

Background to Ukraine

by Orest Zakydalsky

1 Ukraine lies at the crossroads between Europe and Asia, at 49 degrees north latitude and 32 degrees east longitude. Its neighbours to the north are Belarus and Russia; to the west, Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary; to the southwest, Romania; and to the east, Russia. Ukraine covers 603,550 sq. km and is the second largest country in Europe, roughly the size of France or the province of Manitoba. The capital of Ukraine is Kyiv. Ukraine is made up of 24 oblasts (provinces) and the Autonomous Republic of Crimea on the Black Sea.

2 The borders of Ukraine changed several times in the twentieth century. In 1922, after the First World War, the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic was established within the Soviet Union from parts of Ukraine that had been under the Russian Empire. The western regions of Ukraine, which were divided among Poland, Romania and Czechoslovakia were incorporated into the Ukrainian SSR during and after the Second World War. Crimea became a part of Ukraine in 1954. The Russian Federation invaded Crimea in 2014 and illegally annexed it.

3 Most of the terrain of Ukraine consists of vast plains known as steppes, where the black earth (*chornozem*) is extraordinarily rich and fertile. Ukraine became known as the “Breadbasket of Europe” because *chornozem* is ideal for growing wheat and other grain crops as well as certain vegetables such as sugar beets. Ukraine is also a land rich in minerals — particularly iron ore, coal, manganese, and salt.

4 In 2021 there were 41.6 million people living in Ukraine, the ethnic breakdown according to the 2001 census was: 77.7% Ukrainian, 17.3% Russian, 0.6% Belarusian, 0.5% Moldavan, 0.5% Crimean Tartar, 0.3% Polish, and 0.2% Jewish.

5 The population in 1989 was 51.8 million, with 69% of the people living in cities while 31% lived in rural areas. The demographic decline from 1989 to 2021 is due mainly to a low birth rate (related to difficult economic conditions within the country), a relatively low life

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expectancy, and emigration. The rights of minorities are respected in Ukraine. The literacy rate is almost 100%, with comparatively high levels of enrollment in higher education.

Ukraine Under Foreign Rule

6 The lack of natural geographic barriers, coupled with its richness in both natural resources and agriculture, and a strategic location as a crossroads between Europe and Asia, have made Ukraine a land coveted by its neighbours throughout history. Both European (Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Austro-Hungarian Empire, Russian Empire, Soviet Union, Nazi Germany) and Asian (Golden Horde, Ottoman Empire) forces invaded, fought over, and ruled Ukrainian territory. For more than two hundred years (from the late 18th to the 20th centuries) most of Ukraine's territory was ruled by the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union.

7 In 1918, Ukraine became independent but independence was brief. The Red Army invaded and most of Ukraine's territory became part of the Soviet Union (USSR). In 1922 the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic became a part of the USSR and the republic was governed from Moscow until 1991. According to the Soviet census of 1926, Ukraine had a population of 29 million people (about 20% of the total Soviet population). Ukrainians were the largest national group within the USSR after the Russians. Ukraine regained its independence in 1991, leading to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Over 90% of the Ukrainian population voted for independence.

8 The Soviet Union depleted and plundered Ukraine's riches. Much of its grain was exported. Its minerals fed the industrial machine of the Soviet Union: Ukraine provided the Soviet Union with 71.9% of its pig iron, 77% of its iron ore, and 69.9% of its coal in 1928. Under Soviet rule, Ukraine saw a period of massive industrialization and urbanization. While this period led to economic growth, the ecological and environmental consequences were disastrous. Air, water and soil pollution continues to be a massive problem. In 1986, Ukraine

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suffered the worst nuclear disaster in history at the Chernobyl Atomic Energy Station, the consequences of which are still felt today.

Sources:

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