

Kyj, Sjtsjek and Chryv, a history of Kiev

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

In 2010, through mere coincidence and personal circumstances, I discovered a country I had never heard of and which I had never explored before. I wrote this book for those people who do not know a lot about the (ancient) history of Ukraine, Belarus and Russia. History is in the eyes of the beholder. Tolstoy said once: "History is beautiful if it only were true".

Napoleon Bonaparte stated: "History is the reality elites agreed upon and history is always being made by the victors". I guess they both were right. Perhaps my account is also coloured because I fell a bit in love with Kiev in 2010 and stayed there for many years and suffered from wanderlust when I had to return home to Rotterdam. A few weeks after completing the manuscript of this historical story, my long-ordered book by Mykhailo Hrushevsky in Canada was finally delivered to me, without a doubt the best historian that country has ever known.

I wondered if I had hit the right note in my book, whether the facts and timeline were correct and whether I was on the right track based on the many other sources I consulted. The disadvantage was that this historian died in 1934 and his work only covered a part of the scope of my book. There was also the dilemma of dealing with the nationalist sentiments and political agenda that this historian undeniably had.

What was fact and what was wishful thinking, with the aim of opposing Russia and Poland appearing primarily to emphasize the independence and uniqueness of Ukraine? If I noticed anything after reading his book, it is his open and erudite style and he did not shy away from swimming against the current, disproving persistent myths and based mainly on facts. I found his book extremely balanced, worthwhile and to the point.

I am convinced only multidisciplinary history can have added value. Achievements and insights from other branches of science, such as economics, sociology, psychology, cultural anthropology and other auxiliary sciences, are indispensable to paint a true picture. Because everywhere I hear that history is so boring, I thought I should brave my personal experiences and findings in Ukraine lightly and every now and then I have peppered them with anecdotes, personal escapades, adventures and dreams.

So, in that sense the book is also partly fictitious and autobiographic. The light-hearted style of this booklet also saves me a vast number of footnotes, which are often only intended to impress the reader, to legitimize the statement through name dropping and to convince the reader that my conclusions must be correct because others of name and fame have also said it.

I have chosen the form of an easily digestible historical account for the simple reason that I want to reach the widest possible audience and also because you can go a long way with a dose of common sense. If anything has become clear to me, it is that we know extremely little with certainty about the oldest history of Kiev and that reliable sources are often missing or extremely scarce.

We are therefore largely dependent on intuition and common sense. On the other hand, I take historians such as Herodotus and Strabo very seriously when they write about Ukraine, Cimmerians and Scythians also because as early as the 8th century BC there were Greek colonies around the Black Sea and the Crimea and were both in contact with their Greek compatriots as with tribes in the north and east of Ukraine.

I hold Herodotus and Strabo extremely high. If they were wrong on a specific point, it was almost always because they were highly dependent on scarce sources and informants and the internet was not yet known. Everything I say comes from the bottom of my heart and brain and only I am responsible for it. I deliberately kept this book short, because in our volatile time there appears to be a need for accessible, concise history about that border-country in outline.

This book is also about the drama of rapid change. Revolutions are often intended for the best not seldom result in the worst. Kiev came from 2014 on in a social and economic free fall and the once radiant energetic city full of amazing talented people have become since then more or less an average boring town. After my last visit to Kiev in September 2019 my wanderlust vanished. Since 2014 about 1,5 million often young and highly educated people had left Ukraine each year to seek their fortune elsewhere such as in Russia, Europe, the US and Canada. I doubt if they will ever return.

From the very moment I set foot on the ground of that border-country in 2010, I was in love with the adventurous, versatile and sometimes mysterious character of the population, the beautiful buildings, the inviting parks, the radiant atmosphere and the old-fashioned conviviality that were abundant. I felt like I came home after many centuries. I was also thunderstruck by the breath taking extremely attractive, energetic, strong and adventurous women, who are without a doubt one of the most fascinating, intelligent, strongest and at the same time the shrewdest women in the world.

Because they felt that I understood their game of honey-trapping, mutual respect soon arose and I was accepted, unlike most Western men who were often used as walking ATM's and often went home penniless. Somewhere in 2014 I felt the urge to start writing about my experiences in Kiev and I did so after some hesitation.

Ukraine was already inhabited long before the Stone-age. 6.500 years ago, there was the so called Cucuten and the Sredny Stogculture and thousand years later the so called Jamnaculture. It is now more or less acknowledged that on the steppe of Ukraine and Russia the wild horse was tamed and that the wheel and carriages were invented.

This made this ancient tribes much more mobile and it seems that the language they spoke is of proto-Indo-European origin. Many historical facts are still unknown and perhaps we will never know the full spectre. For me it was an eye-opener that the steppes in Eurasia were the cradle of many civilisations en Europe and Asia, also India. The oldest temple of Europe was also found in nowadays Ukraine.

Ukraine means border-country and this vast landmass had had that function at least 1,200 years ago, but probably thousands of years earlier. Greeks of the famous Ionian Miletus founded colonies in Crimea around Odessa, Kerch Street and the Sea of Azov as early as the 8th century BC. Other Greek city-states followed suit. They traded with the Kiev-region and south of present-day Kiev were densely populated areas already in those days and the Dnieper was their supply line.

The mainland of Ukraine was never under Roman rule and I think the Romans did not regard this area as lucrative or of strategic importance. After the fall of Rome in 476 AD, the Greek colonies in the South kept close ties to Byzantium, say Rome 2.0 - after the Western Roman Empire fell in my view into death house construction. Constantinople -present-day Istanbul- had a much better strategic position on the Bosphorus and Rome would never have been able to maintain against the exponentially growing peoples run of the rest of Europe.

The vast land of nowadays Ukraine, Belarus and Russia was inhabited many thousands of years before Christ and there were roughly two types of people, namely: inhabitants who were located on one of the major rivers or sea in (semi-) permanent villages or hamlets and several nomadic tribes of which the Scythians are the most famous. The horse made it possible to bridge enormous distances in a relatively short time and nomadic people intermingled and interbred with people of other cultures.

Not much has been written in the period 1917-2004 about the history of Ukraine and there is a good explanation for that. In the 10th and 11th centuries, the impressive Kiev-Russian empire reached its peak and in 1240, Kiev, the largest city in Europe, bigger than Paris or London was then razed to the ground by Batu Khan, the grandson of Genghis Khan and most of the inhabitants, who could not flee on time, were murdered or taken away as slaves.

For almost 600 years, the city from 1240 on led a heart-pounding existence as a provincial town and the toy of successive foreign dynasties. However, Kiev's decline had already started 100 years earlier due to the poor succession scheme for queens and princes, because of which the power became increasingly fragmented and successors mainly killed each other. Thus, Kiev became a relatively easy prey for the Golden Horde of Batu Kahn.

Two years earlier, Moscow, at that time an insignificant provincial town with predominantly agricultural characteristics, was conquered and burned to the ground by the same Batu Kahn. Of the roughly 30,000 to 50,000 inhabitants in the year 1240, in those centuries thereafter roughly between 1,500 and 3,000 remained in Kiev.

Many people from the Kiev region most likely moved north, perhaps also to Novgorod and Smolensk, the new stable trading centres. Not long after the city had regained its serious size, say from the second half of the 19th century onwards, most of this border country became part of the USSR, in which national history was taboo and de facto forbidden because the country's borders and national culture were considered decisive, but the class struggle.

Historians such as Hrushevsky wrote their books before that and were (literally) silenced. Anything that exuded any nationalistic feelings was banned, and its authors could only carve their stories on their gulag walls. After the dismantling of the USSR in the early 1990's, the socio-economic system completely collapsed, and this disintegration was apparently not conducive to neither the right time to pick up the thread of Ukraine's history again.

For many years, everything revolved around daily survival. Before 1917 Kiev and its inhabitants were romanticized by the Russian monarchs, intelligentsia and other elites as the lower-walled ancestors of the once powerful Kiev-Russian dynasty. Ukraine was affectionately called Little Russia, and Ukrainians may have perceived it as derogatory, but that is incorrect. Even now there is a towering statue of King Vladimir the Great near the Kremlin, and Russians see him as the patriarch of Russia and the Russians as well.

The Russians from the 19th century on tried to take Kiev into the modern world and subsequently invested in economic development and cultural facilities and sometimes military garrisons (including in Kiev) were placed in the border country, which can be seen both as negative and positive. After the collapse of the USSR in 1991 nationalist sentiments flared up again in Ukraine, and from 2014 that animosity between Ukrainians and Russians peaked, or rather, bottomed.

Most of the Ukrainian families are made up of Russians and Ukrainians and they support peaceful coexistence and want nothing to do with the current Russophobia and hostilities. The economy has plummeted after the putsch of February 2014.

The fact that I could only obtain an English-translated book by their greatest historian Hruschovsky from Canada in early 2018 speaks volumes about the weakly developed nationalist sentiments and the wafer-thin nationalist profile of Ukraine. Many people in Ukraine got confused by the polarisation that was stimulated by a militant minority mainly from the West of Ukraine.

People are still searching on this point and for centuries were part of various empires, of which they became the plaything. Ukraine is the border country between Europe and Asia and Ukraine is, whether wanted or not, an important border-country between Europe and Russia. Ukraine is potentially rich, also in natural resources. Its future lies in a good relationship with all its neighbours and not to choose between Europe or Russia.

Because the period 1941 to 1991 period is a piece of cake for most Ukrainians, Russians and my fellow countrymen, I have paid little attention to that period in this book because it would add nothing and it is part of the curriculum at school. Every normally educated person knows about the core of World War II and its aftermath, which we call the Cold War.

CHAPTER 2: LITTLE CHOLCHIS

In order to place the history of Kiev in a broader perspective, it is important to know that about 11,700 years ago, humanity was almost completely wiped out worldwide by an extremely intensive activity of the sun and / or the impact of a gigantic comet. Brief periods of extreme heat and cold followed in rapid succession, the location of the poles shifted, the ice sheets melted and resurrected elsewhere, and large areas of fauna and flora were wiped out, sometimes at a rapid pace (think of the frozen Mammoths found in Siberia with sometimes their last meal still intact in their stomach or the massive ultra-fast extinction of large animals in America).

Numerous extremely severe earth and seaquakes, volcanic eruptions and tsunamis, sometimes 100-200 meters high, ravaged the earth and the oceans burst their banks and searched for a new location based on natural laws. Virtually all myths worldwide speak of the same types of disasters and this seems to be the common basis for all ancient stories. After the last ice-age the water-level rose significantly and many civilisations that were located near the coastlines submerged. Before that period the total landmass of the earth was about 20% larger than nowadays.

Especially people who could find shelter in caves, in mountains or isolated primeval forests survived, such as in southern Turkey, Cappadocia, parts of India, southern Russia around the Urals and Southeast Asia. The highly developed civilizations of Anatolia, Sumer, Akkad and later Babylonia from about 5,800 years ago eventually originated there. The experiences must have been so traumatic that the people suffered collectively from amnesia and their lives were all about survival. Science does not thrive in such a context.

It can certainly not be ruled out that highly developed civilizations existed before that time, but mankind experienced a new start from roughly 9,000 BC on. Kobeki Tepe in Turkey dates to that time and it took several thousand years for humans to recover and return to impressive performances in Anatolia, Sumer, Egypt and the Indus Valley.

Mind you, there are 6,000 years between that cataclysmic period and the rise of Ur, Uruk, Eridu and Kish in Sumer, or three times the period between us and Christ and that long span of time often leads to disorientation with the reader. There have been numerous migrations in Eurasia for thousands of years and sometimes these were not just journeys, but the original inhabitants kept coming back, whether mixed and assimilated with other tribes.

They were incredibly complex cycles and that led to a matrix of comings and goings. Tribes who lived in an area rich in food and raw materials and who offered good protection (for example by forests and mountains or rivers) against raids, such as in the Kiev region, remained relatively stable in terms of population composition, while in other areas this stability was lacking.

That could lead to entire tribes leaving, assimilating with victors and all possible variations in between. It is also not inconceivable that epidemics or natural disasters, such as extreme droughts and famine sometimes disrupted the balance considerably and led to mass migration. It was also possible that invasions by the same tribes or their primal relatives occurred several times after an interval of centuries. They could be Scythians, Greeks or tribes of Iranian or Turkish origin.

The endless steppes of Ukraine and Russia were, in fact, an open invitation to numerous wandering tribes from Eurasia. It also happened that these groups split into subgroups under a new ruler due to mutual disputes. This makes reliable reconstruction extremely complex, if not impossible. Ukraine has been exposed for over 4,000 years to various equestrian peoples from Eurasia due to its large steppe area.

The Scythians came from Eurasian steppes, went to central Ukraine and emerged from the so-called Chornolis culture from 1025 to 700 BC. However, according to Herodotus, the Scythians were already active in Crimea and the rest of Ukraine as early as 1800 BC and were defeated by Pharaoh Sesostri = Sennusret III (1878-1839 BC). The interior of the Kiev-region was heavily forested, inaccessible and defensible and seems to me to have been relatively stable, with the exception perhaps of disputes between the proto-Slavic peoples who lived side by side.

Logically, serious settlements with large populations and trading centres must have already existed around Kiev since the trade-relations with the Greek Colonies of Crimea started. You are not going to trade with a few families many hundreds of miles away. At the time, that journey took 10 days over the Dnieper. An urban centre to the south of Kiev emerged that had roughly 15,000 inhabitants and thousands of homes, an impressive number for that time. One of the three cities was called Taljanki and it contained 2,700 people.

The Greeks from Miletus and other cities founded the cities of Tyres, Olbia, Theodosia, Panticapaeum as early as the 7th century BC. According to Strabo, the Greeks populated the entire Black Sea coast. The important colony of Chersonese or Chersoneses was founded by other Greeks.

Herodotus exposes the most important subgroups and differences. For example, there were tribes of Greek descent (the Geloni) with red hair and blue eyes, various types of Scythians who did not differ essentially in appearance and habits until they turned to other life forms. You had nomadic Scythians, agricultural Scythians (Georgi). Royal Scythians and Scythians who focused more on animal husbandry and horse breeding.

There were tribes with Thracian roots around Crimea and in the Carpathians. Herodotus spoke of man-eaters in the forested interior, there were also Neuri, Blackjackers dressed in black and had Iranian roots, Baldheads, perhaps referring to proto-Cossacks, Greek colonies around the Black Sea, and a number of other mentioned local tribes in and around Kiev. A different people lived in the Carpathians, in all probability first of Thracian and later also of Celtic descent after an influx of Celts during the great migrations in the 5th century AD.

In the north up to the Rokitno swamps in what is now Belarus, you traditionally had tribes that had also left for Kiev after the 6th century AD. In short, it was a very complex dynamic patchwork quilt in which historically there are large holes that are still very difficult to fully reconstruct based on the scarce reliable sources. The reader should also take into account that names were sometimes given by others, such as neighbours or conquerors, and that for the same tribe different names can occur, that names could change after amalgamation, relocation, other king, and the like.

It can therefore by no means be ruled out that two completely different names refer to the same people without our realizing this. Were the Thracians the same as the Sclavi, were the Neuri the same as the Polians and were not the Greek Geloni the ancestors of Scandinavians who had left for Greece over 4,000 years ago or were it Sea Peoples from Crete, Sardinia and Corsica? Who knows?

In the time of Herodotus and before that there was serious barter with Kiev and yes there were regular invasions of equestrian peoples, but in essence I think the area around Kiev was quite stable. It was a wooded area on an important river-cum-thoroughfare. The physical conditions remained the same for many thousands of years. The area was ideal for beekeeping, fur hunting, fishing and woodworking. Kiev is likely much older than is now known. For example, a large population of Trypillians lived there already 5,000 years ago, which had a high degree of development.

According to Herodotus, the Scythians originally came from the Jaxartes River of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Both the Scythians and the Sarmatians were initially nomads who travelled in "caravans". That was their strength because it made them mobile and elusive to enemies who wanted to settle a bill or were on the prowl. According to others the Scythians reportedly came to Ukraine around 750 BC and expelled the Cimmerians who had been there roughly 450 years earlier, who in turn expelled or assimilated the representatives of the so-called Jamna culture (3500-2000 BC).

The latter were again assimilated with the representatives of the so-called Cucut and Sredny Stog culture (4500-3000 BC). The Scythian order or pax Scythia lasted roughly 500 years. They traded with the Greek city-states around the Black Sea, Crimea, the Kerch Strait and the Sea of Azov. It is certain that the Kiev region was already inhabited in the early Stone Age and that in the late Stone Age there were already relatively many settlements. According to Strabo, the Scythian horsemen defeated the kingdom of Bactria, say present-day Afghanistan. Nearly 4,000 years ago, on the border with Kazakhstan in the South of the Urals, there were important settlements of Indo-Iranian tribes, who were excellent horsemen and who travelled across the steppes, also to the heart of Ukraine where the original inhabitants of Kiev often lived in forests that offered protection against invaders.

The Scythians lost more and more influence and steppe terrain and from the 3rd century BC onwards they were outflanked by the Sarmatians, a collective name for all kinds of horseman tribes, most of them of Iranian origin. Later they continued under the collective name Alani, but other sub-names are also known, such as Roxolani and Iazyges. They were warlike and freedom loving.

The Samaritan wives were associated with Amazons and thus were formidable warriors. From the 3rd century AD, they became involved in a fierce battle with the Huns in the east and the Germanic tribes from the west and they became disintegrated as a people. Ukraine has always suffered as a border country between Europe and Asia. It was the first European line of defence against devastating invasions (from roughly 2,000 BC) by Scythians and other Iranian tribes and then (4th century to 8th century AD) by Turkic and Mongol tribes (Huns, Tartars, Cazares, Peshnegetes) who invaded the South and East of the country and resembled termites in pillaging behaviour.

Their influences were almost all negative except for the Cazares. After a crushing defeat against Trajan, the Thracians were deported to other Roman provinces in present-day Turkey. The Slavs from central Ukraine took their place peacefully in the Carpathians. (Proto) Slaves living in the Rokitno swamps, on the Pripet, a tributary of the Dnieper in present-day Belarus, spread and by the end of the 7th century had taken possession of the great fertile, river-rich Eastern European plain.

These Slavs were referred to by Roman historians as Sclaveni and Antea. The Antea, Polianas, Siverians, Derevlans, Dulibians and Ulygians, The original name mentioned for the inhabitants of the Kiev region is that of the Polians, but I have not been able to find this name from Herodotus, nor from Roman early historians, so I have no idea since when that name came into being.

Perhaps it did not become a collective term for fused tribes until much later. He does call their neighbours the Neuri and when he speaks about the Chersoneses he is talking about Thracians. Polians can also be an etymological collective term for city dwellers, who knows. Think of Plato's Politeia. At the time of Herodotus (5th century BC) Ukraine was already a border country.

It was thereafter not part of the Western Roman (ancient Rome) nor of the Eastern Roman Empire (the new Rome), but it was well known to the Classics. Various tribes lived in that region, such as the Polians, Antea, Siverians, Viatichians, Radimichians, Dulibians, Derevlians (forest dwellers), Ulygians, the Neuri, the Boudins and many others. Herodotus mentions Agathyrers, Neuri, the Man-eaters and the Blackjackers, the Greek Crimean Inhabitants, the Geloners, the Basternae and the Sarmatians.

According to Herodotus, the tribe of the Boudins was the most numerous and the original inhabitants. Their city was called Gelonis and they were of Greek origin, settled inland via the Black Sea coast. They spoke a mixture of Greek and Scythian and had blue eyes and reddish hair. The city of Gelonis was walled by a 12-mile wooden rampart and was destroyed in the 5th century BC by the Persian king Darius. So, the key question is where was Gelonis?

It turned out to be in the current Poltava district near Bilsk, which is not very far from Kiev. The problem with ancient history is that only a fraction of the known world at the time has been described and you just have to be lucky that a linguistic historian, clerk or monk was willing and able to write about Kiev's environment and culture. The Sclaveni lived next to these tribes on the (south) west side. Partly because of the many population movements and "mergers",

The Romans called the tribes and clans Antea. The Greeks and Romans also spoke of Slavic democracy among those clans, by which they meant that the tribal elders made important decisions together and that their leader was only a *primus inter pares*. Later each tribe or clan had a "prince". In the 7th century the Slavs had drifted and had left for the present-day Czech Republic, Slovakia, Lithuania, Russia, Belarus, Greece, Serbia and Croatia, and these areas were largely occupied by them.

Many Slavs later worked as soldiers in the Byzantine Empire after they first, together with the Bulgars, Avars (both of Turkish descent) and the Lombards, who later settled in Italy, had made life miserable by plundering various Byzantine provinces.

I intuitively feel that Serbs and Kiev are much more related than is generally assumed. I think the origin of Serbs (Antea, Polanen and Sclaveni) is a mix of Germans (Veneti) East Goths, Polians, Thracians and Greeks who lived and mainly traded around the current Odessa. It is certain that the Serbs belonged to a 7,000-year-old Indo-European Thracian tribe called Triballians who settled in the south of Serbia. Along the Danube in Romania and Serbia there was an highly developed ancient civilisation and it is likely they spread along this river up to Ukraine.

Thracians, according to Herodotus, were the largest tribe in ancient times and split into numerous groups. He said that if they united, they would be invincible, but that would never happen. Around the 8th century AD people emerge called Krivichians. Their base was in the Rokitno swamps in Belarus and you just must remove the 'r' in their name to get to Kiev. Together with Finns, Slovenes and East Goths from Sweden, they formed the basis of a new influx and mixing of a people that would eventually lead to Kiev-Rus.

The Goths, ancestors of the Vikings, were aware of this favourable location, as were the Vikings many centuries after them. And because the Ostrogoths were descendants of the adventurers who had emigrated from Sweden and Norway many centuries earlier, it cannot be ruled out in advance that they still maintained trade contacts and other relationships with each other and distant relatives from Scandinavia.

It is only our lack of imagination, our ignorance, the lack of physical evidence and our underestimation of the qualities and smarts of the people back then that determine our prejudices. The Goths were Germanic tribes and some of them (200,000) entered present-day Serbia and Croatia as early as AD 262 and were crushed by Emperor Claudius in present-day Nish in 269. 50,000 Goths were slaughtered

The oldest history of Kiev is full of gaps and is without a doubt foggy. When you look at the topographic maps from roughly 1,000 BC to roughly 700 AD, Europe and Asia are one large dynamic patchwork quilt with countless tribes, who continuously moved, assimilated with other tribes and changed names regularly.