

BOOK REVIEW: Eyewitness account of western Ukraine, 1918-1923

"Western Ukraine in Conflict with Poland and Bolshevism, 1918-1923," by *Vasyl Kuchabsky*. (Translated from the German by *Gus Fagan*.) Edmonton-Toronto: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 2009. 361 pp. \$34.95 (paper), \$59.95 (cloth).

by Peter Bejger

Our story begins on the night of October 31-November 1, 1918, when a small group of Galician Ukrainian troops under the command of Maj. Dmytro Vitovsky deftly took control of the city of Lviv from Imperial Austrian authorities. This elegant overture announced the debut of Western Ukraine as an independent actor on the European stage. Five years later the international community, in the form of the Council of Allied Ambassadors in Paris representing the victorious powers of the first world war, dropped the curtain on what had become a blood-spattered drama and shattered all Western Ukrainian aspirations when they finally recognized the incorporation of Galicia into the new and triumphant Polish state.

Vasyl Kuchabsky, a Lviv University law student who became an officer of the Ukrainian Sich Riflemen during World War I, was an eyewitness and participant to the chaotic events during these five years. His book – originally published in German in Berlin in 1934 and now available in a remarkably fluid English translation by Gus Fagan, a senior lecturer in international relations at London Metropolitan University – is a fascinating and lively account of the military and diplomatic struggles for independence in both western and eastern Ukraine. This is a crucial point, for Kuchabsky outlines in vivid detail how the often conflicting interests of these two very different parts of the country ultimately doomed the Ukrainian Revolution.

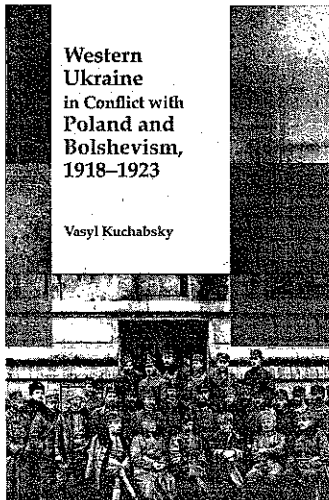
Kuchabsky's book is invaluable because it places these struggles within the broader context of European developments: the shifting play of forces between Poland and Russia, which in reality represented the emerging struggle between world capitalism and communism; the geopolitical considerations behind the Paris Peace Conference and the future role of Germany; and the individual East European policies of major Western powers, specifically France, the British Empire, and the United States.

Why did Ukraine fail to establish statehood when so many of its neighbors succeeded? Kuchabsky eschews the dire sentimentality and apologetics of many émigré memoirs and offers a ruthless analysis.

After a horrific world war, France was determined to keep Germany down and a threatening Bolshevik Russia out of an exhausted Europe reeling from social turmoil. A strong Poland was essential to fulfill these plans, and ambitious Polish leaders – confident of the full support of Paris – energetically pursued a policy where, as Kuchabsky writes, "Ukraine had to be destroyed if Poland were to be great."

The British were more sympathetic, especially when the newly proclaimed Western Ukrainian People's (National) Republic still controlled the oil fields of Boryslav and Drohobych. Once those facilities fell into Polish hands, London's calculations changed, although half-hearted efforts continued for some form of Western Ukrainian "autonomy."

San Francisco-based author and filmmaker Peter Bejger wrote the recently released documentary "A Kingdom Reborn: Treasures from Ukrainian Galicia."



Kuchabsky is cynical about the Americans and notes, "the Western Ukrainians had placed all their hopes of obtaining justice from President [Woodrow] Wilson, the prophet of 'national self-determination.'" Kuchabsky considers these hopes foolish and naïve because, as he points out in great detail, Wilson and leading U.S. government officials were already in thrall to masterful Polish lobbying and the black arts of propaganda. He caustically noted the underlining PR problem the Ukrainian cause faced in western political and military circles. "The Poles were masters of the dashing parade. Among the Western Ukrainians, however, one saw only hulking great barbarians."

Kuchabsky also dismisses Ukrainian hopes on President Wilson in terms of Realpolitik. "Powerful nations exploit weak ones because they consider it profitable to do so, not because they think the weak nation enjoys the experience. The relationship between nations has never been based on moral considerations, it has always been based on the use of various forms of power to gain an advantage."

In both the diplomatic and military arena, Kuchabsky blames the Ukrainian elite for being cautious and unimaginative. He writes, "The leadership of Western Ukraine lacked that greatness of mind without which really creative actions are impossible." This he blamed on the ossified culture of the former Habsburg Empire that produced "a stratum of small-minded pacifist philistines who understood nothing of war."

Yet within this withering litany of complaints Kuchabsky reminds us the short-lived independent Western Ukraine did occasionally rise to the challenge. Amidst conditions of rampant post-war chaos, a functioning state administration was created that successfully mobilized an army, imposed law and order, and guaranteed a free press and fractious democratic political discourse. There were even astonishing military victories when a Russian general, Aleksandr Grekov, joined the Western Ukrainian military service and launched a brilliant counteroffensive that temporarily repulsed superior Polish forces. Kuchabsky writes, "the revival gave evidence of what this peasant nation could have achieved if it had intelligent and energetic leadership."

And yet failure was inevitable. There were simply no resources to keep the fight going in face of an international blockade. The book offers an agonizing blow-by-blow account of how the Ukrainian Galician Army was finally destroyed through incessant battle, the lack of arms and supplies, and disease.

An especially helpful feature in this new edition is a series of invaluable four-color maps (re-drawn from original black-and-white maps) that provide a visual guide to the military campaigns. These maps, along with the trenchant analysis of Kuchabsky's background and organization of the book in an introduction by Oleksandr Pavlyuk, help make this volume an essential reference guide to an exceeding complex period of Ukrainian history.

And what of Kuchabsky himself? In 1922 he emigrated to Germany where he obtained a doctorate in history and Slavic philology from the University of Berlin in 1930, got married in 1932, and had a son named Leo. He pursued a scholarly career while working as a reference librarian at the Institute of World Economy in Kiel. During World War II he served as director of the Lublin state library in German-occupied Poland until the arrival of the Red Army in 1944. Kuchabsky was believed to have disappeared without a trace after the war.

Kuchabsky's son, Dr. Leo Kutschabsky, revealed hitherto unavailable information to the publishers of this translation that Vasyl Kuchabsky made a quiet life for himself in the Soviet-occupied zone of Germany. Kuchabsky worked as an interpreter and statistician and eventually became a teacher of Russian, history and Latin at a secondary school in the town of Blankenburg in the Harz Mountains, where he died in 1971.

Kuchabsky published his book when Ukrainian fortunes reached their very nadir. Communist-ruled eastern Ukraine had been ravaged by famine and purges while Western Ukrainian national life

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— Vasyl Kuchabsky

under Polish occupation had fallen into disarray and despair.

In tracing the causes of the disaster, Kuchabsky laments, "What happened to the Ukrainian movement then was something like a natural catastrophe against which man is powerless, for reason, will, prudence and ingenuity are of no avail."

However, with a chilling prescience Kuchabsky categorized the Polish triumph over Western Ukraine as a "curse for the victor." The "deadly poison" of Polish-Ukrainian animosity was slowly killing Poland itself. His words proved prophetic when a few years later a resentful Western Ukraine greeted the conflagration to come in 1939.

The book is available at www.ciuspress.com, by calling 780-492-2973, or by writing to: CIUS Press, 430 Pembina Hall, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB, T6G 2H8, Canada.

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