

**Serhii Plokhy.** *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine.* New York: Basic Books, 2015. 432 pp. \$29.99, cloth, ISBN 978-0-465-05091-8.



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Serhii Plokhy's *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* is a much-needed concise survey of Ukrainian history from its beginning to the present. As the author acknowledges, this book is largely a response to the Maidan Revolution of 2015 and the war that followed, which generated popular demand for a book that would situate these events in history, but it is also a major and innovative contribution to the extant inventory of Ukrainian history overviews. It could be compared with the only two works of similar scope available in English: Orest Subtelny's *Ukraine: A History* (1988) and Paul Robert Magocsi's *A History of Ukraine: The Land and Its People* (1996).

There are obvious differences in size and chronological range among the three books. The latest editions of both Subtelny's and Magocsi's books approach nine hundred pages, and only Plokhy's book covers the events of 2005-15, which gives the latter an obvious advantage in the competition for an undergraduate survey textbook. There are also important conceptual differences. Subtelny's history was criticized for presenting a

story that consisted mostly of the Ukrainian people and for continuing the venerable Ukrainian national tradition of historical master narratives. Magocsi's project was to offer an alternative to an ethnic-centered approach incorporating the stories about other major ethnic groups which lived on territory that would become Ukraine in the twentieth century. The result was just as problematic; the boundaries seemed artificial and the stories of some peoples appeared as vignettes in the Ukrainian narrative. In his new book, Plokhy charts a refreshing solution to this ethnic and territorial conundrum.

From the outset, the author declares that geography and culture were the two most important constants throughout the country's history. While nearly everyone agrees that the importance of geography is difficult to overestimate, especially for preindustrial societies, the view of culture as another constant of Ukraine's history is more problematic. Plokhy's cultural factor, however, does not refer to some minimally changing cultural core. If geographically Ukraine is defined as a

transition zone between the forest and the steppe, culturally Ukraine has been a frontier zone on the periphery of several important centers. The most important of these centers throughout history was Europe, be it Europe of the Hellenic civilization, which furnished the earliest texts on the history and ethnography of present-day Ukrainian lands; of the medieval Catholic world; of sixteenth-century Reformation; or of nineteenth-century industrialization. Plokhy warns us in his introduction that “the gates to Europe” in the book’s title should not be dismissed lightly as just another metaphor akin to the *antemurale* (bulwark of Europe) myth of some of Ukraine’s neighbors. While in the case of some periods of history the importance of the “European” connection is tenuous, since at least the sixteenth century, cultural influence from the West has profoundly shaped Ukraine’s history.

Although Plokhy’s book is not a history of Ukrainian people, ancestors of present-day ethnic Ukrainians do play an important role in it simply because they happened to live on this territory in great numbers throughout much of its recorded history. Stories of other peoples, their contributions and their (oftentimes troubled) relations with each other, are smoothly integrated into the narrative. Purporting to situate the events of 2014-15 in history, Plokhy tells the story of Ukraine’s *longue durée* on several levels. There is Ukraine’s history as it exists in the nation’s self-imagination, taught in Ukraine’s schools and popularized in the country’s historical novels. There is Ukraine’s history as a part of world history, full of references to events, people, and processes familiar to a North American reader. Even more important, there is a history of Ukraine as a distinct story of an easily distinguishable territorial unit, with a trajectory different from that of its neighbors. This story, however, departs significantly from the dominant Ukrainian national narrative, and the author by and large avoids far-fetched

claims, and points to gaps and contingencies instead of covering them up.

The reader finds out that there is nothing natural about exact borders of present-day Ukraine, and regional variations always have been strong, but Ukraine is not a random assemblage of pieces unfit for each other either. Not only do accidental choices of historical figures define Ukraine’s current configuration but so, too, does certain historical logic. In Plokhy’s book, Rus’ around Kyiv in the tenth century, the Galician-Volhynian state of the thirteenth, the Ukrainian palatinates of the Polish Crown at the turn of the seventeenth, and the Hetmanate of the eighteenth century do not appear as genetically similar forms of Ukrainian political life. They appear as discrete building blocks that both served the historical imagination and provided some distinct live tradition.

Plokhy underlines similarities between Ukraine’s regions, even when they are separated by the state border. These connections and commonalities allow him to talk about the fortunes of Ukraine’s core parts during certain chronological periods in a single chapter, instead of yielding to the logic of political boundaries and assigning to separate chapters their divergent trajectories, as is the case with previous surveys of Ukrainian history. The stronger the states grew and the starker the differences were, the more challenging this task became, with the 1920s and 1930s posing a particular problem. Nonetheless, Plokhy’s strategy works; commonalities and human networks crisscrossing the boundaries allow him to tell the story fairly smoothly.

Essentially, the book is Plokhy’s extended answer to the provocative question Mark von Hagen asked in the pages of *Slavic Review* in 1995: “Does Ukraine have a history?”[1] It shows that in principle, in its essential structure, Ukraine’s history is no different from the history of “historical” nations, which draw on the traditions of longer-existing states, and in whose case the seeming continuity of political tradition often masks profound

discontinuities and regional variance. In all “national surveys,” present-day nations cast unduly large shadows over the past, but at the same time these surveys are hard to replace as pedagogical tools and hard to avoid because of the popular demand for this type of narrative.

As with any survey, some statements in Plokhy’s book can be challenged as not sufficiently accurate. The abundance of controversial topics in Ukraine’s history also leaves plenty of room for disagreement. In particular, the treatment of the interwar and wartime “integral nationalism,” the extent of the nationalists’ collaboration with Germans and participation in the Holocaust, and the ethnic cleansing of Poles in Volhynia can be challenged as partisan, following the Ukrainian academic mainstream rather than more critical interpretations.

On the whole, *The Gates of Europe* is a well-balanced book, one in which the author’s voice and opinion do not dissolve in the mire of middle ways between controversial topics and well-known facts. It is a lively read, with an occasional reference to the clichés and images from contemporary mass culture that have some roots in Ukrainian history. The book will be invaluable as a survey to use in undergraduate courses and an introduction for laymen interested in the country and historical background of the present conflict. The community of Ukrainian studies experts should not skip this book either. Professional historians will find not only a novel emplotment of familiar episodes but also a number of freshly gleaned facts and some metaphors that have not worn off yet. We can congratulate Plokhy with a significant and highly readable contribution to Ukrainian historiography.

#### Note

[1]. Mark von Hagen, “Does Ukraine Have a History?” *Slavic Review* 54, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 658-673. Plokhy’s original short answer can be found in Serhii M. Plokhy, “The History of a ‘Non-historical’ Nation: Notes on the Nature and Cur-

rent Problems of Ukrainian Historiography,” *Slavic Review* 54, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 709-716.

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