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The Victory of Ukraine

by [Anne Applebaum](#)

[The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine](#)

by Serhii Plokhy
Basic Books, 395 pp., \$29.99

[“Tell Them We Are Starving”: The 1933 Soviet Diaries of Gareth Jones](#)

edited by Lubomyr Y. Luciuk, with an introduction by Ray Gamache
Kingston, Ontario: Kashtan Press, 275 pp., \$45.00

[Gareth Jones: Eyewitness to the Holodomor](#)

by Ray Gamache
Cardiff: Welsh Academic Press, 241 pp., \$49.99 (paper) (distributed in the US by International Specialized Book Services)



Roman Pilipey/Demotix/Corbis

Riot police retreating after trying to push back protesters near the Cabinet of Ministers building during the Maidan protests in Kiev, December 2013

In later years, there would be bigger demonstrations, more eloquent speakers, and more professional slogans. But the march that took place in Kiev on a Sunday morning in the spring of 1917 was extraordinary because it was the first of its kind in that city. The Russian Empire had banned Ukrainian books, newspapers, theaters, and even the use of the Ukrainian language in schools. The public display of national symbols had been risky and dangerous. But in the wake of the February Revolution in Petrograd, anything seemed possible.

There were flags, yellow and blue for Ukraine as well as red for the Communist cause. The crowd, composed of children, soldiers, factory workers, marching bands, and officials, carried banners—“Independent Ukraine with its own leader!” or “A free Ukraine in a free Russia!” Some carried portraits of the national poet Taras Shevchenko. One after another, speakers called for the crowd to support the newly established Central Rada—the name means “central council”—that had formed a few days earlier and now claimed authority to rule Ukraine.

Finally, the man who had just been elected chairman of the Rada stepped up to the podium. Mykhailo Hrushevsky, bearded and bespectacled, was one of the intellectuals who had first dared to put Ukraine at the center of its own history. The author of the ten-volume *History of Ukraine-Rus*, as well as many other books, Hrushevsky had spent much of his life in Galicia, the Polish- and Ukrainian-speaking region ruled by the Habsburg Empire, in order to escape persecution at the hands of the tsarist police. Now, in the wake of the revolution, he had returned to Kiev in triumph. The crowd welcomed him with vigorous cheers: *Slava batkovi Hrushevskomu!*—Glory to Father Hrushevsky! He responded in kind: “Let us all swear at this great moment as one man to take up the great cause unanimously, with one accord, and not to rest or cease our labour until we build that free Ukraine.” The crowd shouted back, just as crowds would shout back at Kiev demonstrations ninety years later: “We swear!”¹

To the modern reader, it may seem odd for a historian to lead a national movement. But in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the writing of Ukrainian history was a revolutionary activity. Even to espouse the idea that Ukraine, which had functioned as a Russian colony since the eighteenth century, had a history separate from that of the Russian Empire was provocative, antiestablishment, and even dangerous. For those who dared voice such thoughts, it was a short step to political activism. Hrushevsky’s books in particular stressed the role of the “people” in the political history of Ukraine, and the centrality of their struggle against various forms of tyranny. It was only logical that he should want to inspire the same “people” to action, both in words and deeds. In the broader European setting, this was not unusual either. Historians, as well as poets and artists, had played important parts in the consolidation and cultivation of Italian, German, and Polish national identities too.

Today, of course, things are different. In contemporary Europe and the United States, with our professionalized and separate political and academic castes (leaving aside a few exceptions in 1989), it is hard to imagine historians moving so easily into politics. Or rather it is hard to imagine everywhere except in Ukraine.

For the Ukrainian state, heralded with so much enthusiasm in 1917, failed very quickly; Hrushevsky's liberal Central Rada collapsed in the fires of a catastrophic civil war. A series of governments tried and failed to hold power. In the year 1919, Kiev changed hands more than a dozen times as a massive peasant rebellion, probably the largest of its kind in Europe, swept across the country. Following a Polish army intervention and a White Army incursion that came within 125 miles of Moscow, the Bolsheviks finally took control of what became Soviet Ukraine in 1920.

The dream of Ukrainian independence disappeared again for seventy years. As a consequence, Ukrainian historiography disappeared too; the Kremlin feared its potentially disruptive power. Aside from an early experiment with "Ukrainianization" in the 1920s and some circumscribed efforts in the 1970s, Soviet historians did not interest themselves—indeed, were not allowed to interest themselves—in the origins or development of the Ukrainian nation. Ukrainian identity was allowed some bland, officially approved manifestations—mostly folk dance and folk music—but real Ukrainian culture was heavily repressed or forced underground. During the purge that accompanied the Ukrainian famine, Ukrainian historians were among many tens of thousands of Ukrainian cultural figures and intellectuals arrested and murdered between 1932 and 1934. Hrushevsky himself became the object of a sustained propaganda attack in 1931. He died in exile three years later.

In the years since Ukraine declared independence in 1991, Hrushevsky has been rehabilitated. A major boulevard has been named after him in central Kiev—the same boulevard on which protesters against the corrupt Ukrainian regime battled riot police in February 2014. But even as Ukraine rapidly develops its own historical debate and its own national literature, it is still missing from Western historiography, the Western literary canon, and even from Western political consciousness: Ukraine's right to exist as a nation at all is routinely questioned in Western capitals.

All of which is a roundabout way of explaining the reasoning behind Serhii Plokhy's elegantly written *The Gates of Europe*. Although he holds the Mykhailo Hrushevsky Chair at Harvard, Plokhy is not writing in order to enlighten Ukrainians about themselves. Instead he is engaged in a parallel project: he is writing in order to enlighten foreigners about Ukraine. He opens his introduction with three events in modern Ukrainian history—the declaration of independence in 1991, the Orange Revolution of 2004, and the Maidan revolution of 2014—and explains what motivates him:

To understand the trends underlying current events in Ukraine and their impact on the world, one has to examine their roots. . . . The journey into history can help us make sense of the barrage of daily news reports, allowing us to react thoughtfully to events and thus shape their outcome.

The Ukrainian state that Hrushevsky fought to create now exists. But in order for it to survive, Plokhy argues, foreigners have to understand the history of Ukraine as well.

Several other writers have published English-language histories of Ukraine in the past, notably Orest Subtelny (*Ukraine: A History*) and Paul Robert Magosci (*A History of Ukraine*). Plokhy's version is slimmer, more streamlined, and more clearly focused on the issue that interests him most: the emergence of a Ukrainian national identity from a complicated mix of Slavic and Scandinavian tribes, Catholic and Orthodox religions, Mongol invasions, and of course Polish, Habsburg, and Russian imperial projects.

The conflict with Russia is built into Ukraine's historiography, for the two nations share a common ancestor: the state of Kievan Rus, the early medieval empire whose rulers converted to Byzantine Christianity and built the beautiful onion-domed churches and monasteries of Kiev. Ukrainians, Russians, and Belarusians all claim the city as their spiritual home, which is a part of why Russians find it so hard to think of Ukraine as a separate country.

Long association with Poland gave the Western half of the country a different character, but not a different identity. Plokhy is particularly keen to lay to rest the myth that his country is clearly divided between "Eastern" and "Western" cultures, or between Eastern and Western Christianity. Samuel Huntington's best-selling book *The Clash of Civilizations* included a map that drew precisely such a line through Ukraine. Plokhy points out that it would be hard to find many Catholics in much of the territory that Huntington places on the "Western" side of the line. Worse, the map is unable to account for the Ukrainian Greek Catholic (Uniate) church, which emerged in the sixteenth century—Plokhy devotes a chapter to it—and is a genuine hybrid, a church that owes fealty to Rome but uses Orthodox rites. Though "one should not be too harsh on the mapmakers," he explains: "It is difficult, if not impossible, to draw a straight line in a country such as Ukraine."

The question of language is equally fraught, equally complicated, and, in this thoroughly bilingual country, equally misunderstood. During what Plokhy calls the "Galician alphabet war" of 1859, the Habsburg Empire, which then ruled what is now western Ukraine, tried to impose the Latin alphabet on its Ukrainian subjects in order to ensure that they did not become Russified. At about the same time, the Russian Empire, on the other side of the border, forbade its subjects from using any alphabet except Cyrillic, in an attempt to prevent their becoming Polonized. A few years later, Russian authorities banned Ukrainian publications altogether. In the twentieth century, Ukrainian was once again marginalized, and Russian became the de facto official language of Soviet Ukraine.



Granger

A Soviet propaganda poster with the caption 'Be on Guard!' urging Ukrainians, Lithuanians, and Poles to beware of the Polish leader Józef Pilsudski, 1920

Given that the promotion of their language was so closely associated with national independence—and the repression of their language with subjugation—it is hardly surprising that Ukrainians organized themselves around the issue, not only in 1917 but during the era of Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika. At that time, after seventy years of slow Russification, only 40 percent of Ukrainians used their native language in everyday life. But as soon as they could they

formed the Society of the Ukrainian Language, Ukraine's first post-Soviet civic organization. By the end of 1989, the society had 150,000 members; two years later, Ukraine was independent.

The emotions generated by language are, of course, the backdrop to the Ukrainian parliament's controversial 2014 decision—quickly reversed—to ban Russian as an official language. From another perspective, they also explain at least a part of contemporary Moscow's patronizing attitude toward Ukraine, an attitude that can be found well beyond the Kremlin's walls. The idea that Ukrainian “isn't really a language,” that it's a peasant patois or a dialect, is very common among educated Russians, and no wonder. That's how Russian speakers have treated Ukrainian speakers for two centuries.

But then the notion that Ukraine—once known as “Malorossiya,” or “Little Russia”—is illegitimate, that it isn't really a state and doesn't really count as a nation, is nothing new either. “The history of Little Russia is like a tributary entering the main river of Russian history,” wrote Vissarion Belinskii, a leading theorist of nineteenth-century Russian nationalism. “Little Russians were always a tribe and never a people and still less—a state.” In 1920, Russian Prince Alexandr Volkonsky, then in exile, rewrote Russian history for a French audience, arguing that Ukraine was a false creation of German imperialism.² In 2008, President Putin told George W. Bush that “Ukraine is not a country.” Even today, the relationship of Russia to Ukraine remains one of former colonizer to former colony. For a comparison, think how Ireland, until recently, was understood in Great Britain, or Algeria in France.

At the same time, Russian fear of Ukraine, or rather Russian fear of unrest coming from Ukraine, has a very long history. The Mazepa revolt of 1708, the tussles with the Cossack Hosts, and, most painful of all, that peasant rebellion of 1919 left their mark on the relationship between the two nations. Stalin spoke obsessively about loss of control in Ukraine, and about Polish or other foreign plots to subvert Ukraine. But it was the internal dynamics of Ukraine that he feared the most. He knew that Ukrainians were suspicious of centralized rule, that Ukrainian peasants were deeply attached to their land and their traditions, and that Ukrainian nationalism was therefore a galvanizing force that could challenge Bolshevism and even cause it to collapse.

Which, as Plokhy also points out, is exactly what happened in 1991. Plokhy's previous book, *The Last Empire*, recounted the history of that year in great detail. In *The Gates of Europe* he offers a brief reminder of just how important the decisions taken in Kiev that year turned out to be. Given the nature of the present conflict, it's useful now to remember at least this detail: on December 1, 1991, with 84 percent of the eligible population voting, 90 percent of Ukrainians, of all ethnic backgrounds, voted overwhelmingly for independence from the Soviet Union. Of course the largest percentages in favor were in western Ukraine, where in Ternopil 99 percent voted for it, but Odessa, Kharkiv, and even Donetsk, where war continues, weren't far behind. After that vote, the president of Ukraine, Leonid Kravchuk, refused to sign a cooperation treaty with Russia and Stalin's nightmare came true: the loss of Ukraine to the Ukrainian national movement brought about the end of the Soviet Union.

Putin knows this history, of course, and he too fears that if Russia “loses” Ukraine—which, nowadays, means losing economic and political influence—then his autocratic regime might also be destabilized. For if Ukraine becomes too European—if it achieves anything resembling

successful integration into the West—then Russians might begin to wonder: If Ukraine, then why not us? Plokhy also explains that since the fall of the USSR, the Russian imperial project has focused on the idea of unifying Russian speakers into a single state: “Ukraine has become the first testing ground for this model outside the Russian Federation.” But if Russian-speaking Ukrainians don’t want to join the Russian state—and it seems that they don’t—then there will be no Russian empire. That failure may rebound upon Putin too.

Recent events in Ukraine inspired Plokhy to condense its complex, thousand-year history into a single, readable, English-language volume. But they have inspired others to take the opposite route, to dig into the country’s unfamiliar history and to showcase people and subjects that could have an echo in the West. One of the most extraordinary of these stories, rediscovered and retold several times in recent years, is the tale of Gareth Jones, a Welsh journalist who was one of the very few foreign witnesses to the Ukrainian famine. That man-made catastrophe was caused in part by the chaos of collectivization, but even more directly by the mass confiscation of food. In the autumn and winter of 1932 and 1933, teams of “grain collectors” went from house to house and took everything edible from thousands of Ukrainian villages, as well as anything that could be sold or bartered. The purpose was to feed the starving Russian cities, to terrorize peasants who had rebelled in the past, and to break Ukrainian nationalism once and for all. Close to four million people died as a result.

At that time, Jones was a twenty-seven-year-old journalist and a former secretary to the British prime minister, David Lloyd George. His connections got him the visa—the Soviet authorities hoped they could use him to influence his former employer—but he was really there to collect material for a series of articles he would eventually write for the British and American press. He met a range of Soviet officials, talked to other Western journalists in Moscow, and then got permission to visit a tractor factory in Kharkiv. He boarded the train from Moscow and got off early. For three days he walked along the railway line with no official minder or escort, passing through more than twenty villages and collective farms and recording his thoughts, notes, and impressions. Jones died young—he was murdered, allegedly by Chinese bandits, while traveling across Inner Mongolia in 1935—but his notebooks survived. In the 1980s they were found in his sister’s home in Wales by his grandnephew, Nigel Colley, who has supervised their transcription and publication. In *“Tell Them We Are Starving”* both a transcription and an evocative facsimile of the notebooks are introduced by Colley and Ray Gamache, the author of *Gareth Jones: Eyewitness to the Holodomor*.

The notebooks are not works of literature. They were composed quickly; Russian and Welsh words are thrown in with English, and sentences aren’t complete. But because they record immediate impressions and describe events as they were happening, they have an unusual freshness:

I crossed the border from Great Russia into the Ukraine. Everywhere I talked to peasants who walked past. They all had the same story.

“There is no bread. We haven’t had bread for over 2 months. A lot are dying.” The first village had no more potatoes left and the store of *burak* (beetroot) was running out. They all said: “The cattle is dying, *nechevo kormit’* [there’s nothing to feed them with]. We used to feed the world &

now we are hungry. How can we sow when we have few horses left? How will we be able to work in the fields when we are weak from want of food?”

Then I caught up [with] a bearded peasant who was walking along. His feet were covered with sacking. We started talking. He spoke in Ukrainian Russian. I gave him [a] lump of bread and of cheese. “You couldn’t buy that anywhere for 20 rubles. There just is no food.”

We walked along and talked. “Before the War this was all gold. We had horses and cows and pigs and chickens. Now we are ruined.... We’re doomed.”

Later, in Kharkiv, Jones observed thousands of people queueing in bread lines, spent an evening at the theater—“Audience:- Plenty of lipstick but no bread”—and spoke to people about the political repression and mass arrests that took place across Ukraine at the same time as the famine:

Another woman came. “They are cruelly strict now in the factories. If you are absent one day, you are sacked, get your bread card taken away & cannot get a passport.

“Life is a nightmare. I cannot go in the tram, it kills my nerves.

“It is more terrible than ever. If you say a word now in the factory, you are dismissed. There is no freedom....”

Another family: “...Everywhere persecution. Everywhere terror. One man we knew said: ‘My brother died, but he still lies there & we don’t know when we’ll bury him, for there are queues for the burial.’

“There is no hope for the future.”

Jones’s articles, written on the basis of these notes, caused a small sensation. So did the press conference he held in Berlin after he left the USSR. His descriptions of the famine, there and in print, angered the Soviet Foreign Office, which subsequently banned all Western journalists from traveling outside Moscow without permission. His comments also came to the attention of Walter Duranty of *The New York Times*, at that time the most famous foreign correspondent in Moscow. Duranty denounced Jones by name in an article entitled “Russians Hungry, But Not Starving,” one of several pieces he wrote that argued against the use of the word “famine” with reference to the USSR. The motives of Duranty, who told diplomats in private that the famine was real, have never been clarified. He may have wanted to preserve his contacts and connections in Moscow. Or having defended Stalin’s policies in the past, he may have wanted to protect his professional reputation. His journalism had won him a Pulitzer Prize in 1932.

One or two other Western journalists did report on the famine. Malcolm Muggeridge wrote several articles in the Manchester *Guardian*; Georges Simenon, the Belgian crime writer, also published an account of the few strange days he spent in starving Odessa, where he was told that the *malheureux* he saw begging in the streets were not to be pitied, for they were people who had not adapted to the regime: “There is nothing for them but to die.”³ But Duranty’s voice was more

influential, and Soviet efforts to suppress the truth were sustained for many years. The story of the famine didn't exactly disappear, but it faded from view. So did Gareth Jones.

And yet in the past two decades, the fate of the two journalists has been slowly reversed. Duranty's work has become controversial; in 2003, the Pulitzer committee debated whether to retrospectively withdraw his prize. Jones, by contrast, has been made the subject of Ganache's 2013 biography, a BBC documentary in 2012, and exhibitions at Cambridge University and in London. In part, Jones's reputation has revived thanks to the Ukrainian government's broader efforts to tell the history of the famine. After the Orange Revolution in 2004, the government of President Viktor Yushchenko built monuments to the famine and invested in famine research. The opening of secret police, Communist Party, and Soviet government archives, in Kiev and elsewhere in the former USSR, has inspired new research into many aspects of the famine and other matters as well.

But Ukraine's historical politics are less important, in this regard, than the fact of Ukrainian sovereignty itself. To put it bluntly, the establishment of a Ukrainian state simply makes Jones seem less marginal, more central, more important. The efforts of Hrushevsky and Plokhy have in this sense already borne fruit. If nothing else, it's now clear that Jones was describing a real place, a place that can be found on maps, however inaccurate those maps might sometimes be. Now that the existence of Ukraine is becoming more widely understood and accepted there will be more such stories, and more such reassessments. It's not very often that shifts in European politics throw up new possibilities for historians. But even if it achieves nothing else, the revolution in Ukraine has already made readers and writers of history think twice about what they think they know.

1. 1

For more on Hrushevsky, see Serhii Plokhy, *Unmaking Imperial Russia: Mykhailo Hrushevsky and the Writing of Ukrainian History* (University of Toronto Press, 2005). [↵](#)

2. 2

Ukraine: La vérité historique was recently republished (Paris: Éditions des Syrtes, 2015). [↵](#)

3. 3

Georges Simenon, "Peuples qui ont faim," in *Mes Apprentissages: Reportages, 1931–1946*, edited by Francis Lacassin (Paris: Omnibus, 2001). [↵](#)