

Translation adds more to classic on Ukraine

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History of Ukraine Rus' — Volume 1: From Prehistory to the 11th Century by Mykhailo Hrushevsky

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802 pp., \$79.95

When the original Ukrainian version of this book appeared 100 years ago, it was not only a scholarly event, but a political statement. The codification of the national history in a multi-volume work that met the most exacting standards of European scholarship was an affirmation of the existence and right to exist of the Ukrainian nation.

The author was a professor at the University of Lviv, then the capital of the easternmost province of Austria-Hungary and today the capital of the westernmost oblast of independent Ukraine.

With the first instalment of what was to be a 10-volume history of his nation, Mykhailo Hrushevsky accelerated the dynamic that was to lead to the collapse of empires and the emergence of an independent Ukrainian state.

Volume followed volume with clockwork regularity, except for the period of the Great War and of the revolution which followed it. During the revolution, Hrushevsky exchanged his professor's title for that of president — president of the first Ukrainian state of 1917-20.

In the early 1920s Hrushevsky returned from exile to Ukraine, then under Soviet rule, and continued to pursue his life's work in the face of mounting persecution from the authorities. He died in exile in Soviet Russia in 1934, probably not entirely of natural causes.

Now the first volume of his *History* is available to the English reader, thanks to a team of translators and editors under the leadership of Frank Sysyn, director of the Peter Jacyk Centre for Ukrainian Historical Research at the University of Alberta.

They produced an edition of Hrushevsky's work superior to the original in several respects. Inexact references in Hrushevsky's footnotes were tracked down and corrected. They caught numerous typographical errors in the original and published what must be one of the most error-free works to have appeared from an academic press in decades.

And the whole text has been updated. Wherever Hrushevsky's account has been superseded by subsequent research, this is noted and the reader is referred to the latest, most authoritative literature. The book opens with a superb introduction to Hrushevsky and his *History* by Sysyn.

The sheer ambition of Hrushevsky's project strikes the reader a century later as audacious. Hrushevsky set himself the task of reviewing the entire history of Ukraine, not even from the beginnings of history or memory, but from the prehistoric and geological origins onward. No matter that this entailed studying such diverse fields as earth science, archeology, linguistics and anthropology. Hrushevsky took it as his obligation to examine every branch of learning that might shine light on his investigation.

To read Hrushevsky is to enter a bygone world in which scholarship was truly cumulative and international and took itself seriously without being pompous.

Aside from the 10-volume *History*, he wrote other multi-volume works as well as numerous specialized studies, all of extraordinarily high quality. He placed high demands on others as well as on himself. He enlisted teams of students to help him, divvying up the sources among them and telling them what to look for.

The fruit of all this erudition and hard work were texts that were substantive and stood the test of time.