



## Borderland

BY BENT JENSEN

**Ukraine literally means borderland, a peripheral or remote area. Remote from Moscow that is. But originally, the area that is now called Ukraine played a central role in the formation of the first Russian state in the 9th century - the Rus', or Kievan Rus' as it is also known. This was the area occupied by the East Slavs, and where Kyiv was the capital as well as the political and ecclesiastical hub, with the Saint-Sofia Cathedral as the main sanctuary of the Russian Orthodox Church. It was here, by the river Dnieper – the important link between the Baltic and the Black Sea, and which the Vikings named the Austrveg (Road to the East) – that the Scandinavian Viking princes of the Rurik-Dynasty ruled in the beginning. They called the land Gardariki.**

**In the 13th century,** this first Russian state was overrun by Mongol hordes, which burned down Kyiv in the year 1240. As a result, the Russian state was displaced to the North, and re-established itself in what has since been

regarded as Central Russia. Here, Moscow became the new political and spiritual centre, and in the 15th century the ruling grand prince took the title of Tsar (from Latin: Caesar) to show the world that this Moscow-state was the moral inheritor to the Roman Empire. Russian rulers and their ideologists spoke of Russia as 'The Third Rome' – the first acknowledged as the Roman Empire with Rome as the capital, and the second being the eastern half of the Roman Empire centred around Byzantium. With time, language and culture in the original Rus', by then called Ukraine, developed into what could be regarded as a distinct Ukrainian language and culture. But for the major part of history, this area has belonged to other states – Poland, Lithuania (from the 14th – 16th century) and since the 17th century - to Russia. Naturally, this has left its mark on Ukrainian culture for good or bad. So, it is the Polish-Lithuanian influence which has caused the populations in the Western parts of Ukraine to be either Catholic or Uniat, the latter meaning that they recognise the Pope in Rome, but conduct their religious services in accordance with Orthodox rites. The majority

of Ukrainians, however, are Orthodox.

**In the course** of history, many Ukrainians have served with the Russian Tsars, and belonged to what later became the Soviet elites within politics, the military, business, art and culture. Among them are Stalin's right hand in the 1930s, Lazar' Kaganovitj; and Andrei Gromyko, foreign minister in a lifetime and known in the West as 'Mr. Njet'; Nikolai Podgorny, chairman of 'The Supreme Soviet of the USSR'; Semjon Timoshenko, marshal of the Soviet Army and in charge of the attack on Poland in 1939; and Viktor Grushenko, chief of KGB's 'First Directorate', who was so fond of the USSR that he kept a Soviet flag on his desk even after the union had been dissolved. Contrary to popular belief, however, Nikita Khrushchev, who became the Soviet number one after Stalin's death and remained in charge until 1964, was not Ukrainian, although he enjoyed a spell as head of Ukraine's Communist Party under Stalin's reign.

Authors such as Nikolai Gogol' (Dead Souls) and Mikhail Bulgakov (The Master and Margarita)

grew up in Ukraine, but had Russian as their mother tongue and wrote their immortal works in Russian – just as Norwegian-born authors Wessel and Holberg composed their poems, comedies and other works in Danish. Other great poets and artists from Ukraine include Anna Akhmatova, Isaak Babel, painters Dmitry Levitsky and Ilya Repin, philosopher Nikolay Berdyayev and movie director Aleksandr Dovzhenko.

**The Ukrainian** language was gradually suppressed, and became the common language of peasants and rural workers. So, the Russian Empire was characterised by a rough policy of Russification in the 19th century. In the 1920s, Soviet Ukraine experienced a renaissance of Ukrainian culture and language, until Stalin choked it during the 1930s along with so many other things. To have a voice in the Russian and later Soviet Empire, meant having a Russian voice. With time, many Ukrainians settled in Russia, just like many Russians made their home in Ukraine. Intermarriage was – and is – immensely common.

**Ukraine suffered** terribly under the brutal collectivisation forced upon the country by Stalin during the 1920s and 1930s, and which claimed millions of Ukrainian victims. But so did Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and other Soviet republics. This forced collectivisation, which constituted genocide on peasants regardless of nationality, claimed the lives of a total of six to eight million people in the Soviet Union between 1929 and 1933. But the barbarian policy was not directed at Ukraine in particular, although this is a widely held view among Ukrainians today. It was concentrated on those areas of the Soviet Union which produced grain. And because Ukraine was the top producer, the country was hit particularly hard by the Bolshevik campaign against peasants.

**Apart** from having been the breadbasket of the Russian and later Soviet Empire, Ukraine has also had a huge stake in their industrialisation. The rich coal beds in the Don-area formed the basis of the construction of steel plants around the city of Juzovka, later re-named Stalino, and now Donetsk. A comprehensive metal

industry was founded in the 1930s.

**As a Soviet** Republic, Ukraine constituted the Western borderland. After Stalin and Hitler had divided Poland between them, Ukraine became a neighbour to the Third Reich and so – along with Belarus – were dealt the first blows when the Nazi war machine rolled eastwards on its annihilation campaign in June 1941. Ukraine suffered massive losses during the German attack and the subsequent German occupation in 1941-1944. As they did Russians, Belarusians, Poles and other Slavic peoples, the German master race viewed Ukrainians as slaves. They were to be colonised, enslaved, driven out or destroyed. Many Ukrainians originally embraced their German attackers as liberators, but soon realised what awaited them under Nazi-German hegemony.

**In Berlin,** plans were drawn up to construct a freeway reaching from the German capital – through annihilated Poland and Ukraine – and down to the Crimean peninsula. Here, the Nazi-German upper class could spend their holidays by the Black Sea while being served by inferior races. But although this dream never materialised, slavery within Germany's borders was realised to a vast extent. Young Ukrainians – often no more than children – were rounded up and sent to Germany as a cost-effective replacement for the many Germans who fought at the front, and, as a consequence, could not work the fields and factories. Ukrainians constituted the second-largest share of Soviet's armed forces.

**On the whole,** Ukraine was second only to Russia in terms of importance within the Soviet Union. Ukrainians constituted the majority in the leading circles of the Communist Party, the Soviet military, the prestigious scientific institutions etc. But also common Ukrainians settled in large numbers in Russia, the Baltic countries and in other areas of the Soviet Republic, where the free flow of workers had become a realisation. At the

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