

Between East and West: Understanding Early Modern Ukraine

Oleksii Sokyрко

The face of modern Ukraine was shaped between the 16th to the 18th centuries. As the successor of the Slavic principality of Kyivan Rus, the various state entities that emerged on the Ukrainian lands, or Ukraine-Rus, during this early modern period, absorbed the heritage of Eastern Christian Byzantium while also existing within the cultural and political orbit of Central and Western Europe. During this period, the lands of the medieval Rus were incorporated into a succession of polities beginning with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania during the 14th century. These areas when subsequently absorbed into the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth from 1569 before becoming part of the Cossack Hetmanate after 1648.

The early modern period of Ukraine's history was defined by constant exchange and conflict with its convenient geographic location at the intersection of the agricultural and nomadic worlds made it an important transit hub for regional trade. Notable among these was its position along the salt road, better known as the key trade route between the Varangians and the Greeks, and the Silk Road spanning across Eurasia and connecting its eastern and western extremes. New trade arteries, which had emerged between the 11th and 16th centuries, also served to link Eastern and Central Europe to the Baltic States and the Black Sea region, further reinforcing Kyivan Rus and Ukraine's economic importance. However, its status as geopolitical borderland also meant that these economic benefits were accompanied by a series of seemingly never-ending wars.

At that point in history, the most powerful political actors in domestic and foreign trade were the Rus ruling princes, descended from the medieval Rurik and Gediminas dynasties; the boyars and *shlakhta*, who formed a caste of minor nobles and landowners; and Cossack officials (*starshyna*), as well as the local Orthodox clergy. This domination was itself derived from vast landed estates

that granted these elites access to vast economic power, reinforced by political influence. The second most influential category included colonies of foreign merchants, from Greeks and Armenians to Turks and Jews, whose business and social status were also dependent on maintaining stable relations with those in power. Nevertheless, the failure of the Ukrainian-Rus elites to reach a consensus for the sake of independence in the 14th and 15th centuries had precipitated the partition of the former principality's territories and their incorporation into Poland, Lithuania and Hungary.

However, those among the old Rus elite who had seen their lands incorporated into Lithuania had retained a significant portion of their social and property rights. Although this did not create any impetus for political autonomy, the idea of establishing a Grand Duchy of Rus did emerge within the political discourses of the mid-15th century. Through various strategic marriages, Rus aristocrats not only became the relatives of Polish Kings and Lithuanian Grand Dukes, but also came to occupy important state positions as well as appearing as proponents of new models of governance based on the idea of a socio-political contract between monarchs and political elites that challenged the earlier systems of feudal power. This was best exemplified in the 1569 Union of Lublin, which united the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Kingdom of Poland into a single state: the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. At the time, this new polity included most of the lands that had previously formed Kyivan Rus.

In the first half of the 17th century, on the Rus territories which the frontier between the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the "Wild Fields" (*Dyke Pole*, Lat. *Loca Deserta*), forming the Pontic steppe which is now located in the territory of present-day eastern and southern Ukraine and southern Russia, north of the Black and Azov seas, two new social strata were established: the Ukrainian *shlachhta* and the Zaporizhian Cossacks. Within this comparatively brief timeframe, the Cossacks turned from serving as mercenaries in the Polish army into an organized elite capable of taking power within the vast territories on either side of the Dnieper River. In 1648 a major uprising broke out across the region, which quickly escalated into outright political revolution. What subsequently came to be known as the Cossack Revolution or Khmelnytsky Uprising, having been led by the Cossack Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky (1596–1657), resulted in the creation of a newly autonomous polity that included some 30 per cent of the Commonwealth's territory with the Cossacks successfully wresting political power from the old Rus aristocracy. This new self-governing entity came to be known as the Zaporizhian Host, or Cossack Hetmanate; all state institutions were directly modelled on the Cossack mili-

tary with its commander (*hetman*) serving as head of state. Despite these political reforms, however, the Hetmanate retained much of previous cultural and social traditions that had developed under the direct rule of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

Having successfully acquired autonomy, the Hetmanate immediately launched a war for full sovereign independence, concluding alliances with the Crimean Khanate, the Ottoman Empire, the Kingdom of Sweden, and various other Eastern European states. These wars and alliances radically changed the international balance in the region. Of these, the most decisive was the union with the Tsardom of Muscovy, known interchangeably as Russia since the accession of Tsar Ivan IV in 1547, established under the Treaty of Pereiaslav of 1654. Although the then Tsar Alexis represented the weakest link in a series of potential allies-cum-neighbours, he extended recognition to the Cossack Hetmanate only under pressure from Khmelnytsky who had presented him with the unappealing alternative of the Host becoming an Ottoman protectorate. The Cossack elite was therefore able to establish relations with Moscow on a negotiated contractual basis, placing them within a legal framework previous unknown to the Muscovite tradition. Thus, the Treaty of Pereiaslav became the biggest obstacle to the Tsardom's assimilation efforts as it compelled the Russians to continually refer back to its original clauses in order to give their actions an air of legitimacy. Moreover, even after the fall of the Hetmanate, the Ukrainian Cossack elite still thought in terms of contracts as the basis of a Ukraine-Russian union, requiring the tsar to maintain his legal commitments. Consequentially, the latter's nominal supremacy was never considered permanent or without an alternative.

The new Ukrainian elite declared the Cossack Hetmanate as a successor to Kyivan Rus, delineating the borders of the restored state based on those territories populated by ethnic Ukrainians. The concept of turning the Hetmanate into a Grand Principality of Rus, an idea long-cherished by the territory's leaders since the time of Hetman Ivan Vyhovsky (?-1664), was, above all, a reflection of ongoing attempts at reconciling the majority with the that of the nobility as the region's traditional elite. Such a "momentous blend" not only had to take place between the ruling echelons of Ukraine and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, but also, and even more so, within wider Ukrainian society itself, a situation that saw growing unrest and a series of local Cossack revolts. Despite official attempts at reconciliation, best illustrated by the 1658 Treaty of Hadiach, signed between the Cossack and Polish-Lithuanian diplomats, how-

ever these efforts ultimately proved unsuccessfully in restoring socio-political cohesion.

The failure of Hadiach also served in triggering the gradual erosion of Ukrainian statehood, which later provided grounds for a pessimistic retrospective evaluation of the ability of the then Ukrainian elite to adequately represent society. Indeed, the inability of the Cossack *starshyna* to find any workable solutions resulted in political division and fragmentation along the Dnieper River, culminating in the loss of Right-bank Ukraine and the Hetmanate's gradual curtailing of the Hetmanate's sovereignty in the Left-bank by the Russian Tsardom that continued for over a century. However, successive hetmans never abandoned the notion of its statehood at the intellectual level, being in no doubt that the gathering of all ethnic Ukrainian lands within a single state had to remain a key priority. However, while those such as Petro Doroshenko (1627–1698) and Ivan Mazepa (1639–1709) approached this issue at the level of strategic state policy, those less adept were often undermined their own position through tactical retreats, further narrowing the window of opportunity through which full Ukrainian statehood might have been achieved during the early modern period.

Despite resistance to unification, the Cossack *starshyna* was invariably committed to ideas that they represented a distinct political and social elite for whom the establishment of the Cossack Hetmanate as a sovereign entity would remain a goal from the of Mazepa, through the mid-18th century and even after its political dissolution. Indeed, the concept of the Zaporizhian Host as a polity with historical roots that went deeper than simply the era of Kyivan Rus, being linked to Russia only though the figure tsar, remained at the heart of this elite's guiding convictions. Thus, under Hetman Kyrilo Rozumovsky (1728–1803), the *starshyna* were able to articulate a programme of reform designed to restore not only the internal self-sufficiency of the Hetmanate but also its independent standing in the international arena.

The Ukrainian national myth that had begun to emerge in the 18th century was well-tuned to the challenges of the early modern period. It legitimized the establishment of the Cossack Hetmanate in line with the requirements of the times, while at the same time rejecting Muscovy's territorial claims to the Ukrainian lands. Over time, Ukrainians were able to enlist the help of Orthodox intellectuals, who began emphasizing the historical links between the Cossack Hetmanate and earlier traditions of political independence. Under Mazepa, new ideological conceptions were constructed to highlight the Zaporizhian Host's perceived historic mission as a successor of Kyivan Rus.

Despite Russia's expanding political and cultural influence, the intellectual heritage of the Ukrainian Cossack elite was not lost: beginning in the 19th century, some among their descendants were once again seeking to build a new Ukraine. Most importantly, the historical and legal work produced by this earlier movement would serve as a blueprint for the intellectual birth of modern Ukrainian national identity. This closely mirrored what had happened in earlier centuries when a portion of the nobility had been integrated into Cossacks society; these new incomers proved vital in enriching the territory's intellectual culture and providing the latent precedent for the restoration of the Ukrainian state. In this way, a sense of continuity was preserved among the remnants of the Ukrainian elite, preventing its complete absorption into those of the wider Russian Empire. Responding to the new challenges of the time, those who had established early-modern Ukrainian statehood were also able to lay the ideological foundations necessary for the creation of a fully independent state. Such foundation proved to be strong enough to both outlive the Cossack Hetmanate and fuel the rise of the modern Ukrainian national idea during the 19th century.

The *Lithuanian Statutes* were especially significant within the European legal and political culture of the Ukrainian elite, representing the first official codes that regulated the basic principles of government as well as civil, criminal, and property law. The Statutes also synthesized the legal traditions of the various regions that had comprise the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania – specifically the Belarusian, Lithuanian, and Ukrainian lands – and based on customary law and “Rus Truth” (*Pravda Rus’kaia*). Following in the Renaissance fashion that centred on the structures of Roman law, the codes also incorporated the norms of the Polish, Czech, and German traditions. Indeed, from a contemporary perspective these statutory norms would appear quite modern for the time with the inclusion of elements such as equality before the law, the full right to a fair trial, and the right to representation for different minorities and ethnic communities. The depth with which the Statutes had influenced legal norms guaranteed their persistence within the territory's judicial framework and continued use within the Ukrainian lands that formed part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth after 1569. Under the Hetmanate, the norms of the Statutes also subsequently became the basis of the first “Cossack Code”, delineating the “Rights under which the people of Little Russia are judged” (1743). Even in the imperial era of Ukrainian history, Lithuanian-Rus law remained in force, being revived either in the form of the

new Russian imperial rights, that existed between 1807 and 1835, or in the practices of the Kyiv Magdeburg, which was only abolished in 1834.

Ukraine's social institutes also had much more in common with those of Central and Western Europe, particularly the Magdeburg Rights (Lat. *Jus Municipale Magdeburgense*) and craftsmen unions. Municipal self-governance was introduced at the same time as its cities revived from the Tatar-Mongol invasion of the 13th century, leading to a subsequent increase in their economic role. Self-governance itself traditionally overseen by magistrates: community governments comprised of two elected collegiums. Moreover, most of these municipal governments, including local mayors, were elected, effectively creating virtual city-states with their own governance, laws, taxes, police, even systems of measurement.

The village community was another element of what was still largely an agrarian-based economic and social system, guaranteeing that skilled peasants – in partial or total serfdom – continued to remain in service to their landlords or the state. American historian Steven Hawk even describes these communities as having primarily been a mechanism of mutual social control within rural Russian society. Such systems were based on the leveling principle and developed a specific labor ethic whereby those outside the privileged class of elders and estate managers were expected to remain obedient and working as much as was necessary to meet their economic needs. Consequently, Russian peasants were generally no poorer or richer than their counterparts further west. However, their attitude to work was entirely different, dominated by stifled initiative, fear of punishment, envy, and hostility towards their neighbours.

The Cossack Hetmanate's foreign trade that generated much of the revenues needed to maintain the central budget went in two major directions: west, by way of the Commonwealth and Habsburg Monarchy, and south-east where the Ottoman Empire and Crimea were the major trading partners. The westward trade corridor, through which cattle, grain, *horilka*, and other agricultural products were shipped to other European countries dated back to the 16th century and connected Ukrainian merchants from Poltava and Starodub with Gdansk, Breslau, Stettin, Marburg, Riga and other early modern trade centres. Nevertheless, the success and productivity of this vital economic artery was ultimately dependent on protection of the state government. The south-eastern route was no less lucrative with trade between Cossack Ukraine and Crimea being worth half a million ducats by the end of the 18th century, an enormous sum at that time. However, merchants still required secure routes

for moving the luxury goods they acquired, leading most to favour a more indirect journey through Right-bank Ukraine, under the rule of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, that allowed them to avoid attacks by bands of armed Tatars and the Zaporizhian Cossacks, as well as the threat of epidemic diseases. It was from there that wines, sugar, cereals, dried and smoked food, Turkish delight, silk, weapons, and Ottoman-crafted jewellery flowed into the Hetmanate and a number of provinces in southern Russia, while the steppe routes were mostly used for cattle, salt, and fish. This segment of commerce was entirely controlled by the Ottoman Turk, the Cossacks and *chumaky*, Ukrainian merchants who traded salt extracted on the Crimean Black Sea coast and who were better adapted to the extreme conditions of life on the steppe.

Just as in other European countries, commercial life in Ukraine was centred around two key spheres, with the main one being agriculture followed by urban craftsmanship and trade. These served as the basis for property rights and economic self-organization expressed through the territory's network of craft workshops and commerce. Having remained open and relatively unpopulated until the 18th century, Ukraine's steppe regions offered plenty of opportunities for commercial colonization. This led to the development of a special social type of entrepreneurial landowner who constantly competed with nature and nomads while relying only on their own resources. This made it somewhat comparable to Europe's other "buffer zones" that boasted similar agricultural-based economies such as the Balkans or the Pyrenees during the period of Muslim rule over the medieval Iberian Peninsula.

Prior to the start of the 18th century, the Russian economic model had had little contact with external influences. This started to change, however, with the launch of Tsar Peter I's, more commonly known as Peter the Great's, Westernisation reforms that sought to turn the Romanov Empire into a major European power and player on the international stage. It's historical predecessor the Grand Duchy of Muscovy, had also sought to introduce Western innovations and organization practices as means of releasing its already vast territory's economic potential, while retaining traditional methods mostly based on domination by the state, centralised administration, distribution of assets, and the marginalization of private initiatives. For Ukraine, the lands of which were progressively drawn into the Russian orbit throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, this entailed the crushing and transformation of the economic and social structures established in the late Middle Ages and their reconstruction along completely different principles. The Ukrainian state and its institutions,

whether under Polish-Lithuanian rule or during the Hetmanate, had never had total influence and control over the economy, allowing it to develop freely in response to external markets and domestic demand.

The situation changed when Russia began to pursue its political and economic interests in the early 18th century. Through its victory over the rival Swedish Empire in the Great Northern War (1700–1721), the Russians were granted a hand in being able to redistribute political influence in Central-Eastern Europe while perpetuating the spread of their own preferred economic model and business practices. By 1714, St. Petersburg had monopolized trade in most of the region's strategic goods including Ukrainian potassium, flax, goat fat, and timber for shipbuilding. Moreover, Ukrainian merchants were now ordered to direct their goods to northern ports in Riga and Arkhangelsk instead of the common routes to Krakow, Gdansk, and Breslau.

Surprisingly, even in times of conflict the southern trade routes continued to yield high profits; during the 18th century there were as many as four major wars between the Russian and Ottoman empires. During this period, St. Petersburg had eagerly commissioned Ukrainian merchants to aid in provisioning the Imperial Russian Army owing to the comparative cheapness of their goods and detailed knowledge of the southern steppes and major river crossings. The situation changed dramatically after the Sixth Russo-Turkish War (1768–1774), which severely disrupted trade with Crimea while creating new prospects for transporting goods via the Black Sea ports and bases of which Kherson was initially the largest.

However, Ukrainian merchants once again found themselves out of favour as the Russian Empire sought to first colonize its newly annexed western territories before undertaking economic development measures. Successive governors-general, alongside high-ranking court figures, Russian merchants, and foreign investors, were instead charged with organizing the wholesale trade of agricultural products intended for export. Left without government support, Ukrainian merchants were consequently forced to switch to domestic wholesale and retail trade. Historians have observed that in the second half of the 18th century, trade fairs boomed but were not accompanied by an increase in the number of merchants, implying that both the urban and rural populace, including the Cossacks, were now involved in trade. This was also facilitated by the Cossack *starshyna* and monasteries, which were very active in the domestic market and had enjoyed significant privileges granted under the hetmans' rule. However, from the 1780s, the Russian government began to prohibit both from

engaging in trade in order to protect the economic interests of the expanding cities.

These measures were followed by the increasing regulation of the legal status of the territory's merchant and entrepreneurial class with any economic activity being exclusively limited to those registered as Russian subjects. The problem was only exacerbated by the Ukrainian market being re-oriented towards the export of raw materials while stifling domestic industries through the import of finished Russian products. This process also involved the Russification of the cities, where Russian-speakers emerged as the most economically powerful group. The events of the late 18th century thus represented the end of the early modern period of Ukrainian history, in which the territory had existed as part of both the Western and Eastern cultural traditions. The 19th century would mark the beginning of a new phase in the Ukrainian history – the Imperial Period.

Selected Bibliography

- Frost, Robert. *The Oxford History of Poland-Lithuania. Volume 1: The Making of the Polish-Lithuanian Union, 1385–1569* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
- Historical Dictionary of Ukraine* ed. Zenon Kohut, Bohdan Y. Nebesio and Myroslav Yurkevich (London: Lanham, 2005).
- Isaievych, Iaroslav. *Voluntary Brotherhood: Confraternities of Laymen in Early Modern Ukraine* (Edmonton and Toronto: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 2006).
- Kohut, Zenon. *Making Ukraine. Studies on Political Culture, Historical Narrative, and Identity* (Edmonton and Toronto: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 2011).
- Kohut, Zenon. *Russian Centralism and Ukrainian Autonomy. Imperial Absorption of the Hetmanate, 1760s–1830s* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).
- Plokhyy, Serhii. *The Origins of the Slavic Nations: Premodern Identities in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
- Plokhyy, Serhii. *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (New York: Basic Books, 2015).
- Rudnytsky, Ivan L. and Himka John-Paul (eds.) *Rethinking Ukrainian History* (Edmonton: The Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, The University of Alberta, 1981).

Ševčenko, Ihor. *Ukraine between East and West: Essays on Cultural History to the Early Eighteenth Century*, second, revised edition (Toronto: University of Alberta Press, 2022).