

## The Gates of Europe – A History of Ukraine Sergei Plokhy

Ukraine is not Russia. It has its own character, its own history – and its own language

Most of the major themes in Ukraine's history over the past several hundred years parallel those of Western Europe. There is a west to east gradation. The Enlightenment had a strong impact in Poland, somewhat less in Ukraine, and less than that in Russia. Likewise the romance, which is a good place to start the story.

The romance era, in the early 1800s, celebrated nationalism, folklore, and national language. Russian and Ukrainian have always been sufficiently separate languages that translators were required as far back as the time of the Mongols. This history puts the origin of the Ukrainian language in the Pripyat marshes on the border with Belarus, and credits romance era poets such as Taras Shevchenko and scholars such as Ukraine's first historian, Khrushovsky, with defining the modern language.

Several themes run throughout Ukrainian history.

The first is a sense of egalitarianism, or rough democracy. The founders of Kyivan Rus in the seventh and eighth centuries were Scandinavians, whose harsh life, according to evolutionary psychologists, required a kind of egalitarian government. Although there were hereditary king ships, Ukraine never witnessed the divine right of kings at a level approaching that of the Occident. The downside of this egalitarianism is disunity. The Poles, Russians and others, united under strong leaders, were generally able to divide and conquer the fractious Ukrainians.

A second theme is closeness to the land. The Ukrainian people are farmers. Minorities among them, Russians, Poles, Jews, Hungarians, Austrians and others, were all more given to city life. The Ukrainians themselves stayed on their beloved land.

A third theme is constant invasion. Ukraine's flat geography leaves it wide open to the east, west and north. Turkey, on the Anatolian peninsula, enjoyed more natural defenses. Russia had the defense of its vastness, and Germany and Austria had the Alps. Ukraine's rich land made it a tempting and difficult to defend target.

Language politics has been an issue for the past few centuries. Russians have wanted to call Ukrainian a mere dialect. It is not. Though the languages diverged 1000 years ago, about the same time Portuguese split from Spanish, this reviewer finds a greater difference between them: about the same level of difference in the sound, but more difference in the structure of the grammar and in the vocabularies.

Every historian has to carefully select events upon which to report, and attempt to give an appropriate balance. Plokhy does a very creditable job. Given, however, that he is dealing with 1500 years of recorded history and several millennia of prehistory, there are things he must leave out.

His account of the last decade in Ukraine is necessarily brief. Having lived here, I can appreciate how much he had to leave out. His account does, however, capture the general tenor of the country and events. He does not have time to deal with the nuances of whether or not the current war is a result of Russian invasion. He goes with the consensus view that it is. He does not have time to deal in depth with the ways in which corruption manifests itself.

The book is good for what it is. It is as good a choice as any for a reader who is going to choose a single source for Ukrainian history. Other books that a reader may want to pick up include Orest Subtelny's "Ukraine – a History," Timothy Snyder's "Bloodlands," Andrei Kurkov's "Ukraine Diaries," about Maidan, J. V. Koshiew's "Abuse of Power – Corruption in the Office of the President," Related books about Russia would include Van Herpen's "Putin's Wars" and Alena V. Ledeneva's "How Russia Really Works," which gives a lot of insight into Ukraine's style of corruption.