

UKRAINE IN HISTORIES AND STORIES

ESSAYS BY UKRAINIAN INTELLECTUALS

With a foreword by Peter Pomerantsev

Ukrainian Voices, vol. 4

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UKRAINE

IN HISTORIES AND STORIES

ESSAYS BY UKRAINIAN INTELLECTUALS



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Volodymyr Yermolenko (ed.)

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Essays by Ukrainian Intellectuals

With a preface by Peter Pomerantsev

With an introduction by Andriy Kulakov

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Verlag

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

The book was initially published by Internews Ukraine and UkraineWorld with the support of Ukrainian Cultural Foundation.

The ideas expressed in this book belong exclusively to the individual authors of the texts and do not necessarily coincide with the views of the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation.



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ISBN-13: 978-3-8382-7456-0

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PREFACE

One of the curiosities with Ukraine is that no one really knows where it is. For many, not least Vladimir Putin, it's an extension of neo-Tsarist Russia. For others, it's another Central European state, a proto-Poland of frustrated blood and language nationalism which just needs the chance to build strong state institutions to express its essence. A leading group of Ukrainian sociologists, the Nestor Group, argues that Ukrainians' value system rejects both the Russian model of paternalistic deification of authority and the language-and-bureaucracy-makes-a-state logic of Central Europe. Instead, Ukrainians lean towards horizontal civil society bonds, family and church and small business, which puts Ukraine in the same bracket as southern, Mediterranean countries such as Italy or Greece. Writing in 1977, the Russian language writing, Soviet Ukrainian raised, Austro-Hungarian-inspired, British citizen Igor Pomerantsev seemed to anticipate the sociologists, describing Ukraine as part of 'a greater Mediterranean':

*Strips of light
in a room.
Daytime.
July.
Kiev.
The lightest strip
breathes alongside
on the divan.*

*On a map for fingers
Kiev
is somewhere near
Alexandria.*

Ukraine seduces and confuses because parts of all these identities, more journeys than identities, exist simultaneously and form their own type of meanings. Russian identity here is not like Russian in Russia; Eastern European not like Poland; Mediterranean not quite the same Mediterranean as Sicily or Greece, and if it's Alexandria, it's the half hallucinated one of Lawrence Durrell. Of course this polyphony has confused Western writers and commentators who want to see things in simple, straight lines. But Ukraine resists straight lines—it's a space that breaks all the old, limited models of identity. Its casual bilingualism makes a mockery of the Herderian idea that language makes a nation. It's a space where Muslims and Jews have traditionally helped each other out. Where nationalism can be associated with the most liberal democracy (as well as the more predictable fascism), while multiculturalism can be used to pursue Empire. It's a country where very different stories of the past play out simultaneously, but where the question of what Europe means is now contested most fiercely and existentially. It is, in this sense, at the avant-garde of the present. While other, supposedly more developed countries have nervous breakdowns about how to balance their identity with the fluctuations and instabilities of globalization, Ukraine has been negotiating the paradoxes of being a non-linear nation for much longer.

This makes the writers and thinkers who come out of this creative flux such a vital reading. One of the great failures of the literary and media classes in what was once known as the West has been the inability to find Ukrainian voices to talk about the Ukrainian experience. Thank goodness there have been a few exceptional Western academics to help out, but it's high time for the Ukrainian experience to be related by Ukrainians. Though of course, what makes Ukraine so exciting is the definition of Ukraine in a state of becoming. This is something I've experienced first hand.





INTRODUCTION

Tabula Rasa, or How to Find A Ukrainian Terra Incognita

For many people, Ukraine is still a *terra incognita*. It remains an unknown land even for Ukrainians themselves, and even more so for our close or distant neighbors. This situation persists despite the fact that tragic and heart-racing developments that took place in recent years brought Ukraine to the forefront of the world's attention. It is still an unknown land, geographically, historically, as well as mentally and culturally. Ukrainians themselves often find it difficult to understand what is happening to them, and what the reasons are for their defeats and victories. They are groping around for their singularity, their complex identity in a huge mass of fragments from different eras, states, ethnicities, religions, and feelings about the world. However, Ukrainians also feel their otherness, their distinctiveness. They're trying to think about this and to analyze it, but sometimes they simply forget, as they plunge headlong into the tumult of their daily problems.

However, we, Ukrainians, try to be hospitable and kind. We have invited others to our unknown land in order to explore it together, and to understand specific Ukrainian traits together. Why? Because the view of a stranger can fine-tune new optics, and that becomes helpful in our attempts to figure out who we are and where we are going.

It is natural that when we invite guests, we first of all offer our optics and our glasses. We want to show things we are proud of, things we respect or which cause us pain and bleeding. We present our guests with an entire collection of our own glasses, and unfold

a map on which we have marked out our routes. We understand that these glasses can be—and most likely must be—put aside, or that our guests will insert their own lenses, and that they will stipple their own routes, and draw their own outlines of our landscapes.

This collection of stories and essays is our welcoming package of glasses and maps, an invitation to a journey. Yet, this package also contains something else. Each journey, even to a *terra incognita*, cannot start from scratch, and the traveler's mind is not a *tabula rasa*. Certain expectations are already written on this *tabula*, as are longings, fears and anticipation of new experiences and interesting things. This *tabula* might also contain drawings of scary chimeric dragons, and of incomprehensible native people from whom you know not what to expect: a welcoming plate of *borscht* or a warning spear. There you can meet rivers of milk and flourishing oases, or uninviting deserts, bare rocks and unfriendly winds. These preconceptions and pre-impressions about the territory, which a traveler ventures to explore, present the whole spectrum of feelings with which he or she can start a journey. Now and again he or she can take this tablet of his / her mind, take a map out of their bag, and compare the drawings on her or his *tabula* of consciousness with the outlines on the *orbis terrarum tabula*.

It is through this book that we want to share our mental maps of our lands with our guest travelers, so that they get a better understanding of the land to which they are going, feel good before their journey and are ready for surprises. Perhaps not all terrains are depicted, and the scale is sometimes imperfect, but for a traveler it is still better than nothing. We are offering a roadmap and hints on where to stop for rest and to regain one's strength. We would like to give our glasses to our guests so that they can better see our villages, the ruins of castles, wooden domes of churches, factory pipes, vast rapeseed and sunflower fields, glass boxes of IT-towns, the gates of universities and libraries as well as cozy bars. With the help of the instruments we present in this collection, travelers will get a better vision of the ruins of old empires, destroyed destinies, shell casings from bullets shot at invaders, and the sprouts of a new nation that sometimes go around in a vicious circle, wander out of its way, but make every effort to move on to a better destiny, still smiling and laughing at funny jokes that its people generate in amounts larger than its GDP per capita.

The authors of this book are writers, poets, historians, philosophers, journalists and political analysts. They try to think about the past and design a future. They deconstruct stereotypes and look for new prospects. They set new paradigms and invent new tools. They try to sew together the fractures and look for common points. They show that Ukraine is not only about *saló* [pork fat—Ed.], football player Shevchenko, boxer Klitschko, Chornobyl or Maidan. It is not just about corruption, war, and internally displaced persons. It is not only about Cossacks, *hopak* dance and *vyshyvanka* embroidered shirts. They reveal that Ukraine is also about avant-garde painter Malevich, writer Gogol, Austro-Hungarian emperor Franz Joseph, one of the “fathers” of the Russian autocracy Theophanes Prokopovich, Communist poet Mykola Khvyliovy, old-style wandering philosopher Hryhorii Skovoroda, Jewish German-speaking poet Paul Celan and many others. Ukraine is not just a pre-modern rural traditional culture, but also an urbanized technological society. Ukraine is not just about shadow schemes and oligarchs, but also modern electronic state services and transparent public procurements. Ukraine is also a country of IT, hi-tech, fashion and advertising industries.

One of the authors in this collection, historian Yaroslav Hrytsak, once quoted the saying: “In Western Europe, nations are created by politicians, in Eastern Europe they are created by poets”. Our collection is yet further evidence of this, and that is precisely why we selected these people as our guides. We asked them to write about Ukraine as if they were talking to a foreigner, and trying to share those mental maps and glasses with a foreigner.

We are glad to present this traveler’s toolkit to you, and invite you on a journey to explore a *terra incognita* Ukraine.



This book has eight sections. Each contains two texts, essays or interviews, written by, or taken with, Ukrainian prominent intellectuals: writers, historians, philosophers, political analysts or journalists. The name of each section is in plural, as we believe that plurality is one of the key words that help to understand Ukraine’s past and present.

The first section, *Histories*, contains texts by historians: a “brief but global” history of Ukraine written by Yaroslav Hrytsak, one of Ukraine’s best known historians and public intellectuals, and an interview with Serhii Plokhy (world-renowned historian and the head of the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute) about the origins of Ukraine, its relation to medieval Rus’ and the role of Cossacks in the development of its modern character.

The second section, *Identities*, contains an interview with a prominent Ukrainian writer, Yuri Andrukhovych, one of the creators of modern Ukrainian literature, and an essay penned by another prominent (and the best known globally) Ukrainian writer, Andriy Kurkov. One important thing to remember here: Andrukhovych writes his books in Ukrainian, while Kurkov writes mainly in Russian.

The *Archetypes* section explores the fundamentals of Ukrainian history and its present, an attempt to think about the basic things, which define our emotions, actions and reactions. Read an essay here by writer Andriy Bondar about Ukrainian “incompleteness”, and the reflections of philosopher Volodymyr Yermolenko (this book’s editor) about the steppe, empire and cruelty.

The section *Stories* contains two essays by Ukrainian writers, Irena Karpa and Haska Shyyan. Start with them if you want to know more about lifestyles, diversities, family stories, the experiences of foreigners, pains and joys of Ukrainian life, both in the past and the here and now. This is perhaps the most “personal” part of the book.

The section *Motherlands* explores the difficult relations of an individual with her / his Soviet and post-Soviet motherlands. It contains an essay by the writer and lawyer Larysa Denysenko on how difficult it is to be a majority for a nation that throughout its history used to be a minority. It also contains a text by the Ukrainian-Georgian philosopher Vakhtang Kebuladze on how important it was to gain a motherland after the collapse of the Soviet Union and during the Maidans of the 2000s and 2010s.

The section *Pains* targets the most painful topics today: Crimea and Donbas. It contains an essay by Volodymyr Rafeenko, a Ukrainian writer from Donetsk, who was forced to leave his native city after Russian aggression in Spring 2014. Rafeenko wrote most of his books in Russian, but published his first book in

Ukrainian this year. This section also contains an interview with Alim Aliev, a Crimean Tatar activist and the head of Crimean House (a cultural centre in Kyiv) about Crimean Tatar identities and the pains of Stalin's deportation and Putin's annexation. Both Rafeenko and Aliev are unable to return to their native land. Remember: since 2014 Ukraine has taken in up to 1.4 million internally displaced persons from Crimea and Donbas.

In the section *Relations* we try to look at relations between Ukraine and Poland, and between Ukrainians and Jews. This section contains an interview with Ola Hnatiuk, a prominent Polish-Ukrainian scholar, and an interview with Leonid Finberg, one of the leading figures of Ukrainian Jewish studies. This is only the beginning—and we hope that in our next publications we will look closely at the relations of Ukrainians with Hungarians, Romanians, Russians, Belarusians, Lithuanians, Turks, Germans, Bulgarians, Greeks, and many others.

(You can ask why the “Relations” section in this book does not contain an article about Russians. But you will see that every single essay touches upon the “Russian question”. It is so omnipresent that it would be difficult to prepare a comprehensive separate text on it).

Finally, the section *Stereotypes* aims to analyze the clichés that often exist in the international arena about Ukraine. Historian Andrii Portnov, professor at the European University Viadrina, reflects on the major stereotypes that exist about Ukraine in Germany. Ukrainian expert in conflict studies Hanna Shelest gives her reflections on Ukraine's “insecure security”, as well as the most widespread myths surrounding Crimea, Donbas and Russian aggression.

This book is not a collection of answers, but rather a mapmaking endeavor. We hope it gives you some instruments for comprehension, and some elements of the picture. But the final picture will, of course, be yours.

Andriy Kulakov,
The book project's initiator and leader

STEPPE 
HISTORY  **FRONTIER**
COSSACKS
POLAND **RUSSIA** 
  **HITLER** **STALIN** **JEWS**
WEST **HOLODOMOR**
 **CRIMEA** **SOVIET UNION**
 **VIKINGS** **BANDERA**
WORLD WARS
RUS'
BLACK SOIL



HISTORIES

**Ukraine: A Brief but Global History
of Ukrainian Bread,**

by Yaroslav Hrytsak

Rus', Cossacks and Ukraine's Identity,

Interview with Serhii Plokhyy



Ukraine: A Brief but Global History of Ukrainian Bread

In the 20th century historians have discovered time. This is most likely one of the greatest ever discoveries of historical science. I don't mean astronomical time here, measured with clocks and calendars. I mean historical time. It has its own rhythms and dynamics, which do not coincide with the course of astronomical time.

Historical time runs much slower, and this is why it is more difficult to notice. It is like an underflow that cannot be seen with the naked eye—yet, it determines, to a large extent, what happens on the surface of developments and phenomena. In order to see it, one has to dive deeper than events in history and try to see the long-term factors unfolding during centuries or millennia. Historians call it *la longue durée*—long duration. And they are urging us to use it more actively if we want to understand the world, and even more so if we want to change it. Because whatever we say about the past, the past does matter. It is like gravity, which we have to take into consideration when we construct our aerial devices of the future.

If we take only agricultural and arable land, this share is even higher (54 % and 58 %, respectively). Such proportion can hardly be found in other countries around the world. In terms

“ **The *longue durée* of Ukrainian lands is defined by the fact that approximately 40 % of their area is covered by fertile black soil called *chornozem*.** ”

of area, Ukrainian black soil can be compared perhaps to individual American states and Canadian provinces, but it is unparalleled in its depth (up to 1.5 meters).

Black soil is a part of the belt stretching from Siberia and Ural Mountains through the Volga region, Kuban, and Don, going through the majority of Ukrainian lands right up to the River Dniester, leaving behind Crimea in the south and forests in the north, and then continuing as a narrow strip along the Danube through Romania, Moldova, Hungary, Serbia, and Bulgaria.

Black soil was and remains a factor that has a profound impact on Ukrainian history. In particular, this is basically the key reason for deep-rooted and durable farming on our lands. In pre-literate times, this was the land of well-developed agricultural civilization, which was named Trypillian by archeologists (based on the name of the territory where the respective relics were found—Trypillia village).

During the literate period, the first mention about this land was left by Herodotus. In his *History* he devoted an entire volume to describing Scythia, the Black Sea steppe. The population of that steppe, a belligerent nomadic tribe of the Scythians, managed to do the same as ancient Greeks: to repel an attack by a large Persian army led by Darius. When writing about the Scythians, Herodotus also described farming tribes living to the north of them—the ploughing Scythians. We do not know for sure who these tribes were. However, the Scythian steppe cut their lands from the grain markets of Antiquity. It is assumed that only after the Scythians disappeared did farming become the main type of production, and pushed animal husbandry and nomadism into the background.

The situation described by Herodotus illustrates one of the main features of local history up to the late 18th century—a fight between agrarian people and nomadic tribes for control over the black soil's wealth. The black soil belt coincided in the main with the large steppe that started in Manchuria and Mongolia and stretched right across the entire Eurasian Continent to the south of the forest zone up to the Pannonian Plain (contemporary Hungary). That steppe served as an arterial highway for nomadic tribes travelling from East to West. Some of them appeared and disappeared without trace. Others were able to find shelter in their newly-found homeland, giving their own name to it—like

Bulgaria or Hungary. But in every case they were going through the territory of contemporary Ukraine and leaving their trace on it.

In the interaction between agricultural and nomadic people, the general formula is simple: it predominately implied military confrontation, and nomadic tribes had an advantage in that confrontation. Their very way of life was closely related to war. In order to survive, they were forced to move constantly in search of new pastures. Those pastures were seldom unoccupied—therefore, to get control over them, they had to knock out or to push out the people already living there. Accordingly, martial arts were mastered at an early age in nomadic tribes. For settled agrarian people agriculture, on the contrary, left neither time nor possibilities for the art of war.

The nomads had another great advantage on their side. They had a huge number of horses. Horses were like armored vehicles of the steppe. With them, nomads were able to cover large distances, appear and disappear rapidly, whereas horse meat, blood and milk could satisfy hunger and thirst during long marches.

The constant threat from the steppe prevented unification of agrarian tribes into a unified state. This was changed by other nomads who were not steppe warriors but sea and river sailors: the Vikings (or, as they were also called—the Varangians or Normans). In the 8th–13th centuries, they gained control over almost all coastal regions of Europe, from Normandy to Southern Italy. One of the main points of attraction for them was Constantinople—the capital of Byzantine Empire, the richest civilization of that time. The Vikings took control of all lands along the entire road “from the Varangians to the Greeks” (i.e. Byzantium), and they created their own empire with its center in Kyiv. Moreover, they gave this state their own name: Rus’ (this is how the Slavic tribes called them), but they took their religion from Byzantium.

The evolution of nomadic people was once described by Arabian thinker Ibn Khaldun. First, combative nomads seize the lands taken earlier by the settled people. Subsequently, the nomads assume the habits of these settled people who, although not having martial advantages, prevail both in demography and civilization. In the end, they and their power are defeated by the new nomads—and the circle repeats itself. This scheme gives a very good description of the history of Rus’ too. It can best be seen in how the names of Rus’

princes were changing. The first two generations had Scandinavian names: the dynasty founder was Rurik (Eric), his son—Ihor (Ingvar), and Ihor's wife—Olha (Helga). Instead, the names of the two first Christianized princes—Volodymyr and Yaroslav—were Slavic. The time of their rule (980–1019) is, at the same time, the period of the supreme greatness of Rus'. After Yaroslav's death, Rus entered the period of feudal fragmentation and internecine wars, and in 1240 it became prey for new nomads who came from far-off Mongolia.

“ **Ukrainian, Russian and, to a lesser extent, Belarusian historians, debate whose national state ancient Rus' actually was: Russian, Ukrainian or Belarusian. This dispute is senseless.** ”

In the same way you can discuss whose state the empire of Carolus Magnus was—German, French or Italian? None of these, because the idea of a national state emerges very late, in the 19th century, and it becomes the norm as late as in the 20th century. Before this time, to quote Ernest Gellner, it does not matter which language farmers speak; what matters is the wealth of the land that they cultivate (and, respectively, the amounts of taxes or products they can pay to those who dominate over them in the social hierarchy).

In this regard, the Rus' elite were very rich, and their richness impressed their contemporaries.

“ **However, the material wealth of Rus' contrasted greatly with the poverty of its spiritual culture.** ”

Let me give just one example: from the moment of adoption of Christianity up to the early 17th century, the number of books circulating in the Rus' lands was the same, equal to the number of books in a library of a Byzantine monastery. Historians discuss why Rus' was so “silent”. One of the reasons was its slavish dependence on Byzantine samples. Unlike Rome, which brought religion and language (Latin) to northern barbarians, Constantinople brought religion, but did not bring the language (all religious books were translated from Greek to Church Slavonic).