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Ukraine lives

Karl Schlögel's 'Ukraine' is an eloquent plea for the country's sovereignty and Europe's responsibility to respect it

The song of suffering and betrayal may be a common one in Eastern Europe – and even a pretext for radical nationalism. But today's Ukrainians have every right to claim that regional rivals undermine their country, allies leave them in the lurch, and foreign media either ignore or unfairly sully the country.

Yet despite this, Ukraine's condition has been remarkably vital since the Maidan Revolution in early 2014, followed by Russia's annexation of Crimea and undeclared war against Ukraine. Although the country struggles mightily with corruption and oligarchic machinations, it has proven its will to live up to the enlightened aspirations of the Maidan Revolution – even in wartime.

All of post-Maidan Ukraine's achievements – and failures – have to be judged in the context of a determined five-year war waged by its nuclear-armed neighbor Russia. In 2014, the Russian Army annexed the Crimean peninsula on the northern coast of the Black Sea, and it has been occupied ever since. In the eastern Donbass region, Russia mobilised ethnic Russians to do the same and sent in paramilitaries to help. The death toll: 13,000.

Ukraine as a nation-state

In this light, it's an opportune moment for the release of the English translation of German cultural historian Karl Schlögel's *Enscheidung in Kiew*. The deftly translated *Ukraine: A Nation on the Borderland* is a powerful and erudite assertion of Ukraine's legitimacy as a nation-state, its rich cultural heritage, and the underlying sources of Russia's campaign against it. In the book, Schlögel, a renowned scholar and life-long admirer of Russia, takes his readers on a tantalising historical and intellectual tour of Ukraine's major cities.

From the start, Schlögel admits that he came late to studying Ukraine and that he's not the topic's foremost expert – a modest admission judging by the time he has spent there and the book's wide-ranging references. But he looks at Ukraine with the fresh eyes of someone who's stumbled upon a gem that they'd never known existed. This alone tells us something important about how Russia and its partisans view Ukraine: they don't know it.

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Indeed, Schlögel argues that Ukraine is terra incognita on the mental maps of most Europeans, and not just the Russophiles among them. Those who think about it all often consider the country of 42 million – second in terms of territorial size in Europe only to Russia -- as a domain of Russia, or the Soviet Union or the Russian Empire before that. Since Timothy Snyder's *Bloodlands*, some know it only as killing field and graveyard of millions in World War II; and indeed Ukraine has a dizzy tally of dead and murdered in the most recent centuries. The language and the country's identity have long been thought of as variants of Russia's, not unique in their own right.

This, however, changed for many with the 2014 Maidan Revolution, when protesters across the country threw out the Russian crony Viktor Yanukovych for scuppering a pending EU association agreement in favour of closer ties with Russia. The five years of bullying and bloodying since then have not brought Ukraine to its knees; in fact, it's a more self-confident and determined nation than ever.

The tone of *Ukraine* is often quite personal and Schlögel shares with us many discussions he's had with Russians and Ukrainians. He notes, for example, that never in all his years in Russia had he heard Russians complaining about the rights of ethnic Russians in Crimea, which was the pretext for Russia's takeover. It was a non-topic, he says, until Putin's propaganda machine kicked in after Maidan.

A journey through Ukraine's ages and cities

What's best about Schlögel's *Ukraine* is the affectionate, inspiring journey on which he takes the reader through the nation's ages, empires, and metropolises, colouring in the blank swathes with history, purpose,

and significance. There's Kyiv, the eastern Paris of the Belle Époque; the port city of Odessa on the Black Sea; the teaming, multinational medley of Crimea's Yalta; Hapsburg-infused Lviv and Czernivtsi; and industrial Donetsk; as well as Dnepro on the Dnieper and Kharkiv, which Schlögel calls 'a capital of the twentieth century.'

He populates each vignette with its literary and luminaries and other figures of history who lived at least part of their lives in Ukraine, such as Nikolai Gogol (Myrhorod), Leon Trotsky (Yanivka), Paul Celan and Joseph Roth (Czernivtsi), Nikita Khrushchev (Donetsk) and Mikhail Bulgakov (Kyiv), and many others. They spoke different languages, belonged to diverse religions and ethnicities, and witnessed other atrocities. But they all lived through them the regular atrocities and bloodshed of the last two centuries, which represent a common thread for all of Ukraine's towns and cities.

Schlögel ends *Ukraine* on a distinctly melancholy note, as he never thought he'd see one sovereign state invading and occupying another in postwar Europe. 'A long period of peace shielded by the deterrence capabilities of the superpowers had habituated Europeans to the thought that borders were sacrosanct, that all sides, whatever their differences, agreed on their inviolability,' he writes. He sincerely, deeply believed that Europe had progressed beyond warfare for the sake of territorial expansion. And now that it's happened, the undermining of the international order, he's understandably incensed that the continent's statesmen have opted, more or less, to accept it.



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