

Medieval history impacts contemporary attitudes

**By Taras Kuzio,
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The medieval kingdom of Kyiv Rus may appear to have little relevance to the domestic and foreign policies of present-day Ukraine. However, the way Ukrainians today interpret their country's relationship to Kyiv Rus has a direct bearing on their attitudes toward Russia and Europe.

The writing of objective history is always an elusive project. What was accepted in the West as the "objective" history of Russia throughout most of the 20th century, especially after 1945, was based on a 19th century Russian imperial framework. This framework had no place for Ukraine (or Belarus). It was founded on a linear, smooth progression from "Kiev Russia" to the principality of Vladimir-Suzdal, the state of Muscovy and the Russian Empire. Some authors even added the Soviet Union to this list. Ukraine only twice made an appearance in this framework with Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky, who sought the union of Ukraine and Russia in the mid-17th century, and then again briefly in 1917.

As might have been expected, 19th-century Russian imperialists described Ukrainians and Belarusians as regional branches of the Russian people, the "Little Russians" and "White Russians." I myself was exposed to such histories of Russia at university in the United Kingdom in the 1980s. The result was that a large number of Western academics, government officials and media journalists were reluctant to treat Ukrainians as a subject to be studied in their own right. Virtually the only exceptions were the diaspora-funded Ukrainian research and publishing institutions at Harvard and the universities of Toronto and Alberta.

The resulting ignorance about Ukraine made for panic in foreign ministries when the country became independent in 1991, since none of them had experts on Ukraine. Around that time, the Ukrainian bookstore in London saw its entire stock of Orest Subtelny's "Ukraine.

A History,” published by the University of Toronto in 1988, snapped up by the British Foreign Office.

After the Russian Empire

There had been a brief but radical break with 19th-century imperialist historiography in the Soviet Union in the 1920s when Mykhailo Hrushevsky, unelected president of the Ukrainian Central Rada in 1917-1918, returned to work in Soviet Ukraine. However, after Hrushevsky died (or, possibly, was poisoned) in 1934, Soviet historiography returned to its Tsarist roots.

The revived imperialist historiography had to be adapted to Soviet reality. Ukrainians could no longer simply be described as “Little Russians.” After all, they had their own republic, and after 1945, even a seat at the United Nations. The “Kiev Russia” of the Tsarist and Western historiographical schools was replaced by a model that, on paper at least, seemed to offer all three Eastern Slavic nationalities an equal claim to Kyiv Rus as their “cradle.”

This equality was pure fiction, however. The Russians remained the “elder brothers” of the USSR, especially after the Soviet victory in World War II. This meant it was only the Russians who could claim direct lineage from Kyiv Rus. The study of Kyiv Rus was not even allowed in the Ukrainian SSR after World War II. Soviet books on Kyiv Rus appeared in Russian only, and in English translation the state was known as “Kievan Russia.”

Unlike the Western and Tsarist frameworks, which ignored Ukrainians, the Soviet school at least permitted Ukrainians to appear briefly in the 14th century. But prior to this there were no Ukrainians. In fact, the only reason for their sudden appearance was to search for the quickest possible re-union with their Russian “elder brothers.” Without these “elder brothers,” Ukrainians would apparently have felt lost in the world.

Ukrainian leaders who allegedly supported “reunion,” such as Khmelnytsky, were seen as good. Those who opposed it – like Hetman Ivan Mazepa – were described as “traitors.” In 1954, the USSR held lavish celebrations of the 1654 Treaty of Pereyaslav, which was interpreted as an act of “reunion of two brotherly peoples.”

By the late Gorbachev era, the Soviet school of historiography was being increasingly questioned. Hrushevsky was on the road to being rehabilitated, a process that was completed after independence. Since the first Ukrainian edition of Subtelny’s “History” was published in Kyiv in 1991, nearly 1 million Ukrainian and Russian copies have been printed here.

Historical rivalry

Contemporary Ukraine has three distinct schools of history. The Soviet school is, not surprisingly, only supported by the extreme left and has no influence, though it has returned to favor in Belarus and Moldova. Like the Tsarist school, Soviet historiography is not a “usable” history for an independent state.

The Hrushevsky school is dominant, particularly in the education system. It sees Kyiv Rus as a proto-Ukrainian state while its relationship to Belarus and Russia is similar to that of the Roman Empire to France. The direct successor to Kyiv Rus was the Galician-Volhynian Principality. The key role of Hrushevsky in contemporary Ukraine’s idea of itself is underlined by the monument that stands next to the Teachers House in Kyiv, where the Central Rada was based. A poll conducted last December found that Hrushevsky was one of the country’s most popular historical figures.

There is also a third minority school, best exemplified in the prolific writings of well-known academic Petro Tolochko, which seeks to stake out a Ukrainian history that lies somewhere between the mutually exclusive Hrushevsky and Tsarist schools. However, this ambivalence means that the Tolochko school is an eclectic mix without a clearly

defined framework. Tolochko believes that Kyiv Rus was indeed the cradle of the East Slavs (as in Soviet historiography). But, unlike the Soviet school Tolochko attempts to stress the equal inheritance of all three ethnic groups. In other words, he, like the followers of Hrushevsky, rejects any role for an “elder brother.”

Tolochko admits that if Ukrainian history is now written – as it is in the West – as that of the territory of the nation-state, then everything that occurred on Ukrainian territory going back even further than Kyiv Rus is part of “Ukrainian history.” Such an approach could only be taken after Ukraine became independent and was adopted in Robert Magocsi’s 1996 “History of Ukraine” published by the University of Toronto. Both Hrushevsky and Subtelny wrote histories of Ukrainians (not Ukraine) because when they wrote there was no independent Ukrainian state.

Using a Western, neutral territorial approach to Ukrainian history means that Ukraine (as the head of the Institute of History Stanislav Kulchytsky has pointed out) is the primary beneficiary of the Kyiv Rus legacy. Furthermore, it is difficult to disentangle all of the ethno-cultural processes that took place on Ukrainian territory without placing them within histories of Ukraine. In 2000, Tolochko himself was the main editor of a book entitled “Ethnic History of Ancient Ukraine.” The 15-volume set of “Ukraine Through the Ages” published in 1998-1999 by Alternatyvy did not get around to dealing with Kyiv Rus until volume 4.

Past and present

Supporters of the Hrushevsky and Tolochko schools have different views about the past and present. In general, those with national democratic views tend to favor the Hrushevsky school, while centrists prefer to side with Tolochko. The main reason the Hrushevsky school is so dominant is because the humanities and cultural intelligentsia tend to be national democratic in outlook. Nevertheless, no clear dividing

line separates the schools, as seen by the presence of SDPU(u) member Vasyl Kremen as Education Minister.

The Hrushevsky school sees the Russian language as a foreign language in Ukraine, while Tolochko (like Kuchma) does not. The former defines the adoption of Russian as Russification imposed by a foreign, occupying power. The Tolochko school sees the adoption of Russian as a voluntary process.

These different views on Kyiv Rus and Ukrainian history affect attitudes towards Russia. While the Hrushevsky school sees Ukraine as part of “Europe” and encourages Ukraine to “return to Europe” regardless of Russia’s stance, the Tolochko school is best exemplified by the East Ukrainian slogan of “To Europe with Russia!” The idea that Ukraine and Russia should act together in the international community is reflected in the slogan on the Web site of the Year of Russia in Ukraine “From Common Origins to Common Goals.” Those holding these views cannot see Russia in a hostile light and tend to gloss over problems in Russian-Ukrainian history.

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