

Anna Reid. *Borderland. A Journey Through the History of Ukraine*. Revised and Updated Edition.

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History tends to be rewritten – every new historic epoch in any society prompts it to cast a fresh glance on its past and examine in a new light the role of ideas, events and personalities in its history and their significance for its current development. The history of Ukraine is a good example of such a revision: in the Soviet Union, as a student, I learned one version of the history of the country; now independent Ukraine has created a completely different interpretation of its past. Then, for instance, Lenin, like many other political personalities of communist regime, was treated as a revered founding father of the country; now all his statues have been knocked down in Ukraine, together with all other communist symbols, which have been banned by the formal decommunization process started in April 2015.

The *Borderland. A Journey Through the History of Ukraine* by Anna Reid presents yet another interpretation of the Ukrainian history, that of the informed outsider, well-read in historical documents and first-hand familiar with the country's immediate past and current situation. In mid-1990s, Reid was the Kiev correspondent for the *Economist* and the *Daily Telegraph*, when she wrote the first part of the book under the review as the country ventured on independence. The second part, completed in early 2015, covers the next stage of events, such as Orange Revolution, the Maidan, the on-going financial and economic crisis and the beginning of the proxy war with Russia. Hailed by the *Financial Times* as “a beautifully written evocation of Ukraine's brutal past and its shaky efforts to construct a better future,” the book offers an original, truly engaging tour through the most important events of Ukraine's past and a clear-headed insight on how these events define the identity of the country set right on the border between two different civilizations, Europe and Russia.

*Borderland* is a literal translation of the country's name *Ukraina*, and due to its indeterminate position reflected in its name, Ukraine had never been an independent state until 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed. In the fourteen chapters of the book Reid draws a comprehensive picture of what it means to be a borderland: first, to inherit a legacy of violence, and, second, to develop a questionable sense of national identity, having very few, short and brutal periods of self-rule and never being seen as a separate country. For centuries, Reid emphasizes, Ukraine for Russians has been part of Russia, to Poles, part of Poland, and since some its neighbors still “refuse to acknowledge the existence of such a thing as ‘Ukrainian history’ in the first place it is no wonder that Ukrainians are still puzzling out just who they are” (p. 2).

But the country has not always been like that. Once, as Reid shows in the first chapter “The New Jerusalem: Kiev,” the Kiev of a thousand years ago was the capital of eastern Slavs' first

great civilization, Kievan Rus. From there, the author claims, Ukraine's search for identity has started, reflected in the ongoing debate whether this civilization passed eastward, to Moscow and the Russians, or stayed put, in Ukraine. According to Reid, and many would agree with this, the most significant event of that time, which determined not only the future historic developments in Ukraine but the whole setup of the modern world is the introduction by Prince Volodymyr, upon some deliberation, of Orthodox Christianity in 988:

By choosing Christianity rather than Islam, Volodymyr cast Rus's ambitions for ever in Europe rather than Asia, and by taking Christianity from Byzantium rather than Rome he bound the future Russians, Ukrainians and Belarussians together in Orthodoxy, fatally dividing them from their Catholic neighbors the Poles. (p. 9)

Nevertheless, despite different religions, some centuries later the southern part of former Kievan Rus (future Ukraine and Belarus) formed through an arranged marriage an alliance with a shared monarchy with Poland, "The Most Serene Commonwealth of the Two Nations." These three-some centuries of being a part of Poland have set up, as put by Reid, "Ukraine's great debate": whether Ukrainians are Central Europeans, like the Poles, or a species of Russian. Poles used to call western Ukraine "Little Poland," Russians termed Ukraine "Little Russia," and Kiev became the place where two legacies meet.

In the following chapters of Part One, Reid takes the reader through the next important stages of Ukraine's history up till 1997, through "a thousand years of one of the bloodiest histories in the world" (p. 233). Among the remarkable features of this narrative is the author's alternative interpretation of certain events or new light cast on certain personalities, presented quite differently in the well-known to many of my generation Soviet-era canon. For instance, Bohdan Khmelnytsky has always been considered as one of the most influential figures of Ukrainian history for cementing the union with Russia, but Reid shows that he was also among the most mysterious personalities in the history of Ukraine. As her story goes, for the first fifty years of his life Khmelnytsky pursued a perfectly conventional career of a noble Ukrainian in the Polish Commonwealth. Then this respectable middle-aged man suddenly started a rebellion that "would last for eight years, lay waste Ukraine, kill hundreds of thousands of people and almost destroy the Commonwealth of which he had hitherto been a loyal and successful member" (p. 34). For Ukrainians he is the leader of the first Ukrainian war of independence; Reid, however, suspects it was a personal grudge against a Polish neighbor, who raided his estate, killed his son and kidnapped his fiancée, that provoked Khmelnytsky to rebel against Poland rather than aspiration for Ukraine's independence. Another mystery is the way the insurgence ended, as, according to Reid, when beaten and betrayed Khmelnytsky was looking for an ally he found it, "fatefully" and "fatally" for the whole of Eastern Europe (the author's opinion), in Russia. The transfer of Ukraine's loyalties from Cracow to Moscow sealed handing over of the country to Russia, the event commemorated later by the tsars with the erection of the statue of Khmelnytsky, where he is astride a rearing charger, pointing his mace towards Moscow as a guiding solvency. Now, with Putin's raging nationalism and aggression against Ukraine, which has definitely put an end, at least for the time being, to the "Great Slav

Brotherhood,” I worry if Khmelnytsky’s statue, a precious memorial of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, would remain intact for long. What can save it, however, is the fact that, according to the monument’s history registered in other sources, the mace actually does not point to Moscow, as Reid and many others think – it was supposed to threaten Poland, but in that position the hero’s horse would stick its tail impolitely toward the ancient Michailov’s Cathedral. So the statue was turned in the direction from which Khmelnytsky’s once triumphant army entered Kiev.

The tragic history of Ukraine continues in the next chapters, which show how little the “Great Slav Brotherhood” meant to the Russian empire-building rulers, with Catherine the Great ordering the Russification of Ukraine and complete eradication of Cossacks and their legacy; with Stalin’s extermination of any dissent, which made “Ukrainians the most prominent nationality in the 1950’s Gulag” (p. 138); with Putin’s breach of international law and 1994 “Tripartite Agreement,” under which Russia promised to respect Ukraine’s borders in exchange for its Soviet-inherited nuclear warheads.

A particularly distressing chapter in this already heartrending narration is the one on the Great Hunger (Holodomor, literally ‘Death of Hunger’), the worst of Stalin’s terrors, which in 1932–3 took away the lives of 7 million, 5 million in Ukraine alone. A remarkable fact is that Reid, in her 1997 edition, long before the issue of genocide against Ukrainian people has become a point of heated political dispute between Ukraine and Russia, adamantly stood up for Ukraine. The author portrays a tremendous scope of this tragedy of the Ukrainian countryside, “home to the Soviet Union’s richest and most self-reliable peasantry,” which perished of a deliberate famine due to Stalin’s atrocious policy of mandatory collectivization and food requisitions. While the existing Russian government does not recognize the Ukrainian Famine, or Holodomor, as genocide and states that it is insulting and incorrect for the Ukrainians to claim that they were directly targeted, Reid wholeheartedly supports this accusation, a decade before the issue was officially brought to the attention of the UN and rejected. Unfortunately, no sufficient documentation is left (or made available) to support the claim that Holodomor was the deliberate policy to eradicate the rise of Ukrainian nationalism, which falls under the legal definition of genocide. The documentary corroboration of Reid’s manuscript is also based mainly on witnesses’ accounts, but even those are sufficient for the author to uphold the Ukrainian position and to lash out on the western apologists (Bernard Shaw, André Gide and a Pulitzer-prize winner Walter Duranty among them), who having been lavishly wined, dined and fooled by the government-chaperoned tours of the country, cynically denied or played down the horrendous tragedy of the people devastated by famine.

Reid is equally frank and outspoken in her criticism of modern political personalities, and the way she describes them is quite impressive. Thus, Yeltzin’s friendly and sensible (despite his “booziness”) foreign policy was radically changed with the coming to power of “a short, nondescript ex-KGB man from St Petersburg.” Also, there is “flirtatious” Timoshenko, who being newly released from prison demonstrated her “ultimately unconvincing” combination of “martyr’s halo and Louboutin heels”; a regional governor of Dnipropetrovsk, “a notoriously unscrupulous corporate raider”; former Presidents of Ukraine “sly-fox” Kravchuk and “reptilian” Kuchma, and many others, to say nothing of the notorious jailbird Yanukovich (readers should read this part for

themselves!).

On a more cheerful note, the book offers a lot of curious cultural information and unknown, at least to me, facts about famous personalities of the past and nowadays. For instance, I did not know that Joseph Conrad was born in Ukraine and that the collective farm headquarters in his native village keeps his photos on its walls; or that Count Leopold von Sacher-Masoch is considered by some Ukrainians as “one of the greatest Ukrainian writers” as he was born in Lviv and there is a monument there erected in his honor.

As emotional and involved as Reid sometimes sounds in her narration, it is her enthusiasm that makes the book a page-turner. But it is also a story well researched and thoroughly supported by various documents as each chapter is supplied with ample references and bibliographical notes. I am not a historian and cannot verify all the facts presented in the book, but I feel safe to endorse most of the information and interpretations that Reid provides. There are very few that I tend to disagree with. For instance, Reid states that “visitors to Kiev usually hate the place,” which, to the best of my knowledge, is not true as I have met many foreigners who fall in love at first sight with this beautiful ancient city. Also Ukrainian famous national delicacy, *salo*, is not “the raw” pig-fat, as Reid describes it, but is salted or sometimes smoked. Some author’s imagery is vivid and makes the book an engaging narration, as I have mentioned above, but sometimes it is inappropriately exaggerated, like “sepulchral” Kiev of the 1990s, or modern generation of Kievans being “bi- or tri-lingual.” These are just miniscule remarks, which do not in any way undermine the significance and value of Reid’s book.

A very important component of her publication is the analysis of the situation she leaves the country in and her prediction of its future in both editions of the book, in 1997 and in 2015. In her introduction to the current edition, Reid writes that some predictions she made when the first part was published turned out to be “quite prescient, others mistaken” (p. xvii). At this point, it is the forecast she makes in the final Chapter Fourteen “What’s Next?” of the second part that is the most significant. It starts with a phrase that captures a future possibility, which we all realize and fear but which still reads shockingly blunt in print: “What happens next depends most of all on Putin” (p. 290), the most unpredictable factor of all. Of all possible scenarios of the future, a terrifying, the worst possible one is when Putin “makes a grab for the whole of Russian-speaking south and east, perhaps even launches his army at Kiev” (p. 292). But the author also offers a much more optimistic scenario, when, according to Reid, “the West comes up with the money to tide Ukraine over its immediate financial crisis, and the new government, its mind concentrated by the Russian threat, finally makes the kind of bread-and-butter changes... - that have already transformed economies and societies elsewhere in post-Soviet Europe” (p. 296).

At this moment, the likelihood of both outcomes seems to be equal, however, the reader should not miss one observation that the author makes at the end of the second part of the book: “The biggest change since I lived in Ukraine is that it now feels like real country. ... Ukraine is no longer a borderland. It is its own place, and here to stay” (p. 299). This is a momentous transformation that Reid has noticed and when paired with unprecedented patriotism flamed up by Russian aggression, it gives hope that “a thousand years of one of the bloodiest histories in the world” (p.

300) is approaching its end and “that with help Ukraine actually has a chance of emerging stronger from these disasters, and finally turning itself into a mainstream European country” (p. xvii).

Anna Reid’s fluent, enthusiastic and comprehensive synthesis of eye-witnesses’ accounts, documents and her own observations develops into a gripping narrative, which weaves together past and present. It is still to be seen whether or not “a wise and generous government in Kiev” would give her a medal, as was once suggested by *The Times*, but one thing is certain: *Borderland. A Journey Through the History of Ukraine* is a highly recommended, if not required, reading for anyone interested in this unique, beautiful and volatile country.