

# KATALIN SCHREK

## A NEW APPROACH TO UKRAINIAN HISTORY (REVIEW)<sup>1</sup>

The history of the Ukrainian region is closely intertwined with the history of the Eastern European region and the states within it. Perhaps this is why it is such a difficult undertaking to provide a complete overview of the history of the Ukrainian territories and the Ukrainian state constellations that emerged in different historical periods, and of Ukrainian history as a whole. The frequent changes of authority in the Middle Ages and the early modern period, and the state framework provided by the Habsburg Empire and the Russian Empire in the modern period resulted in regionally and socially different trends of development. Taking all these factors into account, *The History of Ukraine - Region, Statehood, Identity* attempts to provide a comprehensive overview of the past and, in some ways, of the present of this geopolitically unique region/country. This volume, published by Gondolat, collects the work of several experienced Hungarian researchers in the field of Ukrainian history: Csilla Fedinec, Márta Font, Imre Szakál and Beáta Varga.

*Keywords: Ukrainian history, Middle Ages, early modern and modern periods, 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, regional perspective, modern historical approaches*

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Regions, identity, statehood – these key words characterise the main concepts of the newly published volume on the history of Ukraine. The book is a hiatus-filler as no monograph had previously been published in Hungarian that covers the history of Ukraine from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There has been no shortage of works on Ukrainian history in Hungarian historiography. However, their common characteristic is that they generally focus on the study and presentation of a well-defined period or historical problem, which helps readers and researchers interested in the period to deepen their knowledge of certain issues and historical events. The presentation of processes and contexts across historical periods is a complicated task, especially when it comes to a geopolitical region as complex as the Ukrainian one. This volume, the result of a joint effort by Csilla Fedinec, Márta Font, Imre Szakál, and Beáta Varga, has overcome all these difficulties and aims to provide a transparent framework for the interpretation of Ukrainian history, to shed light on the characteristics of the formation of Ukrainian statehood, and to familiarise the reader with the latest findings of historical research. This work, which draws on a wide range of sources and literature, has the merit of presenting different kinds of topics. The monograph reads easily due to its smooth style, and its sometimes very concise and information-rich chapters are broken up by highlighted text boxes that whisk the reader away from the events for the space of a few thoughts and, as a change of perspective, call attention to an interesting aspect of the cultural or political history of the period in question. The maps at the beginning and end of the book, showing the territorial extent of Kievan Rus' and independent modern Ukraine, as well as the illustration at the end of the preface, depicting Ukraine's historical regions, are useful aids. However, there may be some shortcomings in this regard, as there is no cartography in the text section for the different historical eras that would provide a reference point for the geopolitical region of a given period. On the positive side, however, there is a detailed chronological overview at the end of the volume.

In addition to the style of the authors, the structure of the book also contributes significantly to making this monograph on the history of Ukraine usable for both professionals and non-professionals alike. As indicated in the introduction, the book is organized around the key concepts of regions, identity and statehood, and instead of a traditional political-historical approach, it adopts a regional perspective, following a chronological order. This is supplemented with economic, social and cultural historical elements, thus making the events of the periods in

question more comprehensible. After a description of early medieval Rus', the situation of the territories belonging to each of the principalities is presented region by region. Take for example the Principality of Halych-Volhynia, which, from the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century, was a potential target for the expansion of the Kingdom of Hungary, the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The history of the Principality's relations with surrounding states is consistently traced through the major chapters. The history of the Crimean Khanate and the Cossack-inhabited territories, for instance, is also presented in the same methodology throughout the ages.

The book looks at historical events from several angles. An excellent example of this is the period of the Mongol occupation and the relationship of the principalities with the Mongol Empire. It reveals the regional differences that emerged within the territory of Rus' in the decades previous: the lack of cooperation and, later, the different attitudes of the northern and southern principalities towards the Mongol threat. It is also interesting to note that the Mongol rule that emerged by the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century represented a different level and nature of dependency in the territories of Kievan Rus'. The most affected and subjugated geopolitical units of Rus' – like Chernihiv and Pereyaslav – were those where we can speak of occupation in the strictest sense of the word. At the same time, in the case of the Principality of Novgorod, for example, Mongol 'domination' was reflected in the annual payment of taxes, and no other burden was imposed upon it. But a similar differentiation was outlined in the political attitude of Alexander Nevsky and Prince Daniil towards the Golden Horde – the former seeking to maintain a consolidated relationship with the Mongols, while the latter sought to counterbalance the drastic transformation of political relations within Russian lands by building alliances with Western countries and relying on the Pope's assistance.

As the western part of the expanding Mongol Empire, and even after its dissolution, the Crimean Khanate formed a special geopolitical entity. The region was an important link in the eastern trade routes to Europe. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, weakening Mongol rule offered a new perspective for the establishment of an independent Khanate, and the region with a Muslim population found a cooperative partner in the Ottoman Empire's expansionist policy towards Europe, for example in the acquisition of important Genoese trading ports such as Kaffa (Feodosia). From the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the Crimean Khanate became an important factor in shaping relations in Eastern Europe, initially as an independent state, but later as a state dependent on the Porte. At the same time, the authors

reconsidered the stereotype that the Khanate was regarded as an Ottoman vassal state as early as the 15<sup>th</sup> century, while under the reign of Mengli Giray it was essentially an equal diplomatic partner of the Ottoman Empire, paying no taxes to the Porte but, on the contrary, receiving financial support from Constantinople.

The book describes the Polish-Lithuanian union that took shape between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, covering the rivalry between the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Kingdom of Poland, as well as the political and confessional differences between the two territories. In the period between the Kreva personal union in 1385 and the Lublin real union in 1569, the Ukrainian territories under Polish and Lithuanian rule had different administrative systems, the unification of which posed difficulties for the Eastern European state even during the Rzeczpospolita. This period saw the strengthening and awakening of Cossack independent consciousness. The authors have analysed the process of Cossack self-organisation in different phases, reflecting on the difficulties of researching Cossack ethnogenesis and the contrasting historiographical positions. The term 'Cossack' initially meant an occupation/lifestyle and their identity emerged in the 15<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> centuries. There were significant differences in status between the various groups: the registered Cossacks who formed the Zaporizhzhya Army operated within an organised framework within the Polish-Lithuanian army and enjoyed privileges; the free Cossacks formed the Zaporizhzhya Sich, who had no privileges but lived in a more informal way than the registered Cossacks. The greatest achievement of Bohdan Khmelnytsky's movement was to gather the two main Cossack groups – the registered and the free Cossacks – into a common political camp. In the struggle for autonomy of the Cossack territories and the creation of a single privileged status for the Cossacks, the hetman sought to take advantage of the often-changing circumstances. It was in this highly turbulent political environment that the Treaty of Pereyaslav was born, the long-term consequence of which was the bringing of the Ukrainian territories under the protectorate of the Moscow State. The question of the nature of the relationship between the Cossack territories and Russia that this treaty and its related documents – such as the Hetman Articles and the March Articles – established in practice is analysed in depth by the authors, both from a historiographical and legal historical perspective. The agreement, which is of particular importance for both Russian and Ukrainian history, has been interpreted differently by the two sides.

In the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century – after the death of Bohdan Khmelnytsky, but even more so after the hetmanate of Yuri Khmelnytsky – the Cossacks became divided. In the Ukrainian territories, which were split along the Dnieper River, different political leaderships and orientations prevailed. The Ukraine on the left bank of the Dnieper River had closer ties with the Moscow State, while the Ukraine on the right bank secured their connection with the Polish-Lithuanian State. The same was reflected in the efforts of the two Eastern European states to demarcate their spheres of interest. Polish-Lithuanian and Russian authority over the Zaporizhzhya Army and the terms of this were finally guaranteed by the Treaty of Andrusovo in 1667. Lack of Ukrainian unity in the former areas increased the extent to which Russia's interests were asserted and gave way to Russian centralisation efforts. The authors point out how the tsarist government systematically tightened control over the Ukrainian territories, and how the tsarist court weakened the institutions of the Ukrainian hetmanate from the reign of Peter I onwards. We are presented with a detailed institutional history of Russian state offices and functions in the Ukrainian territories, such as the institution of the Little Russia Prikase (later Collegium of Little Russia). The extension of Russian power was finally completed during the reign of Catherine II with the issuance of her decree of 1764, which declared the abolition of the Hetmanate and began the process of incorporating the Ukrainian territories into the Russian Empire.

The authors have analysed the integration of the region not only from a political but also from a social and economic point of view, emphasising that the Ukrainian territories were important for the expanding Russian Empire both economically and strategically. In addition to the prominent role of agriculture, part of the Empire's industrial development was concentrated here in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Railways were built and infrastructure investments and the development of the iron and coal industries after the 1870s made Donbas one of the most important regions at the imperial level, while urbanisation in the Ukrainian territories gained momentum. At the same time, the authors provide a detailed account of the nature and volume of economic and industrial development and their regional disproportion. For example, compared with the rapid development of the Ukrainian regions on the left bank of the Dnieper, the right bank was not subject to the industrial development policy of the Russian state. The same is true in the context of urbanisation. In addition, the book's economic-historical analysis is complemented by a social-historical

analysis in which the authors highlight issues such as the distancing of the Ukrainian peasantry from modernisation and its attachment to agriculture which led to population movements. A significant part of the peasantry did not enrich the urban labour force but sought livelihood opportunities in accordance with its previous lifestyle, even in more remote areas of the Russian Empire. The authors have analysed these socio-economic phenomena in the context of demographic processes which had long-term impacts on the ethnic proportions of Ukrainian territories: in some parts, the Ukrainian population declined significantly due to inner migration to agricultural areas in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Siberia.

Another important section in the book is the unfolding of the Ukrainian national movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the Ukrainian territories belonging to the Russian Empire, the authors identify three distinct phases of national awakening. The first period was characterised by a turn towards the Ukrainian historical past and the accumulation of intellectual and cultural wealth, in which the founding of universities and the enlightened intellectual-scientific community in the first half of the century played an important role. The second is the organisational stage, where the activities of institutions such as the Cyril and Methodius Brotherhood and the society of the so-called 'Tarasists', founded in memory of the poet and writer Taras Shevchenko, were determining. And at the turn of the century, with the emergence of Ukrainian party organisations, national awakening reached its third, now political stage.

The Ukrainian national movement entered a new phase during the First World War. Internal political changes in the wake of the 1917 revolutions brought the possibility of the creation of an independent state. This volume addresses the period of 1917–1921 separately, when the Central Council, formed by social-democratic political forces in the Dnieper region of Ukraine, initially tried to establish a basis for negotiations with the Provisional Government. The authors emphasize that initial negotiations were aimed at establishing autonomy, but the rigidity of the Provisional Government regarding the Ukrainian question meant there was no realistic chance for reconciliation. At the same time, the Bolshevik Government's declaration in November 1917 on the rights of nations did not represent a step forward for the Ukrainian national movement, as Soviet Russia had no interest in voluntarily giving up the valuable Ukrainian agricultural and industrial lands, and a Soviet Ukraine was established. In response, the Central Council proclaimed the Ukrainian People's Republic on the territory remaining under its jurisdiction, and this state concluded a peace treaty

in Brest-Litovsk as part of a settlement with the Central Powers. In the meantime, the Ukrainian movement in Galicia gained momentum and the West Ukrainian People's Republic was established on 13 November 1918. The state initiative found it extremely difficult to hold its ground in the face of Polish and Romanian military threats. By presenting the crisis of the West Ukrainian People's Republic and the Ukrainian People's Republic in parallel, the authors have presented the complex problem of creating and maintaining an independent state in an era when the borders and conditions for exercising political power were changing on an almost daily basis. In the end, the Ukrainian People's Republic fell victim to the struggles of the Russian civil war. With the victory of the Red Army and the end of the Polish–Soviet war in 1921, the Ukrainian People's Republic found itself in the centre of a geopolitical constellation in which Poland and Soviet Russia jointly decided in Riga on the fate of the Ukrainian territories along the Dnieper River.

The remainder of the volume is divided into two major thematic units: the history of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic as a part of the Soviet Union, and the history of independent Ukraine after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Evidently, the history of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic is aligned with the defining periods of Soviet history. Instead of outlining a detailed political-historical background, we shall now focus on some of the issues to which the authors devoted their attention. One of these topics is the process of “korenization”, also known as “root-giving”, which took place in the 1920s. As part of its deliberate policy toward Ukraine, after 1921 the Soviet Government sought to increase the popularity of the Bolshevik Party among locals and the number of Ukrainian members in local party organisations. The authors ascribe the strengthening of the Bolshevik regime in Ukraine to political-economic interests as well as social and demographic reasons. Stalin put an end to korenization, and by the 1930s there was a complete change of attitude in the policy of the Soviet Union towards Ukraine, which, with the violent implementation of collectivisation, brought forth one of the darkest periods of Ukrainian history.

To aid the understanding of historical processes in Ukraine during the Soviet period, the authors, bearing their concept in mind, have included separate subsections on the regions of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, such as Western Ukraine, Transcarpathia, which has many Hungarian connections, and Crimea. In the case of the latter, the authors – through the history of the autonomous republics – contextualised the

place and role of Crimea in relation to the Soviet Union, the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic and independent Ukraine. The resulting overall picture helps the reader greatly in understanding the significance and international position of Crimea in the past and present. It is also important to note that alongside perestroika and glasnost, the role of the Chernobyl disaster of 1986 was also given special attention in the treatment of the process of the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the establishment of Ukrainian independence.

This book explores the history of modern, independent Ukraine through four main themes: geopolitical division, demography, political and economic history, and international relations. Each chapter presents a segment of post-1991 Ukraine without which it would be difficult or impossible to understand the challenges of independent Ukrainian statehood in the period of 1991–2019. The periodisation, aligned with the presidential terms, presents the main features of the political orientations of each era, the characteristic features of the relationship with Europe and Russia, the background of the Majdan Square revolutions and the condensation of the ‘two Ukraines’ theory in political public life, something which goes back to Samuel Huntington’s concept.

In my opinion, this book by Csilla Fedinec, Márta Font, Imre Szakál and Beáta Varga provides a versatile and modern approach to Ukrainian history. Perhaps one of the greatest merits of the book is that it presents the characteristics of the geopolitical space in question from a regional perspective and analyses the history of Ukrainian territories in close context with the neighbouring states. Therefore, in addition to the Ukrainian region, the book provides crucial information on certain periods of Polish, Lithuanian, Russian and Ottoman history.

CSILLA FEDINEC – MÁRТА FONT – IMRE SZAKÁL – BEÁТА VARGA: *Ukrajna története: régiók, identitás, államiság* [A History of Ukraine: Regions, Identity, Statehood] (Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 2021). 444 p.