

Between East and West

Fedinec, Csilla, Mária Font, Imre Szakál and Beáta Varga. *Ukrajna története: régiók, identitás, államiság*. [History of Ukraine: Regions, Identity, Statehood], Budapest: Társadalomtudományi Kutatóközpont – Gondolat Kiadó, 2021. pp. 444.

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This monographic work by four authors attempts to trace what happened on the territory of modern Ukraine for the last 1200 years, and gives a much-needed concise history of Ukraine in Hungarian – for academia and beyond.

The publisher, the Centre of Social Sciences in Budapest, is the home institution of one of the authors, Csilla Fedinec. Over the last decade, Fedinec has established herself as an authority on Ukraine in Hungary. She is frequently asked to interpret Ukrainian issues and politics in the media. She is also the guiding figure of this monograph, which was published at the end of 2021 while its official presentation was held only 21 days prior to the Russian invasion of February 24th, 2022. Thanks to the month-long escalation in tensions between Russia and Ukraine and the outbreak of war, the book sold out quickly. Fortunately, it is also available in its entirety online.²³ The reason for this generosity is somewhat educational in nature. Two of the writers, Márta Font and Beáta Varga, were the authors of a previous publication entitled *Ukrajna története* [History of Ukraine], published in 2006 and again in 2013.²⁴ That book was essentially a university textbook, and its republication was connected to the rising civil unrest in the country, accompanied by growing interest in Ukraine and its politics by the public in Hungary. The publication currently under discussion is closely connected to these previous textbooks. The opening chapters, which were written by the same two authors, are structurally similar and their content is tightly connected to one another. Besides newly written material, some of the paragraphs are identical to those in the previous works throughout these early chapters. In my opinion, this is advantageous, as this new concise history of Ukraine can contribute to the Hungarian historiography as the latest – partly revised and repurposed – teaching material and information source on Ukraine, following in the

23 <http://real.mtak.hu/134693/1/FedinecUkrajna2021konyv.pdf> (11.09.2023)

24 This is also available online: <https://mek.oszk.hu/04800/04809/04809.pdf> (11.09.2023)

footsteps of earlier volumes.

Before listing all the positive features of this publication, it is worth highlighting one crucial thing that this book lacks: illustration. The book includes three maps, all created by István Molnár D. (of the Ferenc Rakoczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education in Berehove). The two larger maps are printed on the front and rear endpapers, while the third is to be found on page 12. The first map depicts the Kyivan Rus' and its regions before the Mongol invasion, the second one shows the regions of modern (pre-2014 and de jure) Ukraine and the third map depicts the twelve historical regions (politico-geographic toponyms) of modern Ukraine, e.g., *Kárpátalja* (Sub- or Transcarpathia), Galicia, Sloboda Ukraine, Tavria and so on. These three maps are the only illustrations to be found in the entire book, besides the colourful floral decoration (*вишиванка*, vyshyvanka) on the cover. However, to compensate for this deficiency, the preface tries to reassure the reader that the account will be intentionally broken up by informational text blocks. The writers include these text boxes every three and a half pages or so on average, giving the reader useful insights, quotes and even tips on areas to follow-up and possible questions to consider.

In the following sections I will elaborate on some of the main points of interest raised in the book. Taking into account that the monograph was written by Hungarian scholars, it is worth noting the prominence they give to discussing the relations of the Kyivan Rus' and Ukraine to Hungary. In essence, this work is still a teaching material. Every other chapter ends with a subchapter dealing with the north-easternmost region of the Hungarian Kingdom, in an attempt to connect the modern history of Ukraine with the general historical knowledge of the average reader from Hungary. Indeed, two of the authors come from a Hungarian background in Ukraine/Transcarpathia. In subchapter I.6. (Where was the western border of the Rus'?) Font summarizes the Hungarian viewpoint on this question in four pages. Besides that, and to affirm it, she outlines Miroslav Voloshchuk's opinion: the western border of the Rus' was the Carpathian Mountain range, while the territory of the westernmost Ukrainian region of our time – Transcarpathia – was then an integral part of the Hungarian Kingdom and had no significant connection with the other side of the range up until the end of the 12th century.

In subchapter III.4. (The beginnings of the history of the Cossacks) – after previously discussing the history of the Poles and Lithuanians and their rule – Font and Varga provide an introduction to the Cossacks, their genesis and their appearance in Ukraine. This section is based largely on Ukrainian sources and outlines the differing views on their

origins from those of Hryhorii Hrabianka through M. S. Hrushevsky to V. Holobutsky. The rightly cautious authors do not settle for a definitive answer to this question, opting not to take a side. Their task was, instead, to introduce the historiographical landscape of *obchina*, *mir* and *sloboda*, and to summarise the credible historical narratives of the Cossacks for modern Ukrainian identity politics.

In the 26-page long chapter IV. (The age of Cossacks) – which contains subchapter IV.1.2. (The Union of Brest in 1596 and its consequences) – Varga, Szakál and Fedinec trace the territory's history from 1569 to 1654, from the Union of Lublin and the creation of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth to the March Articles of the Agreement of Pereiaslav. This chronological division reflects the main narrative and foreshadows the last subchapter of the book, *Between East and West*. Chapter IV. is a very-well written part of the book, together with chapter V. However, the literature cited at the points where the chapters deal with the question of the Greek Catholic denomination are surprisingly poor or even seem ad hoc. While a few authors such as Oskar Halecki, V. A. Bednov and Paul Robert Magocsi are mentioned, a vast proportion of the international and domestic literature remains unused and uncited. I would also note here that the usage of the word Vatican to describe the Papacy in a political sense is, to say the least, anachronistic before 1870. These are minuscule details, however, and do not detract from the text. These two chapters are deeply connected and continuous between page 163 and 200. This section takes up nearly 10 percentage of the whole publication, with the main focus on Khmelnytskyi and his movement. This rather disproportionate coverage reflects the fact that not only was this the single most important historical event leading to the statehood of Ukrainians, but also that it is still interpreted as such. This is clear even in the preface, which attributes the era as the source of the Ukrainian national idea. Khmelnytskyi, who was perceived as a statesman rather than as a soldier and a hetman, became not only the historical exemplary to future organizers of a Ukrainian nation or state, but also provided an answer to the question of identity – and the romanticised hero who made a bad choice (Pereiaslav) – throughout the centuries of foreign dominion. "...[T]o show that we are brethren of the Cossack nation!" – declares a poem from 1862 and this is echoed in the modern national anthem.

Subchapter VIII.5. (Regions), deals with three regions of Ukraine: Western Ukraine, Transcarpathia and Crimea. While this selection may seem ad hoc or biased, the account is well written – although of course, if one wished to read more about e.g., Sloboda Ukraine in the north-east, one would have to read the whole book to find occasional

mentions of it. Still, I would argue that this incomplete selection of regions is appropriate for this work. It corresponds to the interests and knowledge of the Hungarian reader, since Western Ukraine (Galicia, Podolia etc.), along with its capital Lviv, and Transcarpathia, with cities such as Uzhhorod, Mukachevo and Berehove are the two most culturally and historically significant Ukrainian localities for Hungarians. As the preface puts it: “*For every nation, its own history is the most important.*” Focusing on these regions will benefit the Hungarian reader more, as it can be assumed that Hungarians will take an interest in them – a consideration that the authors might have thought of.

The closing remarks (subchapter IX.5.) of the publication, entitled *Between East and West*, compare and contrast the situation in Crimea, Luhansk and Donetsk with other frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet world – further linking Ukraine to the East. Besides this comparison and list of frozen conflicts, the subchapter and the book itself ends with a short summary of Ukraine’s international connections. Szakál and Fedinec mention the Polish helping hand and the sympathy of the Baltic states, but place more emphasis on Ukraine’s NATO Partnership of Peace since 1994 and its relationship with the EU since 2007 – as what binds the country and its future to the West.

The chronology at the end brings the publication to a fitting end. A look at the chronology gives the reader an excellent sense of the events, especially in the last three pages. The events listed here provide a better understanding of contemporary Ukrainian history since 1989. In a world that can seem as fast-moving and alienated from previous historical developments as never before, we are reminded of the fragility of both the stability of international peace and democracy in the post-Soviet world. The chronology ends with 2021: the introduction of autochthonous ethnic communities in Ukraine and the creation of the Crimea Platform. We all know what has happened since then.

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