

BIOGRAPHICAL STUDIES IN UKRAINE AND POLAND: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE CURRENT STATE

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Summary

This article presents a comparative analysis of the current state of biographical studies in Ukraine and Poland as an interdisciplinary field within the humanities. It examines the principal centres of biographical research, the work of leading scholars, specialized academic journals, and national biographical projects in both countries. Particular attention is paid to the development of national biographical dictionaries as essential instruments for preserving historical memory, shaping national identity, and safeguarding cultural heritage. The study demonstrates that Polish biographical studies represent a classical model based on the long-standing tradition of compiling a printed national biographical dictionary, whereas Ukrainian biographical studies have developed a digital model centred on a national biographical resource. Despite differences in their historical development and institutional frameworks, both traditions share common methodological foundations and exhibit an increasing tendency towards scholarly cooperation. The research employs general scientific methods, as well as historical and comparative approaches.

Key words: biographical studies, biographica, biographical dictionary, national biographical resource, Ukraine, Poland, comparative study.

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1. Introduction

Biographical studies have become an increasingly important field within the humanities, as biographical projects serve not only to reconstruct the lives of individuals but also to preserve historical memory, shape national identity, and safeguard cultural heritage. Following the democratic transformations in Poland and the restoration of Ukraine's independence, biographical studies in both countries gained new momentum. However, their development followed different trajectories, shaped by distinct historical experiences and patterns of institutional development.

Today, biographical research performs not only a reference function but also cultural, commemorative, educational, and identity-building functions, thereby contributing to the preservation of historical memory and the interpretation of national heritage. These developments have been influenced by differences in historical circumstances, state policies in the humanities, the degree of institutionalization of biographical studies, and established academic traditions. Against this background, this article aims to provide a comparative analysis of the development of biographical studies in Ukraine and Poland, identify their common features and distinctive characteristics, and outline the principal trends in their contemporary development, as well as the prospects for Ukrainian–Polish scholarly cooperation in this field.

2. Research Centres for Biographical Studies

Given the long-standing tradition of biographical studies in Poland, the country has developed an extensive network of research centres dedicated to this field. Among them, the Centre for Biographical Research at the University of Szczecin (*Ośrodek Badań Biograficznych Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego*, OBB US) occupies a leading position. Established in 2011, the Centre specializes in the study of history, politics, and psychology through the lens of individual life histories. Its primary research focus is Polish historical biographical studies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The Centre publishes the prestigious annual journal *Polish Biographical Studies*, the only academic periodical devoted exclusively to research on Polish historical biographical studies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Founded in 2012 under the editorship of Professor Adam Wątor, the journal aims to disseminate the results of biographical research. According to its official website, its objectives include promoting methodological discussions in biographical studies; publishing analytical articles and dissertations devoted to well-known, little-known, and forgotten historical figures; making available primary biographical sources, such as correspondence, memoirs, diaries, journals, and reports; as well as publishing reviews of monographs in the field of biographical studies. During its initial years, the journal was published exclusively in Polish; however, in recent years a substantial proportion of its articles has appeared in English, reflecting its growing international orientation.

For the purposes of content analysis, one of the most recent issues of the journal – Volume 11 (2023) – was selected (*Central and Eastern European Online Library*). The volume contains ten scholarly articles authored by Polish researchers. Most of them focus on the biographies of individual Polish historical figures, including Władysław Bieńkowski, Marian Książkowski, Jarosław Tomasiewicz, Jerzy Rożałowski, Ivan Osynskyi, and others. Only one article, authored by Witold Wojdyło, addresses the role and objectives of historical biography as a field of research. These findings corroborate the observation made by the Polish scholar Mariusz Wołos in his article *Biografistyka – fenomen współczesnej historiografii polskiej?* (“Biographical Studies: A Phenomenon of Contemporary Polish Historiography?”). Wołos argues that in recent years Polish biographical studies have witnessed a shift in scholarly interest from well-known historical figures to individuals who previously occupied a marginal position in historical research. For various reasons, these figures remained largely absent from academic inquiry for decades, yet they are now increasingly being reintroduced into scholarly discourse. The author also notes the predominance of political and military biography within contemporary Polish biographical studies, a tendency that is likewise evident in the analysed issue of *Polish Biographical Studies* (Wołos, 2024).

One of the leading Polish scholars specializing in the theoretical and methodological foundations of biographical studies is Jolanta Kolbuszewska. Together with Rafał Stobiecki, she edited the collective monograph *Biografistyka we współczesnych badaniach historycznych. Teoria i praktyka* (*Biographical Studies in Contemporary Historical Research: Theory and Practice*), a landmark publication devoted to contemporary trends in biographical research, the typology of biographies, source materials, and the current state of Polish historical biographical studies (Kolbuszewska, Stobiecki, 2017).

In Ukraine, the Institute of Biographical Research of the V. I. Vernadskyi National Library of Ukraine, established in 1994, remains the first and, to date, the only specialized academic institution dedicated exclusively to biographical studies. According to information published on the Library's official website, the Institute's activities focus on the study of the

historical development and contemporary state of Ukrainian *biographica* and biobibliography; the advancement of the theoretical and methodological foundations of biographical studies as a humanities discipline; research into the theoretical and practical aspects of developing electronic biographical information resources; and the promotion of biographical knowledge within society (*National Library of Ukraine named after V. I. Vernadskyi, n.d.*).

The Institute of Biographical Research has published the annual scholarly volume *Ukraïns'ka Biografistyka (Biographistica Ukrainica)* since 1996. The publication addresses the historical development and contemporary state of Ukrainian biographical scholarship and biographical studies, while also presenting research on prominent historical and cultural figures and their role in the social and cultural life of Ukraine.

Unlike the Polish annual *Polish Biographical Studies*, the Ukrainian publication includes not only original research articles but also materials based on presentations delivered at specialized academic conferences. A representative example is Volume 26 (2025), which contains the proceedings of the Twenty-First Biographical Readings entitled *Biographica and the Patriotic Consolidation of Ukrainian Society*, held in Kyiv on 4 June 2025, as well as materials prepared for the *Ukrainian National Biographical Archive (Biography. Biohrafika. Biohrafistyka, 2025)*.

The volume comprises 34 contributions organized into seven thematic sections: *Times of Great Trials in the Mirror of Biographica; A Collective Portrait of Figures in Science, Education, and Culture as a Form of Representing Ukraine; Figures in Science, Education, and Culture: Contemporary Interpretations; Memoirs, Recollections, and Epistolary Sources: A Spiritual Dialogue between Generations; Expanding the Boundaries of Biographical Research; New Information Technologies: Bibliography and Sources for Biographical Research; and Materials for the Ukrainian National Biographical Archive*. The thematic diversity of the volume reflects the broad range of research interests pursued by Ukrainian scholars in biographical studies, encompassing not only individual biographies but also collective biographies, source studies, digital biographical resources, and questions of historical memory. This diversity highlights the interdisciplinary character of contemporary Ukrainian biographical studies and their responsiveness to current social and cultural challenges.

One of the leading Ukrainian scholars in the field of biographical studies is Volodymyr Popyk – a historian, bibliographer, and Director of the Institute of Biographical Research at the V. I. Vernadskyi National Library of Ukraine. He is the author of the influential monograph *Biographica: A Phenomenon of Culture and Scholarship, an Information Resource for Society* (2021), in which he conceptualizes *biographica* as an essential component of national culture, scholarly inquiry, and the information infrastructure of contemporary society.

3. National Biographical Dictionaries and Digital Biographical Resources

National biographical dictionaries occupy a central place in the development of contemporary biographical studies. They serve not only as reference works but also as important instruments for preserving historical memory, representing national identity, and advancing biographical studies as an academic discipline. In addition to their documentary function, they fulfil research, commemorative, educational, and cultural roles, reflecting changing societal perceptions of the significance of historical figures.

Ukraine has yet to produce a comprehensive national biographical dictionary, although efforts to compile one date back to the late nineteenth century. During the 1890s, a scholarly circle of historians, literary scholars, and art historians led by Volodymyr Antonovych initiated work on such a project. A further step was taken on 26 November 1918, when the Permanent

Commission for the Compilation of a Dictionary of Ukrainian Figures in Science, History, the Arts, and Public Life was established under the Joint Assembly of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences to coordinate the preparation of the dictionary.

The Commission developed a working programme and editorial guidelines stipulating that the dictionary should include biographies not only of Ukrainian figures but also of Polish, Jewish, Russian, and representatives of other nationalities whose activities had influenced the history of Ukraine or contributed to its development (*National Library of Ukraine named after V. I. Vernadskyi, Fund X, File 6372, fol. 2*).

As Tetiana Varava notes in her article *The Main Stages in the Activities of the Permanent Commission for the Compilation of a Dictionary of Ukrainian Figures in Science, History, the Arts, and Public Life (1918–1933)*, the preparation of this biobibliographical dictionary represented the first attempt to create a Ukrainian national reference work of such scope. To achieve this objective, the Commission sought to collect information not only from printed sources, which contained relatively limited information on Ukrainian figures, but also through the extensive use of archival materials. As a result of its work, approximately 200,000 biographical records were compiled. In 1933, however, the Soviet authorities denounced the Commission's activities as “fascist” and “nationalist” and subsequently dissolved it. Biobibliographical research was not revived until the 1990s, following the establishment of the Institute of Biographical Research at the V. I. Vernadskyi National Library of Ukraine.

The history of the Ukrainian national biographical dictionary demonstrates that awareness of its importance emerged long before the institutionalization of biographical studies as an independent academic discipline and even before Ukraine gained state independence. As early as the late nineteenth century, the Ukrainian intelligentsia regarded the creation of a national biographical corpus as an essential component of preserving historical memory and shaping national identity. The realization of this project was ultimately prevented by adverse political circumstances and the repressive policies of the Soviet regime. Following the restoration of Ukraine's independence, however, the idea of establishing a national biographical resource gained renewed momentum.

Despite the fact that the project of a national biographical dictionary was never completed in the form of a traditional printed publication, its conceptual foundations were carried forward through the establishment of the Ukrainian National Biographical Archive (UNBA), which today serves as Ukraine's national electronic biographical resource. The project was launched in 2012 on the web portal of the V. I. Vernadskyi National Library of Ukraine, drawing upon electronic databases of biographical and biobibliographical information that had been developed since the 1990s. Over the course of the project, the Institute of Biographical Research has compiled information on more than 50,000 individuals. Today, these records are integrated with full-text reference works and scholarly publications, archival documents, and iconographic materials.

According to the project's concept, its principal objective is to develop a comprehensive national historical and biographical resource that provides academically verified information on prominent figures from Ukraine, the Ukrainian diaspora, and other countries whose lives and activities were connected with the history and culture of Ukraine. As Volodymyr Popyk argues, the Ukrainian National Biographical Archive was conceived not merely as a digital repository but as an integrated biographical ecosystem, combining a biographical dictionary, a biobibliography, a digital library of biographical texts, studies on the theory and methodology of biographical research, and a database of Ukrainian iconography (*Popyk, 2013*).

Thus, the establishment of the Ukrainian National Biographical Archive marks a transformation in the very concept of the national biographical corpus—from a traditional printed dictionary to an open digital resource that enables the continuous expansion, revision, and integration of biographical information. Rather than replacing the traditional biographical dictionary, this digital model extends its functionality, creating new opportunities for scholarly research and international cooperation.

By contrast, Poland possesses one of Europe's most authoritative national biographical dictionaries. The Polish Biographical Dictionary constitutes a monumental account of Polish history viewed through the lives of individuals. Published in Kraków since 1935 – with interruptions during the Nazi occupation and the Stalinist period – it currently contains more than 28,000 biographical entries in over 55 volumes. Since its inception, nearly 4,000 scholars from Poland and abroad have contributed to the project, underscoring its exceptional importance for Polish historical scholarship. Although the entries are concise, they combine a high degree of factual precision with a coherent reconstruction of individual lives, making them valuable not only as reference materials but also as independent works of historical-biographical research.

Thus, Poland represents the classical model of a national biographical dictionary, whereas Ukraine has developed a digital model of a national biographical resource. The Polish model is based on a completed and canonical printed publication, while the Ukrainian model relies on an open digital environment that enables the continuous expansion and updating of biographical information.

Despite the differences between the traditional printed model of the *Polish Biographical Dictionary* and the digital model represented by the Ukrainian National Biographical Archive, these projects should not be regarded as mutually exclusive. On the contrary, they create new opportunities for scholarly interaction and mutual development. A notable example of such cooperation is the article by Tetiana Komarianska and Tetiana Kotliarova, *The Representation of the Polish Biographical Dictionary in the Ukrainian National Biographical Archive (On the 90th Anniversary of the Publication of the First Volume of the Dictionary)* (Komarianska, Kotliarova, 2025). In this study, the authors examine how materials from the *Polish Biographical Dictionary* are incorporated into the Ukrainian National Biographical Archive, paying particular attention to the statistical representation of individuals associated with the historical regions of Galicia and Right-Bank Ukraine. Drawing on Volodymyr Popyk's monograph *Reference Biographical Information Resources: Historical Experience of Their Formation, Current State, Problems, and Prospects for Development*, the authors argue that integrating foreign biographical resources into the Ukrainian humanities will “substantially enrich the source base for scholarly research and broaden the scope of cultural and educational activities”. Consequently, they emphasize the importance of ensuring their “comprehensive representation in Ukrainian biographical corpora” (Popyk, 2013).

The incorporation of the *Polish Biographical Dictionary* into the Ukrainian National Biographical Archive, together with the growing engagement of Ukrainian scholars with this resource, demonstrates not only the use of the Polish biographical legacy as a valuable scholarly source but also the emergence of a shared Ukrainian-Polish biographical space. This development reflects the increasing interaction between the two national biographical traditions and the deepening of Ukrainian-Polish scholarly dialogue in the field of biographical studies.

4. Similarities and Differences between Ukrainian and Polish Biographical Studies

The analysis conducted in this study demonstrates that Ukrainian and Polish biographical studies share a number of common features resulting from the proximity of their historical and cultural traditions and their integration into the broader European humanities. First and foremost, this is reflected in the understanding of biographical studies as an interdisciplinary field that examines the theoretical, methodological, source-critical, and historiographical dimensions of historical-biographical research (*Golubovych, Menzhulin, Popova, (n.d.)*). In both countries, biographical scholarship draws upon the methodologies of history, literary studies, sociology, psychology, cultural studies, political science, and other humanities disciplines, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of individuals within their historical, social, and cultural contexts.

Furthermore, in both countries biographical studies developed as an integral component of the national historical narrative. Biographies of prominent historical figures played a significant role in shaping collective memory, national identity, and the national pantheon. Following the democratic transformations in Poland after 1989 and the restoration of Ukraine's independence in 1991, the methodological foundations of biographical research underwent substantial revision. The focus shifted from the mere reconstruction of an individual's life to the interpretation of broader historical processes through the lens of personal experience. As a result, biography has increasingly come to be regarded as an important branch of historiographical research, since biographical texts reflect not only the lives of historical figures but also the evolution of historical thought, methodological approaches, and changing perceptions of the past.

At the same time, the comparative analysis reveals several fundamental differences in the development of Polish and Ukrainian biographical studies. The most significant of these lies in the distinct historical trajectories through which biographical studies evolved as an academic discipline. In Poland, biographical scholarship is rooted in a long and almost uninterrupted academic tradition dating back to the late nineteenth century. Supported by an extensive network of research centres, large-scale publishing projects, and active international cooperation, contemporary Polish biographical studies devote considerable attention to the theory of biography, the methodology of biographical writing, the study of intellectual elites, local history, and the development of prosopography.

In contrast, the development of Ukrainian biographical studies was interrupted by Soviet ideological policies in the 1930s. This period was marked by the persecution of the intelligentsia, the suspension of commissions responsible for preparing a national biographical dictionary, the destruction of archival collections, and the ideological instrumentalization of biographical research. Contemporary Ukrainian biographical studies therefore pursue two closely interconnected objectives: restoring the interrupted scholarly tradition and developing new conceptual and methodological approaches aligned with the European humanities.

The field has experienced particularly dynamic development following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. As Volodymyr Popyk observes, "Ukrainian biographical studies have gradually begun to free themselves from outdated stereotypes, actively embrace the values of European and global scholarship, and move toward a postmodern, multidimensional, and critical understanding of the individual in all the complexity of human experience" (*Popyk, 2024*).

Overall, the differences between Polish and Ukrainian biographical studies lie not so much in their aims or functions as in the historical circumstances of their formation and institutional development. Consequently, rather than representing competing scholarly traditions, they increasingly demonstrate convergence, accompanied by the intensification of Ukrainian-Polish academic dialogue and cooperation in the field of biographical studies.

5. Conclusions

The comparative analysis of Ukrainian and Polish biographical studies demonstrates that, despite differences in their historical development and institutional formation, both traditions share common methodological foundations and perform similar social and cultural functions.

Both Poland and Ukraine have developed specialized research institutions dedicated to the study of the historical evolution and contemporary development of biographical studies, the advancement of theoretical and applied approaches to biographical research, the development of digital biographical resources, and the promotion of biographical knowledge within society.

One of the most significant areas of contemporary biographical scholarship is the development of national biographical resources. These serve not only as reference works but also as important instruments for shaping historical memory, constructing national identity, and advancing biographical studies as an academic discipline.

Poland represents the classical model of a national biographical dictionary, whereas Ukraine has developed a digital model of a national biographical resource. The Polish model is based on a comprehensive and canonical printed reference work, while the Ukrainian model relies on an open digital environment that allows for the continuous expansion, updating, and verification of biographical information.

The incorporation of the *Polish Biographical Dictionary* into the *Ukrainian National Biographical Archive* demonstrates not only the use of the Polish biographical corpus as a scholarly source but also the emergence of a shared Ukrainian–Polish biographical space. This process reflects the growing interaction between the two national biographical traditions and the deepening of Ukrainian–Polish academic dialogue in the field of biographical studies.

The differences between Polish and Ukrainian biographical studies lie not so much in their aims or functions as in the historical conditions of their development and institutional formation. Consequently, Ukrainian–Polish cooperation in the field of biographical studies contributes to the creation of a shared scholarly space and promotes interdisciplinary dialogue within the humanities.

Thus, although Ukrainian and Polish biographical studies have evolved along different historical trajectories, they are becoming increasingly integrated into the European humanities, creating new opportunities for international scholarly cooperation and for a deeper understanding of their shared historical and cultural heritage.

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