who serves as host, translator, and informal interpreter of post-Maidan civic life – articulates a key distinction:

"The Russian and Ukrainian populations uniquely prone to manipulation by propaganda and populist appeal are likely the middle-aged, the lost generation trapped between the malaise of late communism and the betrayed post-Soviet promises of liberalism and privatization. Without a memory of the Soviet Union, and with the positive example of their peers in Poland, those under thirty are more resistant to Putin's pan-Slavic rhetoric". (Nicolay, 2016, p. 335)

This generational frame offers a counter-narrative to representations of Ukraine as divided along regional or linguistic lines. The significant divide, in Nicolay's account, is not between Ukrainian-speaking west and Russian-speaking east but between those who grew up under Soviet rule and those who came of age in independent Ukraine. Tanya's own trajectory illustrates this: raised speaking *suzhik* (the Russian-Ukrainian pidgin common in central regions), she learned "real Ukrainian" only after moving west for university. Her nationalism, Nicolay emphasizes, is "inclusive" – welcoming of Crimean Tatars (the indigenous Turkic Muslim people of the Crimean peninsula, mass-deported to Central Asia under Stalin in 1944 and once again displaced and persecuted following Russia's 2014 occupation) and sympathetic to eastern refugees.

This generational analysis connects to Nicolay's broader interpretation of the Maidan's significance. Drawing on conversations with his friend Larissa, he articulates what becomes a central hetero-image: "It's like the war of independence that [Ukraine] never got to have. Because independence in 1991 came so easily, the country never had to make a positive decision, yes, we want to be independent. And now, people have to decide, do we really want to live in a different way?" (Nicolay, 2016, p. 356). This reframes 2014 not as political crisis but as a belated founding moment.

5.3. Key hetero-images in Nicolay

The hetero-images that emerge differ significantly from Applebaum's uncertain, fragmented Ukraine. *Ukrainians as pragmatic revolutionaries*: unlike the 2004 Orange Revolution, the 2014 movement chose Petro Poroshenko – “basically their Mitt Romney” (Nicolay, 2016, p. 356) – with sober awareness that competence matters more than charisma, reflecting political maturation after failed revolutions. *Ukrainians as inclusive nationalists*: against the image of Ukrainian nationalism as ethnic chauvinism, Nicolay documents civic nationalism defined by political commitment: “All Ukrainians are anti-imperialists” (Nicolay, 2016, p. 347). *Ukrainians as culturally creative*: the punk scenes, festivals, and literary celebrations Nicolay documents suggest a society with vital cultural production, exemplified by bands like DakhaBrakha blending traditional elements with contemporary aesthetics (Nicolay, 2016, p. 345). Where Applebaum's linguist struggled to articulate what Ukraine “is”, Nicolay's interlocutors display confident, if contested, national identities forged through revolutionary experience. As subcultural travelogue, Nicolay's text addresses readers already inclined toward alternative-tourism modes (Lean et al., 2014), suggesting how the post-Maidan civic imaginary travels beyond mainstream channels into the destination images of culturally-engaged independent travelers.

6. Analysis: Brumme and Orth (German wartime perspectives)

6.1. Christoph Brumme – *Im Schatten des Krieges*

Im Schatten des Krieges (Hirzel, Stuttgart, 2022) records a diary kept in Poltava, in central Ukraine, from 25 January 2022 – a month before the full-scale invasion – through May 2022, capturing pre-invasion anticipation and the texture of early-war daily life. Brumme occupies a unique position: neither traveler nor tourist but long-term resident with kinship ties to Ukraine through his partner and son Kolja. This positionality fundamentally shapes his narrative authority – when he writes about Ukrainians, he writes about neighbors, friends, and family whose fates are intertwined with his own. The diary form, spanning from anxious pre-invasion weeks to the grinding reality of early wartime, produces distinctive epistemological effects. Writing in near-real-time without retrospective organization, Brumme records the uncertainty of the moment – air-raid sirens interrupting composition, friends departing for the front, deaths arriving by casual street-corner announcement.

A central preoccupation is articulating Ukrainian distinctiveness from Russian identity – a question with particular resonance for a German author. In his preface, Brumme confesses: “In my childhood and youth in the German Democratic Republic, we called all Soviet people Russians. But how were Russians and Ukrainians supposed to differ?” (Brumme, 2022, p. 7). This frames the entire text as correction of inherited misperception. His key characterization, derived from decades of cycling through the country, constructs Ukrainians as “far less authority-oriented than Russians”, skeptical of centralized power and tolerant of diversity – but capable of decisive resistance when red lines are crossed (Brumme, 2022, p. 12).

Brumme represents Ukrainians as resilient, dignified, and resistant to the role of victim. His Ukrainian friends become “role models in the subject of dignity, pride, and morality” (Brumme, 2022, p. 31) – maintaining composure under conditions that would justify panic. A crucial passage articulates this ethic: “Ukrainians don't want revenge for the 'defeat in the Cold War'. They don't feel like a chosen people, they don't want to invade neighbors and force their language and culture on them. They simply want to live in peace” (Brumme, 2022, p. 12). This constructs Ukrainian nationalism as defensive rather than aggressive, civic rather than ethnic, oriented toward self-determination

rather than domination.

6.2. Stephan Orth – *couchsurfing in der Ukraine*

Couchsurfing in der Ukraine: Meine Reise durch ein Land im Krieg (Piper, München, 2024) brings the hospitality-platform methodology of Orth's earlier reportage to a country at war. Staying in private homes to access domestic spaces invisible to conventional journalism produces distinctive epistemological effects. Orth's hosts – whose Couchsurfing profiles he reads and quotes, noting how pre-war self-descriptions now read as artifacts of vanished normalcy – become primary vehicles for representing Ukrainian identity. Orth's Ukrainian partner, whose family includes front-line soldiers, is the emotional and logistical centre of the project: her bilingual competence, social ties, and personal stakes in the conflict shape which doors open and which conversations turn confessional, positioning Orth as an implicated witness rather than a detached observer. He is acutely aware of the potential impropriety of his project: “Couchsurfing in a country at war, that sounds fundamentally wrong. As if the suffering people had no other problems than to host an unkempt backpacker from privileged Germany” (Orth, 2024, p. 15). Yet Ukrainian responses encourage him: one contact writes, “The Germans have taken in a million Ukrainians, including my wife. Is it too much to ask that a German visits us?”

Orth's representation of Ukrainians emphasizes their maintenance of humanity under inhuman conditions. The Couchsurfing profiles he quotes – Wolodymyr from Odesa who “likes Tai-Chi, motorcycles, and video games”; Diana from Chernivtsi who “loves good wine”; Anastasija from Bakhmut who “loves dancing and singing” – transform abstract victims into recognizable people (Orth, 2024, p. 16–17). He clicks through profiles noting “Last login 14 months ago” – the time since the invasion began – wondering which of these people are still alive. A recurring formulation, attributed to photographer Mychajlo, captures the wartime ethos: “Ukrainians laugh so as not to constantly cry” (Orth, 2024, p. 247).

6.3. Key hetero-images in Brumme and Orth

Three hetero-images recur with particular force across the two German wartime texts. *Ukrainians as resilient and dignified*: Brumme's friends become “role models in dignity, pride, and morality” who maintain composure under conditions that would justify panic; Orth's hosts welcome him amid air raids and shortages without converting their welcome into either victimhood or heroic posture. *Ukrainians as defensively rather than aggressively national*: Brumme's claim that “Ukrainians don't want revenge...they don't want to invade neighbors and force their language and culture on them” counters Russian propaganda framings of Ukrainian nationalism as ethnic chauvinism. *Ukrainians as humanly ordinary under inhuman conditions*: Orth's Couchsurfing profiles – Wolodymyr from Odesa who likes Tai-Chi, Diana from Chernivtsi who loves good wine, Anastasija from Bakhmut who loves dancing and singing – transform abstract victims into recognizable individuals whose ordinariness becomes the locus of moral weight.

Both authors also write with explicit awareness of historical crimes in Eastern Europe – the Nazi occupation, the Holocaust, the destruction of Ukrainian cities and populations – which generates particular sensitivity to Russian propaganda appropriating anti-fascist rhetoric. Brumme's impatience with German policy reflects frustration with a political culture that failed to anticipate the war: “In Germany, politics is conducted like accounting – without connection to ethics and long-term strategic orientation” (Brumme, 2022, p. 80–81). Both engage with the legacy of *Ostpolitik* – the faith in economic interdependence as guarantee of peace – and its post-2022 discrediting. Writing for German readers in German, both perform acts of cultural translation for an audience whose understanding may be limited or distorted by Cold War and post-Cold War frameworks. The two German texts share this section because both record the same wartime present from German-

language witness positions; the English texts (1994 and 2016) span twenty-two years and write into different political conjunctures, warranting separate treatment. For tourism scholarship on conflict-affected destinations, the wartime travelogues operate as working examples of responsible visitation tested in practice rather than asserted in principle: travel that derives its authority from acknowledging asymmetry and personal implication rather than performing distance (Armstrong, 2004).

7. Comparative synthesis

7.1. Recurring hetero-images across the corpus

Several hetero-images recur across the four texts with notable consistency, suggesting durable elements in Western perceptions of Ukrainian identity.

Hospitality and warmth: all four authors represent Ukrainians as notably hospitable, welcoming foreign visitors with generosity that often surprises or moves them. This image carries particular weight in the wartime texts: when Orth's hosts welcome him amid air raids and shortages, their hospitality becomes evidence of deeper national character – a refusal to let war extinguish ordinary human warmth.

Resilience and pragmatism: across all four texts, Ukrainians appear as people who adapt to difficult circumstances with practical determination rather than passive endurance. Brumme's formulation that his friends are "role models in the subject of dignity, pride, and morality" exemplifies this framing; Orth's "Ukrainians laugh so as not to constantly cry" captures its specific texture as coping mechanism and refusal of victimhood.

Linguistic and cultural complexity: all four authors attend to Ukraine's internal diversity – regional variations, linguistic mixtures, and historical layers that complicate any singular definition of Ukrainian identity. This attention functions as correction of oversimplified Western frameworks, particularly the "cleft country" thesis. The authors consistently find that Russian-speakers identify fiercely as Ukrainian, western nationalists welcome eastern refugees, and young people across regions share more with each other than with their Soviet-raised elders.

Distinct from Russians: the most consistent hetero-image across all four texts is Ukrainian distinctiveness from Russian identity, operating across historical, religious, political, and characterological registers. Applebaum establishes it through the testimony of historical travelers; Nicolay's contacts articulate it through political analysis; Brumme frames it as the central lesson of his decades in Ukraine; Orth's hosts embody it through wartime choices. This image serves both descriptive and normative functions: correcting Western tendencies to conflate the two nations while grounding Ukrainian claims to separate statehood.

7.2. Diachronic transformation

The corpus reveals significant transformation across three temporal periods. In 1994, Applebaum's Ukraine exists in suspended animation: national identity is a question rather than an answer, the linguist's lament – "never ever in our history have we had our own state" – encapsulating historical incompleteness. Ukraine appears as borderland rather than bounded nation, as object of others' stories rather than author of its own narrative.

By 2014–2016, Nicolay's Ukraine has undergone transformation: a generation that came of age in independence has chosen, through struggle, to become a nation in the fullest sense. The Maidan functions as the "war of independence that Ukraine never got to have", transforming passive beneficiaries of Soviet collapse into active citizens of a chosen polity. Uncertainty gives way to assertion; fragmentation to consolidation. Yet new uncertainties emerge – active military threat rather than merely historical victimhood.

In the wartime texts of 2022–2024, war-forged solidarity has consolidated national identity across regional and linguistic lines, refuting

the "cleft country" thesis through demonstrated willingness to fight and die for Ukrainian statehood. In Ignatieff's terms, the consolidation these travelogues record is markedly *civic* rather than *ethnic*: Russian-speakers and Ukrainian-speakers, lifelong residents and returnees close ranks around a shared political community and its institutions rather than around blood or language – the inversion of the ethnic-nationalist trap he feared might claim post-Soviet Ukraine in 1993 (Ignatieff, 1993). Yet the wartime hetero-images incorporate new elements: trauma, loss, exhaustion, and the grinding endurance of prolonged conflict. The Ukraine that emerges from war will not be the Ukraine that entered it.

7.3. Genre and representation

The corpus's generic diversity illuminates how form shapes knowledge. Applebaum's scholarly travelogue produces analytical distance and access to political and intellectual elites, with representations characterized by historical contextualization. Nicolay's punk tour diary grants entry to subcultural milieus and generational dynamics invisible to conventional journalism. Brumme's war diary captures immediacy and uncertainty – the borderline experience of writing from within limit situations where text and event merge. Orth's couchsurfing narrative accesses domestic spaces and ordinary lives, with Couchsurfing profiles functioning as documents of interrupted normalcy whose pre-war self-descriptions acquire tragic retrospective significance.

7.4. Intercultural and tourism-relevant potential

These texts possess considerable intercultural potential for both Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian readers, with consequences that extend into how tourism imaginaries of Ukraine are formed. Ukrainian readers encountering them confront their nation as seen by sympathetic but external observers, experiencing recognition – when Brumme's characterizations or Nicolay's celebrations of civic nationalism affirm self-understanding – and estrangement, through the inevitable distortions and simplifications of external representation. The linguist's formulation in Applebaum remains pertinent: "It was the fate of borderland nations always to know yourself through the stories of others" (Applebaum, 1994, p. 193). The three temporal layers of hetero-images we have traced – 1994's borderland with fragmented identity, 2016's post-Maidan civic awakening, and 2022–2024's war-forged consolidation – give Ukrainian readers the unusual experience of seeing their own decade-by-decade self-understanding reflected, contested, and partly anticipated in foreign witness.

For non-Ukrainian readers – including prospective tourists, cultural intermediaries, and tourism educators – these texts offer what statistics and news reports cannot: access to individual lives and particular stories. The Couchsurfing profiles Orth quotes transform abstract victims into recognizable people whose hopes the reader can imagine sharing; Brumme's neighbors, Nicolay's scene contacts, and Applebaum's intellectuals all individualize what might otherwise remain undifferentiated mass. This humanizing function carries ethical weight in a conflict whose scale risks becoming numbing, and it carries practical weight for destination image formation: the hetero-images circulated by these travelogues are precisely the building blocks from which prospective visitors construct expectations of Ukraine as a destination, whether for memory tourism, solidarity visitation, or post-conflict cultural travel. All four authors grapple, explicitly or implicitly, with the ethical responsibilities of representation – positioning reading itself as a potentially consequential act, gateway both to more adequate response and to more responsible visitation.

8. Conclusions

This study explored four English- and German-language travelogues spanning three decades of Ukrainian history, tracing hetero-images of Ukrainians and their evolution across distinct historical moments. Five recurring hetero-images emerge with notable consistency – hospitality, resilience, linguistic and cultural complexity, European aspiration, and distinctiveness from Russian identity – pointing to durable elements in Western perceptions of Ukrainian national character. Across the corpus, three diachronic transformations are visible: from Applebaum's 1994 borderland in suspended animation, through the post-Maidan civic awakening recorded by Nicolay in 2016, to the war-forged consolidation registered by Brumme and Orth, in which the "cleft country" thesis is refuted by demonstrated willingness to fight and die for Ukrainian statehood. The specifically German perspective – shaped by Cold War legacies, *Ostpolitik*, and historical guilt – adds dimensions absent from the American texts. In bringing a new corpus to imagological analysis, bridging English- and German-language literary traditions, and reading travel writing alongside tourism scholarship on destination image, the study shows how literary travelogues help form the imaginative geography of a conflict-affected destination.

These findings bear on how Ukraine's international image might be understood and managed in the wake of war. The hetero-images the travelogues circulate – hospitality, cultural complexity, resilience – are the very materials from which prospective visitors assemble expectations, and they offer a counterweight to the reductive coverage that has dominated perceptions of Ukraine since 2022. Because travel writing reaches readers through personal narrative rather than promotional rhetoric, it can work as a form of destination branding for audiences resistant to conventional advertising (Mansfield & Potočník Topler, 2022), with the durable image of Ukrainian hospitality a particularly powerful resource for post-conflict recovery. The itineraries the texts document also sketch concrete possibilities for literary and cultural tourism – Applebaum's borderland route through Habsburg and Greek Catholic L'viv, Nicolay's punk-circuit map of independent venues, Orth's couchsurfing network of urban and regional hosts – much as travel writing has elsewhere served as both catalyst and guide for tourism development (Hooper, 2020).

The texts also model what responsible visitation to a wounded destination might require. Orth's immersive couchsurfing and Brumme's long-term residency prioritize authentic encounter over commodified experience (Chen, 2018), carrying an awareness of asymmetry that package tourism tends to elide; read across the corpus, responsible visitation rests on acknowledging the gap between visitor and host, engaging host narratives rather than consuming scenery, and supporting local economies even where the destination is contested. Ukraine's State Agency for Tourism Development has begun building infrastructure consonant with these principles, notably the *Places of Memory* route (MemoryMap.ua, 2026), which structures war-affected sites into an itinerary ordinary travelers can follow; the travelogues supply the interpretive register such routes will ask of their visitors, and a discursive resource for the guides and materials through which they will be encountered. The same texts are valuable in the classroom, where analysis of travel writing has been shown to deepen students' grasp of cross-cultural encounter and destination-image formation (Armstrong, 2004).

Several limitations qualify these claims. The corpus is small and purposive – four book-length travelogues in two Western languages – and necessarily excludes digital-native travel writing and accounts in Slavic, Romance, and other languages that would widen the comparative frame. The reading is qualitative and interpretive rather than generalizing, and it is produced by a single interpretive community of Ukrainian scholars whose acknowledged *philia* both sharpens and bounds what the analysis can see. Each text, moreover, captures a particular historical moment rather than a continuous record. These

constraints mark out future work: a broader multilingual corpus, reception studies that test how readers actually take up these hetero-images, and a fuller engagement with the psychoanalytic dimension of Ignatieff's account – his debt to Freud's "narcissism of minor difference" – as a way of theorizing the Russian–Ukrainian relation beyond the descriptive.

The travelogues explored here document stages in Ukraine's transformation from peripheral post-Soviet space to the centre of European concern. As literary artefacts and as tourism mediators, they will continue to shape how the wider world imagines Ukraine – what manner of country it is, and what manner of people are defending it.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Vita A. Hamaniuk: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation. **Valentyna A. Karpiuk:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation. **Tetiana M. Mishenina:** Writing – original draft. **Serhiy O. Semerikov:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation.

Ethics approval

Not applicable. This study involves the imagological analysis of published literary texts.

Funding

The authors did not receive support from any organization for the submitted work.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary material related to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annale.2026.100226>.

Data availability

No datasets were generated or analyzed. The analyzed travelogues are available through public libraries and commercial publishers as cited in the references.

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