

Ukraine: A Land Crossed by Empires

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Abstract

To understand the current ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, it is necessary to understand the centuries old relationship between the two countries. A panoramic view of the Ukrainian history suggests it has shared deep relations with Russia. However, there is no doubt that the people of Ukraine have suffered from invasions over the centuries. It has persistently been a victim of war and deprivation. Ukraine, has been a victim of countless invasions from all sides, the North, the South, the West and the East; Mongols, Swedes, Lithuanians, Poles, French, Germans have all invaded this land. This is a land that has been crossed by Empires. The article aims to highlight the root cause of the current crisis by diving into the history of the land called Ukraine and the author has summed it up by saying: to understand the war one needs to reflect on history. It also points to the existing and emerging fault lines between Russia and Ukraine.

Introduction

Ukrainians are at the heart of Russian history. They are the famed Cossacks and the noblest of Eastern Slavic families. Ukrainians were also top rulers of the Soviet Republic. Nikita Khrushchev was born in Kalinovka, a village in what is now Russia's Kursk Oblast, near the present Ukrainian border but was raised in eastern Ukraine. In time, Khrushchev became the head of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR). After Joseph Stalin's death, he led the Soviet Union between 1953 and 1964.

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While Khrushchev was ethnically Russian, he was Ukrainian in many ways. “In 1954, the Crimean Region of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR) was given to the Ukrainian SSR, in gross violation of legal norms that were in force at the time,” Putin said of Khrushchev’s act, which the latter described as a “symbolic gesture”.¹

Leonid Brezhnev hailed from Kamianske, a city in Central Ukraine on the Dnieper River. He ruled the Soviet Union between 1964 and 1982, the second longest-reigning Communist leader of the state after Stalin who incidentally was born in Georgia.²

Konstantin Chernenko was another Ukrainian, whose ached the upper echelons of Soviet power. Though born in Siberia, he was a Ukrainian by descent. He led the State for a brief period from 1984 to 1985. Mikhail Gorbachev, the last Soviet leader, was half-Ukrainian. His maternal family had Ukrainian descent and migrated from Chernihiv, a city in northern Ukraine, he succeeded Chernenko as the General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party. Gorbachev established the office of the President of the Soviet Union in 1990. He was the first and the last President of the Soviet Union, overseeing its dissolution. He ruled the Soviet Union from 1985 to 1991.

From Stalin’s death in 1953 to the disintegration of the USSR in 1991, the Soviet Union was led by Ukrainians for 31 of those 38 years. Clearly, Ukraine punched above its weight when it came to political influence within the Soviet Union.

Relationship between Ukraine and Russia

To understand the war in Ukraine, a necessary starting point is to look at the centuries-old relationship between Ukraine and Russia. It’s in Kyiv where one of the holiest places of christianity stands: the great Medieval-era Saint Sophia Cathedral, currently a museum, was built under the reign of the most revered rulers of Kievan Rus, Vladimir the Great, originally a follower of Slavic paganism, Vladimir converted to Christianity in 988 and Christianised Kievan Rus’. This, along with other landmark shrines in Kyiv, is religiously significant to both Ukrainian and Russian Orthodoxy. In this period, it was in Kyiv that Christianity was brought from Byzantium to the Slavic people.

The birth of Kievan Rus, central to Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian history – came in tandem with other great kingdoms moulded into shape by Vikings, also known as Normans or Norsemen in Europe. Following the fall of the Roman Empire, Norman warriors became some of Europe's most able and trusted fighters and rulers. In the short span of a century, they founded flourishing kingdoms in France, England, southern Italy and also in Kyiv. They cherished the idea of reconstituting the peace and prosperity enjoyed under the Roman Empire. Norsemen solidified their footing in the 9th century, traveling on large wooden river boats, conquering as they went farther South. On the banks of the Dnipro River, they founded what is now Kyiv, the jewel of early East Slavic history.³ The modern nations of Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine all claim KievanRus' as their lineage with Belarus and Russia deriving their names from it.

The State eventually disintegrated into rival regional powers and was ultimately destroyed by the Mongol invasions of the 13th century. The area was then contested, divided, and ruled by a variety of external powers for the next 600 years, including the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Austrian Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and the Tsardom of Russia.

The Cossack Hetmanate emerged in central Ukraine in the 17th century, but was partitioned between Russia and Poland, and ultimately absorbed by the Russian Empire. From the steppes of Ukraine, the Cossacks helped turn Moscow into a great European power. Their grit and fighting spirit was legendary and the fighting spirit being demonstrated by the Ukrainians can possibly be traced back to their Cossack past. The Cossacks were a tough people who had mastered the art of horseback fighting. Theirs was a multi-ethnic, semi-nomadic, anarchic and democratic society that emerged in the late Medieval period; in a loose semi-democratic military federation, they ran affairs on the Ukrainian plains for centuries. They were early followers of the East Slavic Christian Orthodox faith and withstood assaults from both the Russian and Turkish Empires, each vying for control of the Black Sea.

Today, the Black Sea is back in focus as one of the principal reasons for the Russian invasion of Ukraine is control of the Black Sea. Russia's Black Sea fleet remains harboured in Sevastopol in

the Crimea. Russia's expansion on the Black Sea was beneficial to the Russians as they developed Ukraine's warm-water ports, and gained access to the booming world trade in the Mediterranean Sea. The lands surrounding the Black Sea have for centuries been a crossroads of empires, voyagers, diseases, wars and revolutions. It was on the eastern shores of the Black Sea in present day Turkey where Marco Polo launched his great overland voyage to Cathay. The Bubonic plague also known as Black Death, arrived in Europe via Crimea.

Over the course of Moscow's imperial expansion, the Cossacks entered into alliances with the Tsars of Moscow and provided crucial military strength. They fought on the side of the Kremlin in the Great Northern War, the Seven Years' War, the Crimean War, the Napoleonic Wars, the Caucasus War, and in the many Russo-Persian Wars and Russo-Turkish Wars, becoming the backbone of the Russian Empire.⁴

Chequered Past

In Kiev, a granite stele commemorates the Pereyaslav Council of 1654 at which the Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky and other leaders of the autonomous Cossack Hetmanate pledged allegiance to Russia in exchange for protection against the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth – leading to the eventual Russification of the region that is now Ukraine.⁵ In the late 1700s, they fought for Russian Empress Catherine II and it was largely to their military prowess that Moscow was able to push back the Ottomans from Crimea and Ukraine.

Catherine the Great was indebted to the Cossacks and bestowed them with favours, wealth, and noble titles and they played a major role in turning a large but land-locked Russia into a European power. But in Ukraine, Catherine's legacy is mixed and a source of deep division. Catherine sent the Russian General Peter Tekeli to disband the Zaporozhian Sich, a semi-autonomous and republican-style government in Southern Ukraine run by Cossack Chiefs. Russian forces surrounded the Sich in May 1775, forced its surrender and razed what buildings they had to the ground. With the sacking of the Sich, Catherine renamed Southern and Eastern Ukraine 'Novorossiia' or New Russia. After the 1783 Russian annexation of Crimea from the Ottoman Empire and liquidation of the Cossack Zaporozhian Sich, Grigory Potemkin, a

nobleman, became Governor of the region. Crimea had been devastated by the war and the Muslim Tatar inhabitants of Crimea were viewed as a potential fifth column of the Ottoman Empire.⁶

Potemkin's major tasks were to pacify and rebuild by bringing in Russian settlers. In 1787, as a new war was about to break out between Russia and the Ottoman Empire, Catherine II, with her Court and several Ambassadors, made an unprecedented six-month trip to New Russia. Famously, Grigory Potemkin brought the Queen by river boat to see her new possessions, an episode best remembered as Catherine's 'Potemkin village' trip.

The destruction of the Sich led to Ukrainian resentment against the Tsars and, in time an important narrative about why Ukraine needed to become independent again from Russia. During the spread of Ukrainian nationalism in the 19th century, references to the sacking of the Sich were a rallying call. Going back in history, the word 'Ukraine' first appeared in 1187 AD, upon the death of Volodymyr Hlibovych, a great ruler of the Principality of Pereiaslavl in the South Eastern extreme of the Kievan Rus dynasty.

During the Russian Revolution, an independent Ukrainian Republic briefly survived before it was crushed by the Bolsheviks. To allay the seething anger raging across so many regions of the now-decapitated Russian Empire, the Bolsheviks created new 'Soviet republics' roughly corresponding to regional, ethnic and geographic boundaries. Thus, the borders of Ukraine were formalised. Ukraine, then, became a semi-state within the Soviet universe in 1922. During World War II, Hitler invaded Ukraine and millions were killed in his bid to possess the Black Sea, Ukraine's fertile wheat fields, and the untold riches farther East. In fact, in Babyn Yar, a ravine in Kyiv, more than 33,000 Jews were killed within 48 hours in 1941, when the city was under Nazi occupation in one of the largest mass killings at a single location during World War II.⁷ Napoleon Bonaparte had made a similar attempt more than 200 years before, though he invaded Russia with an eye to joining forces with Ukraine's anti-Tsarist population still fuming over the destruction of the Sich.

The Soviet years saw Ukraine transformed from a once wild and unspoiled steppe into an industrial heartland. Under Stalin's Soviet rule, Ukraine became the industrial engine as well as an

environmental wasteland with the Chernobyl nuclear disaster topping them all.⁸ Ukraine was a powerhouse among the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Many of the biggest Soviet's dams, highways, government complexes, factories, mines, oil refineries, chemical plants, ships and space rocket facilities came up in Ukraine. However, this was also marked by one of Ukraine's worst tragedies, the Holodomor or 'death by hunger'. In the drive to quickly industrialise and modernise, Stalin oversaw mass starvation across the Soviet Union. The famine of the early 1930s hit Ukraine particularly hard. To most, it remains a consequence of human made factors which included the collectivisation of agriculture. Anne Applebaum, in her book 'Red Famine: Stalin's War on Ukraine', states, "It's a piece of history, and it's remembered by Ukrainians as an attempt to eradicate them".

Post Parting of the Iron Curtain

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine became an independent state, formalised with a referendum in December 1991. Earlier on 21 January 1990, over 300,000 Ukrainians organised a human chain for Ukrainian independence between Kyiv and Lviv. Ukraine officially declared itself an independent country on 24 August 1991 when the Communist Supreme Soviet of Ukraine proclaimed that Ukraine would no longer follow the laws of USSR but only the laws of the Ukrainian SSR, de facto declaring Ukraine's independence from the Soviet Union. On 01 December 1991, Ukrainian voters, in their first Presidential election, elected Leonid Kravchuk.⁹ During his presidency, the Ukrainian economy shrank by more than 10 per cent per year (in 1994 by more than 20 per cent). The Presidency (1994–2005) of the second President of Ukraine, Leonid Kuchma, helped the transition of Ukraine from a Soviet Republic to a capitalist society, privatising businesses and working to improve international economic opportunities. But in 2000, his presidency was rocked by a scandal over audio recordings which revealed he ordered the death of a journalist. It was also surrounded by numerous corruption scandals and lessening of media freedom.

In 2004, Kuchma announced that he would not run for re-election. Two major candidates emerged in the 2004 Presidential election. Viktor Yanukovich, the incumbent Prime Minister, supported by both Kuchma and by the Russian Federation, wanted

closer ties with Russia. The main opposition candidate, Viktor Yushchenko, called for Ukraine to turn its attention westward and to eventually join the European Union (EU). In the election, Yanukovych won by a narrow margin but Yushchenko and his supporters alleged that vote rigging and intimidation cost him many votes, especially in eastern Ukraine. The opposition started massive street protests 'Orange Revolution' in Kyiv and other cities, and the Supreme Court of Ukraine ordered the election results null and void. A second runoff found Viktor Yushchenko the winner. Five days later, Yanukovych resigned from office and his cabinet was dismissed on 05 January 2005.¹⁰ During the Yushchenko period, relations between Russia and Ukraine were strained as Yushchenko looked towards improved relations with the EU and less toward Russia. In 2005, a dispute over natural gas prices with Russia caused shortages in many European countries that were reliant on Ukraine as a transit country. A compromise was reached in January 2006.¹¹

By the time of the Presidential election in 2010, Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko — allies during the Orange Revolution, had become foes. Tymoshenko ran for the Presidency against both Yushchenko and Viktor Yanukovych, creating a three-way race. Yushchenko, whose popularity had plummeted, persisted in running, and many pro-Orange voters stayed home. In the second round of the election, Yanukovych won the elections. In November 2013, President Yanukovych did not sign the Ukraine–European Union Association Agreement and instead pursued closer ties with Russia. This move sparked protests on the streets of Kyiv. With the protesters setting up camps in Kyiv's Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square). Battles between protesters and police resulted in about 80 deaths in February 2014.¹² Following the violence, the Ukrainian Parliament on 22 February 2014 voted to remove Yanukovych from power, and was replaced by Oleksandr Turchynov, who was subsequently installed as the interim President. Yanukovych fled Kyiv, and subsequently gave a press conference in the Russian city of Rostov-on-Don.

In March 2014, the annexation of Crimea occurred. The Crimean Parliament voted to secede from Ukraine and join Russia. A public referendum followed with 97 per cent of voters favouring secession, although the results were denounced by the European Union and the United States as illegal.¹³ The Crimean crisis was

followed by pro-Russian unrest in East and South Ukraine. In April 2014, Ukrainian separatists self-proclaimed the Donetsk People's Republic and Lugansk People's Republic and held referendums on 11 May 2014; the separatists claimed nearly 90 per cent voted in favour of independence.¹⁴ Later in April 2014, fighting between the Ukrainian Army and pro-Ukrainian volunteer battalions on one side, and forces supporting the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics on the other side escalated into a war in Donbas. By December 2014, more than 6,400 people had died in this conflict, and, according to UN, over half a million people became internally displaced within Ukraine, and two hundred thousand refugees fled to Russia and other neighbouring countries.

On 25 May 2014, Petro Poroshenko was elected President. He was pro-West politician and promoted reforms, including measures to address corruption and lessen Ukraine's dependence on Russia for energy and financial support. By the second half of 2015, independent observers noted that reforms in Ukraine had considerably slowed down, corruption had not subsided, and the economy of Ukraine was still in deep crisis. In April 2019, Volodymyr Zelenskyy was elected President in a landslide rebuke of Poroshenko, which included a stagnating economy and the conflict with Russia. During his campaign, Zelenskyy vowed to make peace with Russia and end the war in the Donbas.¹⁵

In its three decades of independence, Ukraine has sought to forge its own path as a sovereign state while looking to align more closely with western institutions, including the EU and NATO. However, Kyiv struggled to balance its foreign relations and to bridge deep internal divisions. A more nationalist, Ukrainian-speaking population in western parts of the country generally supported greater integration with Europe, while a mostly Russian-speaking community in the East favoured closer ties with Russia.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked an escalation of the eight-year-old conflict that began with Russia's annexation of Crimea and signifies a historic turning point for European security. On the eve of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the country was the poorest in Europe, the cause was attributed to high corruption levels and the slow pace of economic liberalisation and institutional reforms. Since its separation from the Soviet Union, Ukraine has wavered between the influences of

Moscow and the West, surviving scandal and conflict with its democracy intact.

Conclusion

In the annals of time, there is no doubt that the people of Ukraine have suffered. Victims of war, deprivation, and lost history. In 1991, they obtained their independence as a Republic with the dissolution of the USSR. Yet, since gaining independence, the past 32 years have seen the country continue to suffer with the decline of 10 million people, a flat economic curve, and endemic corruption.

In understanding this war, it seems wise, therefore, to reflect on its history. History which is now repeating itself as has happened so many times before. Ukrainians are born in a land crossed by Empires. The struggle over control of Mackinder's 'Heartland' and Russia's need to reclaim control over Ukraine, is now resulting in Europe's worst war since World War II, where the conflict is raging without an end in sight. Yet, for as much as they've been at the centre of Russian history, Ukrainians resent that history. The 'historical reality' of modern-day Ukraine is undoubtedly complex. Encompassing 'A thousand-year' history of changing religions, borders and peoples, conquests over the years and Ukraine's diverse geography have created a complex fabric of multi-ethnicity.

Endnotes

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