

Between history and nation: Paul Robert Magocsi and the rewriting of Ukrainian history¹

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“Getting history wrong is an essential factor in the formation of a nation,” wrote Ernest Renan, basing this observation on his analysis of the nation-building experience in nineteenth-century Europe (qtd. in Eric Hobsbawm, *On History*. New York: New York Press, 1997: 270; for a different translation of the same sentiment, see Ernest Renan, “What is a Nation,” in *Nationalism in Europe from 1815 to the Present: A Reader*. Ed. Stuart Woolf. London: Routledge, 1996: 50). Many historians today tend to agree with Renan’s statement and are doing their best to “get history right” as they search for alternatives to national history. More often than not they face an uphill battle in that regard, both within and outside their profession.

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Asking historians in eastern Europe to abandon the national approach to history after decades of the suppression of national narratives by the Communist authorities may be rather like asking Leopold von Ranke to tone down his nationalist and statist rhetoric after the unification of Germany. Still, one can approach east European historians with much more hope today than could have been mustered in dealing with German and Italian historians in the second half of the nineteenth century. For one thing, writing traditional national history today means contributing to the isolationism and provincialism of east European historiography imposed by decades of existence behind the Iron Curtain. The new nations of eastern Europe want to be part of a united Europe, while their younger historians want to be part of the larger European and world community of historians.

But how is one to overcome the deficiencies of present-day writing on the history of eastern Europe – deficiencies often caused by decades of totalitarian rule in that part of the world and general indifference on the part of Western historians to the history of nations without a state of their own? Here I shall discuss the possibilities of rewriting, reshaping, and restructuring east European historical narratives, focusing on the history of Ukraine.

The traditional scheme of Ukrainian history

What are the main characteristics of the Ukrainian historical narrative as created by the national awakeners of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? In defining the time frame of Ukrainian history, the new narrative at that time presented the Ukrainian nation as more ancient than the Russian, and thus deserving of full support in its quest for sovereign cultural and political development, unhindered by interference from its

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younger sibling. In order to achieve that goal, the starting point of the narrative had to be moved as far back as possible. Consequently, the new narrative, worked out according to prevailing scholarly standards, established the Ukrainian claim to Kyivan Rus'. That approach put the Ukrainian narrative on a collision course with traditional Russian historiography, creating a conflict akin to the one between Swedish and Norwegian historians over the ethnic origins of the Varangians. In territorial terms, the new Ukrainian narrative linked the history of Orthodox Ukraine in the Russian Empire with that of Greek Catholic Ukraine in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Mykhailo Hrushevs'kyi, who managed this feat, could also be called the Henri Pirenne of Ukrainian history.²

The national narrative of Ukrainian history followed the development of the Ukrainian people through a sequence of rises, declines, and revivals. Like Heinrich von Sybel and other German historians of his era, who created the myth of a German nation as a sleeping beauty awakened by the "kiss" of the wars of liberation, Ukrainian historians believed in and worked toward the "awakening" of their own nation.³ Not unlike the Russian narrative, the Ukrainian one was teleological, although its final destination was not the reunification of the Russian people but the emancipation of one of its parts from the oppression of another.

As the national paradigm took center stage in Ukrainian historiography after 1991, the Ukrainian nation finally emerged victorious in its historiographic competition with dynasties, states, and the dominant Russian and Polish nations.⁴ While that change in perspective corrected numerous wrongs done to Ukrainians in russocentric and polonocentric narratives, did it do justice to the history of Ukraine as a country and territory?

This question should be answered in the negative. Not only were significant portions of Ukrainian territorial and cultural history sidelined in the process, but large numbers of ethnic Ukrainians were allotted little space in the Ukrainian national narrative. Hrushevs'kyi, for example, was criticized in his lifetime for replacing the early modern history of Ukraine with that of Cossackdom, an important but still a minority element of the Ukrainian population in its day. Hrushevs'kyi also reduced the history of the nineteenth century to that of the Ukrainian liberation movement. Intellectual and cultural currents that were not part of the Ukrainian national project were left out of his narrative, which followed the rise, fall, and resurgence of the nation.⁵ Thus, neither Nikolai Gogol nor Ilia Repin, both ethnic Ukrainians born in Ukraine, made it into the mainstream of Ukrainian national history. Those who opposed the Ukrainian national movement – the so-called Little Russians such as Mikhail Iuzefovich, the instigator of the Ems Ukase (1876), which prohibited Ukrainian-language publications in the Russian Empire – became part of the story, but only as traitors and villains. The Russophiles of Galicia and the Ruthenians of Transcarpathia fared no better. On the other hand, there is a tendency to "Ukrainianize" groups and institutions that never possessed an identity that might be called Ukrainian. Recent research on the formation of political, cultural, and national identities in the lands now known as Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus points to the danger of assigning to the masses of the population national identities that did not exist at the time and did not become "majority faiths" at least until the twentieth century.⁶

If not all Ukrainians made it into the national narrative of Ukrainian history, that is even more true of representatives of other ethnic groups. As Andreas Kappeler has recently noted, one cannot write the history of state institutions in Ukraine, its trade and economy, or its urban centers by focusing on Ukrainians alone ("From an Ethnonational to a Multiethnic to a Transnational Ukrainian History"). They certainly dominated the countryside but were a minority in the cities, which were dominated by Russians, Jews, Poles, and Germans. It would be unfair to state that minorities are completely absent

from the Ukrainian national narrative. But as a rule they have been portrayed as aggressors, oppressors, and exploiters in the struggle with whom the Ukrainian nation was born. There is little doubt that the minorities must be included in the new narrative of Ukrainian history, not just as “others” but as part of the collective “we” – an all-important element of Ukrainian history that differentiated it from the history of other lands. Today there are positive developments to be noted in the research and writing of a multiethnic history of Ukraine.

Paul Robert Magocsi and the multiethnic history of Ukraine

The first attempt to write a territorial, multiethnic, and multicultural history of Ukraine was made by Paul Robert Magocsi. His *History of Ukraine*, almost 800 pages in length, was published in 1996 and became a multiethnic alternative to Orest Subtelny’s more traditional narrative, *Ukraine: A History*, which first appeared in 1988 and went on to sweep Ukraine in numerous editions of its Ukrainian translation.⁷ Magocsi managed to produce a much more complete history of Ukraine as a territory than did Subtelny and should be commended for that.

Magocsi’s *History of Ukraine* populates the Ukrainian past with important figures, events, and developments that were absent from the traditional Ukrainian narrative but are all-important for understanding Ukraine’s past and present. Sections and maps on the peoples of eastern and western Ukraine introduced by Magocsi into his magisterial *History of Ukraine* serve as a clear indication of his fresh approach to Ukrainian history.

Even more telling in this regard is the comparison of his recently published *Ukraine: An Illustrated History* with its likely prototype, Mykhailo Hrushevs’kyi’s *Illustovana istoriia Ukraïny*, first published in 1911. One can take as an example the illustrative material in Hrushevs’kyi’s and Magocsi’s books on the cultural history of nineteenth century eastern Ukraine. Both works feature portraits of Ivan Kotliarevs’kyi, Taras Shevchenko, Mykola Kostomarov, Panteleimon Kulish, and Mykhailo Drahomanov among other Ukrainian activists of the period. But Magocsi goes beyond the Ukrainian national movement and Hrushevs’kyi’s narrative by also featuring portraits of Nikolai Gogol (Mykola Hohol’), the Baal Shem Tov, Shalom Aleichem, Józef Bogdan Zaleski, and Ismail Bey Gaspirali (Hrushevs’kyi 488–505; Magocsi, *Ukraine: An Illustrated History* 155–69).

Magocsi’s historical narrative is certainly much richer than Hrushevs’kyi’s and does more justice to the multiethnic and multicultural history of Ukraine by introducing figures associated with the pro-Russian choice among the Ukrainian elites, as well as the leading figures of the Jewish, Polish, and Crimean Tatar cultural revival in Ukraine. It should be kept in mind, of course, that Magocsi’s *Illustrated History of Ukraine* is separated from Hrushevs’kyi’s book by almost a century of Ukraine’s historical development and by the advance of Ukrainian and world historiography. From today’s viewpoint, Magocsi has certainly done better than his distant predecessor. But does this mean that the process of rewriting Ukrainian history has come to an end and that full justice has been done to the Ukrainian past? My answer to that question is, as one might assume, largely negative.

Writing a multiethnic history of Ukraine is of course an important way of dealing with the deficiencies of the dominant narrative of Ukrainian history. This exercise is useful from the political and the scholarly point of view. It helps present a much richer mosaic of Ukrainian history and replaces the confrontation of competing ethnic narratives with their coexistence. Nevertheless, writing multiethnic history does not mean moving “beyond ethnicity.” It means, rather, diversifying the approach instead of abandoning the paradigm altogether. As Andreas Kappeler has noted recently, the multiethnic

approach shares the same set of weaknesses as the ethnonational one, since it is liable to lapse into primordialism, a teleological approach, and the marginalization of non-ethnic groups and institutions (“From an Ethnonational to a Multiethnic to a Transnational Ukrainian History”).

I shall now offer an example of the dangers associated with limiting Ukrainian history to the multiethnic approach. Not surprisingly, it is drawn from Magocsi’s own writings. His reconceptualization of Ukrainian history along territorial and multiethnic lines is closely associated with the major project of his academic career – the promotion of the idea that there is a fourth East Slavic nationality, the Carpatho-Rusyns, who inhabit Transcarpathia in today’s Ukraine and adjacent territories in present-day Slovakia and Poland. By rewriting Ukrainian history, Magocsi (among other things) creates space for the construction of a narrative related to, yet also distinct from, Ukrainian history – that of Carpatho-Rusyn history. That narrative manifests all the characteristics of nineteenth and early twentieth century narratives of ethnonational history, including the Ukrainian historical narrative. At its core is the primordial approach to nation formation, which assumes that nations have existed since time immemorial, and that what happened to them after the Polish Uprising of 1830 in the Russian Empire and the Revolution of 1848 in Austria-Hungary was not the beginning of nation-building but rather the painful search for national identity. According to that school of thought, nations already existed: they simply had to discover themselves.

The success of such an approach to Rusyn history, or any other historical narrative written along ethnonational lines, largely depends on whether historians-turned-nation-builders can find proof of the existence of their nations since time immemorial. For Carpatho-Rusyn historiography, this has turned out to be a daunting task. Its practitioners faced the challenge of “proving” the existence of a separate Rusyn ethnos in Transcarpathia, despite overwhelming historical and linguistic data that point to the coming of the ancestors of today’s Carpatho-Rusyns from what is now Ukraine and to the continuing migration to the region from the Ukrainian regions of Galicia and Podolia until the sixteenth century. The rules of mythmaking require, however, that each nation have distinct origins, making it impossible for proponents of the Rusyn national project to link the origins of their group to Kyivan Rus’, which has been already claimed by the more powerful Russian and Ukrainian historical mythologies.

How can one keep the name brought to the region by Rusyn migrants while dissociating it from the Rus’ princes who brought that name to the Carpathians? Nineteenth century amateur historians and national awakeners such as Mikhail Luchkai Pop dealt with the problem by claiming that Byzantine authors referred to the local inhabitants as “Ruthenians” long before the creation of Kyivan Rus’. Some of them looked for distinct roots in the region’s Orthodox faith, linking it not to Prince Volodymyr of Kyiv but to SS. Cyril and Methodius. How the saints could have introduced Orthodoxy almost two hundred years before the schism of Christianity and a quarter of a millennium before the schism began to affect the religious situation in eastern Europe was a problem handed down for resolution to later generations of nation-builders.⁸

Paul Robert Magocsi, who has done an outstanding job of demythologizing the traditional narrative of Ukrainian history, seems to overlook the pitfalls of the traditional Carpatho-Rusyn narrative. The following is an excerpt from his article on Rusyn history published in the *Encyclopedia of Rusyn History and Culture*: “...because Carpatho-Rusyns received Christianity over a century earlier than Kievan Rus’, it is likely that they used the name *Rusyn* and were called by others *Rusyns* (Latin: *Rutheni*) even before the arrival of subsequent Rusyn migration from the north and east” (“History”).

Here Magocsi links the name Rus' to Christianity and then reads that connection all the way back to the legendary acceptance of Christianity in the region – all this in order to legitimize the myth of Rusyn origins, which cannot function unless it severs all ties with the rest of Ukraine, including Kyiv. Incidentally, that myth also makes Carpatho-Rusyns the oldest Christian Slavic nation on the face of the earth.

The multiethnic approach to Ukrainian history has a strong potential to produce a better Ukrainian historical narrative, but it also threatens to replace one narrative concerned to affirm the existence of a dominant nation with a multiplicity of other similar narratives. The task of the new Ukrainian historiography, however, is not to multiply national paradigms but to go beyond the national paradigm altogether.

Toward a new history of Ukraine

The problems associated with writing national and multiethnic histories can be overcome by means of transnational approaches to the history of Ukraine. Here I shall discuss only one such approach, which conceptualizes the history of Ukraine as that of a civilizational and cultural borderland; that is, a dividing line but also a bridge between central and eastern Europe.

Such an approach has been applied successfully to the history of other central and eastern European countries, including Poland and Hungary. But Ukraine fits that paradigm better than any other country of the region, given its centuries-old situation as a crossroads not only between eastern and central Europe but also between eastern Europe and the Balkans, the Mediterranean world, and the Eurasian steppelands. In the Ukrainian historiographic tradition, the East-West approach has been associated with the work of Ivan L. Rudnytsky and Ihor Ševčenko.⁹ Although the history of Ukraine as a multiethnic country and a cultural borderland has not yet been written, in comparison with representatives of other regional historiographies, historians of Ukraine have a head start in that undertaking. This is because they are uniquely positioned to study the history of eastern Europe in its full scope, whether it be the history of Polish-, Russian-, or Ottoman-dominated lands and territories, at different stages of its development.

Over the course of its history, Ukraine has been a borderland not only of different state formations but, much more importantly, of different civilizational and cultural zones. Ukraine was always a border zone between the Eurasian steppe lands controlled by nomads and the settled forest regions. Kyiv, the future capital of Ukraine, was founded as a border post between these two worlds. The struggle for survival against the steppe nomads and the later colonization of the steppe lands constitute one of the most important themes of Ukrainian history, although the history of Ukraine's "moving frontier" – the scene of interaction between governments, settlers, and nomads – has never found its Frederick Jackson Turner or Herbert Eugene Bolton. The Crimea and the northern Black Sea region, settled by Greek colonists in ancient times, was a peripheral but lasting part of the Mediterranean world – the territories delineated by the Roman *limes*, which coincide, at least in the case of Ukraine, with the northern borders of Mediterranean powers, including the Ottoman Empire, and with the northern boundary of present-day Islam. Having accepted Christianity from Byzantium in 988, the Kyivan princes found themselves on the border between eastern and Western Christendom – another all-important dividing line in Ukrainian history that the early modern Ukrainian elites tried to erase by promoting the idea of union between Christian churches.

Centuries of borderland existence contributed to the fuzziness and fragmentation of Ukrainian identity. Whereas borders were created and policed to divide people, the

nearby borderlands served as contact zones where economic transactions (legal and illegal) took place, loyalties were traded, and identities negotiated.¹⁰ Ukraine's steppe borderland called into existence a special category of steppe dwellers known as the Cossacks and a special type of identity. They are usually presented as ferocious fighters against Islam and nomads of the steppe. But what remains largely unexplained within the national narrative of Ukrainian history is why they gave themselves a Turkic name, why they dressed in baggy pantaloons like their enemies the Ottomans, why they shaved their heads like their enemies the Crimean Tatars, and why the most popular visual image of them is preserved in the Buddha-like paintings called "Cossack Mamai." The answer to these questions is quite simple. Not only did the Cossacks flout state frontiers, giving constant headaches to their nominal superiors in Warsaw and Moscow, they also crossed the cultural boundaries dividing the steppe and the settled area, Christianity and Islam, Polish nobiliary democracy and Muscovite autocracy.¹¹

The new interest in the history of empires in the West, as well as in the former USSR (apparent, for example, in the articles published over the last few years in the Kazan-based journal *Ab Imperio*), allows historians of Ukraine to present their research in a new comparative framework. The history of Ukraine offers unique opportunities for research on relations between centers and peripheries, as well as on interrelations between imperial peripheries, bypassing decision makers in the imperial capitals. Andreas Kappeler's seminal book on the multiethnic history of the Russian Empire sets one to thinking of ways in which the Ukrainian experience under Moscow and St. Petersburg can be discussed and better understood against the background of the history of other non-Russian ethnic groups in the Russian Empire.¹² Terry Martin's *Affirmative Action Empire* helps explain the role of Ukraine in the formulation of Soviet nationality policy. Roman Szporluk's articles encourage scholars to take a close look at the legacy of the Habsburg, Romanov and Ottoman Empires in Ukrainian history.

There is certainly a long way to go before the Ukrainian experience is fully incorporated into the global historical narrative, whether we consider such events as the two world wars, the Revolution of 1917, the history of Communism, or ecological history (of which Chernobyl is and will remain an important part). The post-1991 Ukrainian historical narrative is still distant from Drahomanov's ideal of Ukrainian history (as formulated by him back in 1891), and it is not fully integrated into the European historical narrative. While it may now cover all periods of the Ukrainian past, it does not always pay "attention to the growth or decline of population, the economy, mores and ideas in the community and the state, education, and the direct or indirect participation of Ukrainians of all classes and cultures in European history and culture" (qtd. in Plokhy, *Unmaking Imperial Russia* 156).

The history of Ukraine should be rethought in order to overcome the limitations imposed on it by the centuries-old national paradigm. This would help integrate the Ukrainian past into the history of eastern Europe and the whole European continent. One would like to believe that the future of Ukraine lies in Europe, but its past should stay where it belongs, in the multiplicity of worlds created by civilizational and imperial boundaries throughout the history of the territory known today as Ukraine. There is little doubt that Ukrainian history can only benefit from being imagined outside the limits imposed on historical thinking by the national paradigm. Methods applied today in micro- and macro-historical study will certainly make Ukrainian history richer, more complete, and more true to the life experience of people of various nationalities, cultures, and political persuasions who settled that territory in the past and those who live there today. Such a new Ukrainian history will also enrich and help reshape the history of eastern Europe, as well as of the whole European subcontinent.

Notes

1. This paper is drawn in part from my essay "Beyond Nationality"; these sections are reprinted here by kind permission of University of Toronto Press.
2. On Henri Pirenne and his construction of the Belgian historical narrative, see Koninckx.
3. On German national historiography, see Iggers.
4. On the current state of historical research in Ukraine, see Kasianov and Kuzio.
5. Some of the shortcomings of Hrushevs'kyi's scheme were pointed out by his colleague Bahalii.
6. The dangers of that approach are spelled out in my book *The Origins of the Slavic Nations*.
7. In Ukraine this work was translated into both Ukrainian and Russian and served as a textbook for university students through the first years of independence.
8. See the exposition of these views in Makara and Sharga.
9. On Ukraine as a cultural borderland between the Christian East and West, see Ivan L. Rudnytsky. On the Ukrainian steppe frontier, see the recent publications by Chornovol: "'Dyke pole' i 'dykyi zakhid,'" and "Seredn'ovichni frontyry ta moderni kordony."
10. Mark von Hagen has recently made a strong case for the application of the borderland paradigm to the history of eastern Europe in general and Ukrainian history in particular. See his "Empires, Borderlands, and Diasporas" (445–468) and "Revisiting the Histories of Ukraine."
11. On the strategies applied by the Cossack officers who had to operate simultaneously in a number of worlds, see Frick.
12. See Kappeler, *The Russian Empire*. See also his "Great Russians" and "Little Russians" 8.

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