

## Ukraine: Myths, National Historiography, Nation and State-Building

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Orest Subtelny, *Ukraine. A History*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988 and revised edition, 1994 (Ukrainian and Russian-language editions, Kyiv: Lybid', 1991 and 1994. Pp. 499 and 732). Pp. xiv + 692. \$35.00 ISBN 0 8012 0091 8

Paul R. Magosci, *A History of Ukraine*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996. Pp. ix + 725. \$40.00 ISBN 0 2959 7580 6

Are historiography, myths and legends important in the formation of national identities? The answer to this question is given by Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma, who believes that, 'History may not be limited to people's attitudes towards the past. History continues in the present and has an impact on forming the future'.<sup>1</sup> Historiography plays both an important part in creating and sustaining a national 'We' while laying claim to earlier settlement in disputed territories.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, there has been little systematic study of what can only be described as a revolution in post-Soviet non-Russian historiography, which is radically departing from its Soviet-era predecessor.<sup>3</sup> The only two former Soviet countries that have to a large degree maintained Soviet-era historiography are Russia and Belarus.

Ukraine did not feature as an independent entity in either Western historiography of 'Russia' or in Soviet historiography, which equated the history of Russia with that of the USSR. Only France followed a similar pattern to Tsarist Russia and the former USSR in utilizing history as an ideological tool to unite territories: both attempted to persuade their subjects that they had descended from the Gauls or Russians respectively.

Soviet historiography reverted to its Tsarist Russian nationalist predecessor by the mid-1930s, which helped to create the synthesis of nationalism and bolshevism that underpinned Stalinism. This historiography was further developed in the post-Stalin era when great emphasis was placed upon the de-nationalization and Russification of Ukrainians (and Belorussians) to create an east Slavic *Rus'kiy* core. In 1947 and 1954 Soviet historiography was further elaborated to codify all three eastern Slavic groups as belonging to one *Rus'kiy narod* that had entered the world together in the medieval Kyiv Rus' state and would inevitably remain united in the future as the core Russian-speaking *Homo Sovieticus*.

Soviet historiography rehabilitated the past, attempted to prove the superiority of Russians as the 'elder brother', argued that there were only 're-unions' (never conquered territories), which had only ever brought positive benefits through a

Russian *mission civilisatrice*. At the very least they were the 'lesser of two evils'. Nationalist agitation against these 're-unions' was against the wishes of the *narod* and therefore 'treacherous'. The expansion of Muscovite/Russian rule over Ukraine was never therefore 'annexation' but the recovery of the Tsar's patrimony. More importantly, the Ukrainians and other non-Russians were seemingly incapable of creating their own independent states. As Ukrainians (and Belorussians) are only branches of the *Rus'kiy narod*, a belief still shared according to contemporary polls by the majority of Russians, their independent states are somehow 'artificial' and therefore 'temporary'.

Such a historiography was acceptable to both Tsars and Commissars. It harmed Russian, Belorussian and Ukrainian national identities by promoting an all-Russian (*Rus'kiy*) historical memory. Ukrainians and Belorussians were allowed to maintain a pre-modern, rural, ethnographic regionalism, while modernization and urbanization were associated with the adoption of a 'higher' Russian culture and language. This 'Little Russianism' has been brought to the fore by the election of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka in Belarus in 1994 and by the Russian inability to look upon Ukrainians and Belorussians as separate nations with possibly divergent interests to Russia. As President Yeltsin has bemoaned, 'We cannot get it out of our systems that the Ukrainians are the same as we are. That is our destiny, our common destiny'.<sup>4</sup>

Western historiography of 'Russia', with the exception of Hugh Seton Watson, usually portrayed the three eastern Slavs as a Russian nation in the making, treating Ukrainians and Belorussians as Bretons or Alsations in France. In contrast to histories of Austro-Hungary, the multinational nature of the Tsarist or Soviet empires, or indeed any national oppression of the non-Russians, were largely ignored. Histories of the Russian revolution, with the exception of Richard Pipes and R. Grigor Suny, also ignored the nationalities factor.

Russian émigré scholars greatly influenced this trend in Western academia because they were portrayed as 'objective' while Ukrainian diaspora scholars were usually ridiculed as 'nationalists'. Ukrainian and Belorussian histories were marginalized and subsumed within 'Russian' history, and they were largely ignored in academic teaching. External influences upon Ukraine were largely described as exclusively emanating from Russia, which failed to take into account Ukraine's longer contact with and influence by its Western neighbours. Western historians accused their Ukrainian colleagues of 'nationalist bias' when they exclusively claimed the medieval Kyiv Rus' state as part of Ukrainian history. At the same time, the nationalization of Kievan Russia exclusively on behalf of Russian history was, and still is, defined as 'objective' (although the very term 'Russia' is of eighteenth century origins). As Kyiv Rus' was and is still treated as an integral part of 'Russian' history, Ukrainian history is only slated to have begun from the fourteenth, or worse still, the seventeenth century.

Clearly the revival of Ukrainian national historiography in the late Gorbachev and post-Soviet eras is going to fundamentally challenge many of the nineteenth-century myths which went on to become this widely accepted 'Russian' historiography in both the West and the former USSR. The two books under review survey Ukrainian history from different perspectives, but nevertheless both will challenge Western, Soviet and post-Soviet Russian historiography in many key areas. A Ukrainian historiography which traces Ukrainian history back in time to its earliest origins based upon the territory which became an independent state in January 1992, as reflected in these two volumes under review and in post-Soviet Ukrainian historiography in general, will inevitably 'nationalize' all of the personalities and events which took place within the confines of this state's borders.

This challenge includes the question of the 'ownership' of the medieval state of Kyiv Rus', the majority of which lay in Ukrainian territory. This has profound implications for Russian-Ukrainian relations because the city of Moscow is 600 years younger than that of Kyiv. After all, can an older city be really inhabited by a 'younger brother'? Paul Magosci interchangeably uses Rus'/Ukraine and the Rus'/Ukrainian people, which he believes is analogous to that of the Franks/French or Romans/Italians. 'Indeed, it is not uncommon for any territory in Europe or elsewhere to have had different names for its inhabitants and its homeland in the past' (p.10), Magosci believes. Ukraine's new historiography also questions all of the underlying assumptions outlined earlier in this review and commonly found in Tsarist, Western and Soviet historiography. Russian rule is no longer portrayed as 'progressive', russification and imperialism are condemned, former 'traitors' are reinvented as national heroes through monuments, stamps, medals, currency and street names. More importantly, Ukraine is treated as an entity with its own life independent of Russia, where stress is laid upon Ukraine as an organic part of European (not Eurasian) civilization.

When the University of Toronto published Orest Subtelny's *Ukraine. A History* in 1988 they undoubtedly never expected it to become the most widely used textbook in an independent Ukrainian state only a few years later, after being translated into Ukrainian and Russian and then reprinted on numerous occasions.<sup>3</sup> This influence upon the evolution of Ukraine's post-Soviet historiography, based upon the revival of banned historical studies only kept alive in the Ukrainian diaspora, is directly linked to Ukraine's state and nation-building processes. Subtelny's survey is divided into five parts covering Kyiv Rus', the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Cossacks, Tsarist Russian and Austro-Hungarian rule and twentieth century Ukraine.

Subtelny's one-volume survey was the first in 50 years to bring Ukrainian history up to the present and is therefore similar to other one-volume histories of Ukraine by Dmytro Doroshenko and its most pre-eminent historian, Mykhailo Hrushevs'kyi. All three histories are devoted to the Ukrainian people who have lived on the territory we have known since the late nineteenth century (and more importantly since 1992) as Ukraine. Consequently Russians, Poles and Jews, who played an important role in the history of this territory, are only given five out of 692 pages.

Magosci's one-volume *History of Ukraine*, also published by the University of Toronto, will eventually reach Ukrainian readers, who will be able to compare and contrast it with the already widely popular Subtelny. In contrast to Subtelny's work, Magosci focuses upon the history of all of the ethnic groups and events that took place on Ukrainian territory. In this sense it follows in the standard Western historiographical framework of tracing back in time the history of territories that since the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were defined as independent states. It is neatly divided into ten sections dealing with geography, ethno-linguistics and the pre-Slavic era, Kyiv Rus', the Lithuanian-Polish commonwealth, the Cossacks, the Hetmanate, Tsarist Russian rule, Austrian rule, World War One and the Ukrainian independence struggle, the inter-war years, World War Two and the post-Soviet era. The book is interspersed with useful separate, shaded quotations and extracts on certain events, which often give opposing views, as well as a useful bibliography. The book is also marred by its weak coverage, in only ten pages, of the crucial last decade that spanned the Gorbachev era and the establishment of an independent state.

Magosci's methodology is different from Subtelny's approach but it will nevertheless be as unsettling to Russian historiography. After all, if Russian historiography is to follow in Magosci's footsteps (and, by default, standard Western

historiography, which links 'history' to the territory of the independent nation-state) then new histories of Russia, both in the Russian Federation and the West, should be confined to the borders of the post-Soviet Russian Federation. This would require a complete overhaul of both Russian and Western historiography of 'Russia'. In the same manner as Ukrainian independence, Subtelny's and Magosci's historical surveys will inevitably contribute to the ongoing debate as to what, where and who constitutes 'Russia' and Russians.

## NOTES

1. *Uriadovyi Kurier* (13 November 1997).
2. T. Kuzio, 'Borders, Symbolism and Nation-State Building: Ukraine and Russia', *Geopolitics and International Boundaries*, Vol.2, No.2 (Autumn 1997), pp.36-56.
3. T. Kuzio, *Ukraine: State and Nation Building* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp.198-229.
4. *Radio Rossia*, 21 November 1997.
5. *Henezza*, No.4 (1996), p.120