Ukraine: Gateway to Europe

Europe is an important part of Ukrainian history, just as Ukraine is part of European history. Located in the western part of the Eurasian Steppe, Ukraine has been the gateway to Europe for centuries. When this "gateway" has been closed due to wars or conflicts, Ukraine has helped stop foreign invasions from the east and west; when it has been open, it has served as a bridge between Europe and Asia, facilitating the exchange of people, goods and ideas. For centuries, Ukraine has also been a meeting point for various empires - from the Roman to the Ottoman, and from the Habsburgs to the Romanovs. In the 18th century, Ukraine was ruled from St. Petersburg and Vienna, Warsaw and Istanbul. In the 19th century, only the first two capitals remained on this list. By the second half of the 20th century, it was only Moscow that reigned over most of the Ukrainian lands. Each of the empires claimed ownership of the territory and its wealth, leaving their mark on the landscape and nature of the population, contributing to the formation of a special border identity and spirit.

Political events, domestic and global, create a convenient plotline, and during my research I have found that geographical, environmental, and cultural factors are long-lasting and therefore have the greatest influence in the long term. Modern Ukraine, when viewed in terms of the longue durée of cultural trends, is the result of the interaction of two moving frontiers: one is between the Eurasian Steppes and the Eastern European forest steppe, the other is between Eastern and Western Christianity. The first border also divided settled and nomadic people and, as a result, Christianity and Islam. The second is derived from the division of the Roman Empire between Rome and Constantinople, and denotes the differences in the political culture of the European West and the East, which still exist. The movement of these borders over the centuries has led to the formation of a unique set of cultural features that form the basis of modern Ukrainian identity.

The cultural and social space that was created by the movement of those frontiers was heterogeneous. Each time, when state and imperial borders crossed the Ukrainian ethnic territory, they formed separate cultural spaces that became the basis for Ukrainian regions - Carpathian Ruthenia, which in the past was under Hungarian rule; Galicia, formerly under Austrian control; Podillya and Volhynia, which were governed by Poland; the Left Bank Ukraine with the terrain along the lower reaches of the Dnipro river ruled by the Cossacks; Sloboda Ukraine and, finally, the colonisation of the Black Sea coast and the Donetsk Coal Basin during the Russian Empire.

The ancestors of modern Ukrainians lived in dozens of different pre-modern and modern principalities, kingdoms, empires and throughout their history had different names and features. To denote their land, they used two main words - "Ruthenia (Rus')" and "Ukraine".

Ukrainians were known by different names, depending on the period and region in which they lived: Ruthenians in Poland, Ruthenen during the Habsburg Monarchy, Little Russians in the Russian Empire. In the 19th century, the builders of the Ukrainian nation decided to put an end to this confusion, abandoning the name "Ruthenia" and clearly separating themselves from the

rest of the East Slavic world—especially from Russians—choosing the names "Ukraine" and "Ukrainians" to designate their land and ethnic group, both under the Russian and in Austria-Hungarian Empires. The name "Ukraine" has a medieval origin and in the Early modern period referred to the Cossack state in Dnieper Ukraine. In the collective consciousness of public figures of the 19th century, Cossacks, most of whom were of local origin, formed the basis of the Ukrainian people. In order to combine the "Ruthenian" past and "Ukrainian" future, Mikhailo Hrushevsky called his remarkable 10-volume series the History of Ukraine-Rus'. In fact, anyone who writes about Ukraine's past today must use two or more terms to refer to the ancestors of modern Ukrainians. I use the term "Ruthenia (Rus')" mainly (but not exclusively) when speaking of the Middle Ages, I apply the term "Ruthenians" to the Ukrainians of the Early modern period, and when I write about contemporary history I use "Ukrainians". Since the proclamation of the independent Ukrainian state in 1991, all its citizens had been called Ukrainians, regardless of ethnic origin.

"Come and behold"—so wrote the anonymous author of "the History of Ruthenians", at the end of his preface to what has become one of the fundamental works of modern Ukrainian historiography. I can not imagine a better ending for this text.

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