

## STUDYING UKRAINE

David R. Marples

*David Marples is a Distinguished University Professor in the Department of History & Classics, University of Alberta. He is Director of the Stasiuk Program for the Study of Contemporary Ukraine, Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, University of Alberta. His works include [Heroes and Villains: Creating National History in Contemporary Ukraine](#) (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2007) and *Motherland: Russia in the 20th Century* (London: Longman, 2002).*

I work on all three East Slavic countries, but will select Ukraine as my example. I entered the field of Ukrainian studies belatedly, having switched from a potential PhD program at LSE in British history to Russian history after meeting with a potential supervisor. The supervisor was an American Jew from Boston, who had himself written a thesis on Right-Bank Moldova after the Second World War. Although relations between the UK and Soviet Union were not particularly amicable at that time--I received my PhD in the mid-80s--he had had no difficulty in traveling to Kishinev where he had gathered, in addition to his own, some materials on Ukraine in the same period. The republic was utterly unknown to me. I had never to my knowledge even met a Ukrainian to that point, but I accepted my supervisor's advice and decide to write my thesis on Western Ukraine after the war, with focus on its annexation to the USSR and collectivization of agriculture. Subsequently I took Ukrainian language lessons, to accompany my classes of intensive Russian, and was fortunate to have a tutor from Kyiv, who was a visiting professor in the Russian language department at the University of Sheffield.

However, the lack of a base of Ukrainian studies in Britain at that time was a serious handicap. Moreover, the only Ukrainians I discovered were people in local communities in Yorkshire, most of whom had arrived during or shortly after the end of the Second World War. Some had been members of an SS Division. Others had fought in the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, a fanatical anti-Soviet guerrilla movement that persisted in Ukraine into the mid-1950s. My language tutor, meanwhile, had me translate Soviet decrees and other propaganda from the USSR. Each provided their own version of the war and postwar years. A more confusing beginning could hardly be imagined.

After a year, I applied and was granted a 10-month British Council Fellowship to study in the Soviet Union, but I was not accepted by the Soviet side. The British Council

informed me that of all the applicants on a list of 6 rejected, I was the least likely to receive a visa because of the subject area of my topic. Instead I applied for a grant to visit United States from the Social Science Research Council, intending to do some research in Washington, and meet various experts on Ukraine on the North American continent. The Soviet rejection changed the entire course of my life.

To be succinct: I completed a Master's degree at the University of Alberta, working with Ivan Lysiak-Rudnytsky, perhaps the most erudite expert on Ukrainian history of that time, before writing the Sheffield PhD with my original supervisor. I took a temporary position also at the research desk on Ukraine at Radio Liberty in Munich, and maintained close contacts with the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies throughout. I returned to Canada in 1986 and have remained there ever since, taking up a permanent position in the Department of History, University of Alberta in 1991. And I would like to begin with this year in recounting the difficulties and advantages of conducting research and writing on Ukraine in the contemporary era. Because the year coincided with the independence of Ukraine and the rewriting of national history, particularly on the 20th century, but in fact of all periods starting from medieval times with the principality of Kyivan Rus'. That history is deeply contested within Ukraine today and there is no consensus on several critical events, despite a pro-active presidency under Viktor Yushchenko that has been at the forefront of the historical revisionism.

There is another important factor to be taken into consideration in the case of Ukraine, namely a large and politically active Diaspora in North America and Western Europe, which has been influential in the rewriting of history in Ukraine, so much so, that the official accounts are often ipso facto Diaspora accounts, held and elaborated during the Soviet years. In 1991, Ukraine had no reliable works of history. There were no school textbooks that could be considered in any way impartial. The Ministry of Education circumvented the problem by commissioning translations of Western histories of Ukraine, foremost among them Orest Subtelny's 1988 book, published by the University of Toronto Press. It was reissued many times, even though Subtelny himself had never set foot inside an archive in Ukraine before writing it. No Ukrainian article between 1991 and 1995 was considered complete without a reference to Subtelny in the footnotes. Subtelny, if you like, became the new Lenin. Over the decade and into the 20th century, Diaspora views on issues such as the mass famine of 1932-33 and the anti-Soviet resistance during the war years (a genocide and liberation movement respectively) became the official opinion in Ukraine, at least as far as the government, major newspapers, and school textbooks were concerned. These works were mostly nationalist in orientation, anti-Russian--if not overtly Russophobic--and accepted a version of history propagated by Mykhailo Hrushevsky as the official rendering of the past, i.e. of a clear and unbroken pattern of Ukrainian history since the acceptance of Christianity by the Kyivan prince Volodymyr in 988.

I have added this detail in order to explain the complexities of being a scholar of Ukraine today. There have been some noted benefits of working in this field as an outside and a non-Ukrainian. Ukrainians in general, and especially in the West, are grateful when a foreigner shows a serious interest in their country. I receive frequent invitations to speak at community gatherings. On controversial questions--such as the impact of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in the past--I was regarded as someone who could not be accused of nurturing any particular bias. On the other hand, such lack of commitment is not regarded so favorably at times when the community is seeking to push a particular point of view, as, for example, in the recent campaign in Canada to have the Famine of 1932-33 recognized by the government as an act of genocide. Many Canadians of Ukrainian background consider it almost an act of treachery to question to such a perspective. Their attitude is mirrored in Kyiv. The history and details of the Famine in particular reflect the most pressing problem: the deployment of historical events for the needs of the current state, and particularly for nation building. The Famine has been elevated to the most crucial event in the history of Ukraine. It is replete with all the prerequisites: mass deaths, a clearly delineated perpetrator of a different ethnic nationality, a mass cover-up, and even an invented name--the Holodomor--that can only remind people of the tragedy under a similar title--the Holocaust, which took place a decade later. Additionally, the death toll has been raised to 7-10 million, i.e., higher than the number of Jews who died in the Holocaust.

The politicization of history in this way also limits the paths of genuine historical enquiry. Although there are archival collections on the Ukrainian Famine, how can they be approached on the specific question of the famine's causes if we already have an answer in mind? The Ukrainian secret police, the SBU, has obligingly made available several thousand documents on the famine? Have they been tampered with? Who knows? One can only surmise that the secret police can be selective in their choice of sources, particularly when following government instructions to demonstrate the famine as a genocide. The Yushchenko administration is adhering to the well-known dictum that if a story is repeated often enough, it will eventually be accepted without demur. Russia, and particularly President Dmitry Medvedev, has already protested angrily this exploitation of historical events. Russia is in fact portrayed as 'the other' even though Ukraine does not request an official apology from the Russian Federation for the deaths of several million peasants at the behest of Stalin's regime.

One consequence of official intervention is a striking similarity between Soviet times and the present. The hero has become the villain, and the villain the hero. Black becomes white. The scholarly community, however--and I contrast this with the situation in the UK--is not separated from the Diaspora/official Ukraine perspectives. In Canada, the community funds many initiatives and programs through endowments. There is an endowment, for example, at the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies to publish all Hrushevsky's works in English; another to promote Ukrainian culture in Eastern Ukraine. The Ukrainian Research Institute at Harvard University has funded a new history of the Famine, based on community funds--the same institute that

commissioned the first such major work in English by Robert Conquest 26 years ago. The question is can scholars funded in such a way produce a work that is objective and may come to conclusions not in line with the beliefs of the funders? It did not happen with Conquest of course. And it is unlikely to happen with new books on the Famine in Ukraine.

What has been interesting for me has been to work, along with several of my graduate students, including one from Ukraine and another from Moldova, on the Central Archive of the Ukrainian Famine in Kyiv. I chose students who had no strong opinions on the topic, and who were also happy working in both Russian and colloquial Ukrainian, since the 6,000 pages contain many discussions at party, government, and rural levels. But my conclusions in written form may still be regarded as a form of political statement rather than a historical analysis. In Ukraine today, the narratives about the past have become more significant than the past itself. Historians are needed not only to explain the past, but to interpret it in line with official opinion. Paradoxically most people in Ukraine are not particularly happy about this, insofar as they are concerned at all. The pervasiveness of historical events as political issues prompted me to write a book--it was published in late 2007 with a paperback edition last year--entitled *Heroes and Villains: Constructing National History in Contemporary Ukraine*, which was published by Central European University Press. I would like to close with an explanation for the methodology of this book, which epitomizes the present dilemmas of being an historian of Ukraine but also an outsider who does not wish to take sides or adopt a strong stance.

It occurred to me that in researching Ukraine in the Second World War, it might be more interesting to examine the changes and revisions of views than the events themselves. That is not to say the latter cannot be undertaken, rather that in this instance it may not matter what the historical truth may be. The key issue for me in the recent book was only what people think and say happened, how they narrate events and memorialize them. How memory is passed down from one generation to another so that it becomes a form of post-memory. I do think, and it is perhaps cynical to admit it, that there are some aspects of the war that will never be clearly delineated--one example on which I am working currently is that of the Partisans in Belarus. Sometimes myths are so deeply-rooted that even if they were to be uncovered as flawed, no one would believe it. In Ukraine, school textbooks are probably the most influential of all sources in terms of educating a new generation about the past. They are commissioned by the government through the Education Ministry, and thus reflect the official positions. Likewise in Canada, I have found that those of Ukrainian ancestry derive their views from two main sources: the church--either Ukrainian Catholic or Ukrainian Orthodox--or the youth scouting camps, which are reminiscent of those of the 1930s but attended by the vast majority of young people of Ukrainian background who have not been assimilated into the Canadian mosaic.

Thus it can be both a rewarding and thankless task to research the history of Ukraine, particularly the contemporary period. Even my colleagues at the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies hold views that vary only in the smallest degree from those of the community at large. In only one case there is an exception: John-Paul Himka, whose investigations into the Holocaust in Ukraine have led him to the conclusion that his compatriots have never admitted responsibility for their complicity at various times during the war. Finally, I would like to add that I am an outsider in more than one respect, especially in terms of self-designation: I am an Anglo-Canadian with a wife born in China, who studies the former Soviet Union. Strong nationalistic views are alien to me but I have begun to understand how the quest to form an independent state and construct a new nation take priority in the minds of many, even in the 21st century, and even in a country--Canada--that is among the most multi-cultural on the planet.

David Marples