

How to go further

When you are ready to expand your knowledge of Ukrainian, there are several avenues you can pursue. If you live in an area where there is a Ukrainian community, make contact. You should have no problem in the United States or in Canada, where there are large Ukrainian communities. You can also contact any university where there is a department of Slavonic ('Slavic' in America except where reference is to '(Old) Church Slavonic') languages and literatures and enquire about classes. In the United Kingdom university classes are well established with an impressive team at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies in University College London, and at Cambridge University, with its Ukrainian Studies Programme. More programmes are emerging all the time. Try also to tune into Ukrainian on the radio. In the United States, the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute at Harvard University is a powerful centre of Ukrainian studies. In Canada you can contact the mighty Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, based in Edmonton, Toronto, and with an office in Lviv. London has the wonderful Ukrainian Institute London (ukrainianinstitute.org.uk); and there is the fine Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain.

Ukraine regained and declared its independence on 24 August 1991, a declaration that marked a stage in the dissolution of the Soviet Union. At the beginning of 1991 the official population was a little over 52 million. Ukraine's territory amounts to over 603,000 square kilometres, and its capital is Kyiv. The country has a highly varied landscape, from the fertile black-earth zone, the steppes, and the considerable heavy industry and coal mining of the east of the country (the Donbas), to the mountainous south-west and forested and marshy north-west. It is bounded in the east and much of the north by Russia, in the north-west by Belarus, in the west by Poland and Slovakia, in the south-west by Hungary, Romania, and Moldova, and in the south by the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov.

Political and subsequent cultural diversity and division hampered standardization of the language over the centuries (if one assumes 'standardisation' to be a goal). Moves towards this goal existed in the seventeenth century, and definitively emerged within the context of Romanticism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, advanced further (in circumstances at first exhilarating and subsequently tragic) in the 1920s and early 1930s, and are, whatever the awful and insane circumstances, coming to fruition at the time of writing (2023-2024). Ukrainian specialists have no illusions about the importance and difficulty of this task. One must read Serhii Plokhy's *The Russo-Ukrainian War*, Allen Lane, 2023.

Ukrainian language, literature, and history

Ukrainian is a Slavonic language, like Polish, Czech, Slovak, Upper and Lower Sorbian, Bulgarian, Macedonian, Serbo-Croat (now Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, and Serbian), Slovene, and, most closely related to it, Belarusian and Russian; the last two languages, together with Ukrainian, make up the East Slavonic branch of the group. In numbers of speakers Ukrainian

is the second Slavonic language. We might, of course, expand the list of Slavonic languages, but that would raise questions and is a matter for another day!

Around 988 AD Christianity came to the East Slavs, whose centre was Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine. With it came a written form of Slavonic ('Old Church Slavonic'), originally based on a Balkan Slavonic (Bulgaro-Macedonian) dialect, which served as the liturgical language of the established Slavonic-speaking tribes in the forests, marshes, and steppes of Ukraine. Many of these tribes were the base of what would become Ukrainian. This helps us understand the view of the renowned Slavist, George Shevelov, writing of 'Proto-Ukrainian' (pre-written Ukrainian) as existing in the seventh century AD.

The meaning of the name 'Ukraine' is uncertain and may refer to land near urban centres and/or to the Cossack Hetmanate by the Dnieper – the 'Cossack myth' may be seen as a 'gel' which binds Ukraine together. The traditional 'borderland' explanation is perhaps to be used cautiously now, though in a very broad sense 'borderland' is very appropriate to cover tribes living on the edges of Western Europe, indeed anywhere; at least 'Ukraine' avoids any suggestion of 'Rus' and Russia', though the former is certainly acceptable (the latter is a later Muscovite imperial Hellenism). More broadly, this massive area above and west of the Black Sea may be seen as Ukraine, whatever the speech of the inhabitants at that early stage. And the area of the Prypiat marshes (vaster than as interpreted now) remains likely as a possible core for future Slavonic migrations.

An indispensable account of the history of Ukraine, including the earliest times, is given by Serhii Plokhyy, in his *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine*, Penguin, 2016 (the use of 'gates' here is a topic for a seminar). A very moving, topical, and equally indispensable account is *Diary of an Invasion*, by Andrey Kurkov, Mountain Leopard Press, 2022.

The sack of Kyiv in 1240 had the dramatic effect of removing the ancient centre, a hub of East-West trade endowed at its height with an exceptionally high level of civilization, from the state of Rus also 'Rus'). Political power, among the East Slavs, moved north-east, eventually to a relative newcomer on the scene, Moscow (later Muscovy). Until the seventeenth century much of Ukraine, including Kyiv, however, was ruled by the Lithuanian Grand Duchy and the Kingdom of Poland; during this period dialect divisions persisted. In the eighteenth century the division of Ukraine between Russia and Austria-Hungary (1793-1795) led to the increased importance of the south-eastern dialects, centred around Kyiv, Poltava and Kharkiv. We can see them as important because this period coincided with both the rise of Romanticism and the emergence in that area of very gifted writers, e.g. Ivan Kotliarevskyi (1769-1838) and Hryhorii Kvitka-Osnovianenko (1778-1843). For Ukraine the Romantic period begins around 1820 and has as its supreme figures Panteleimon Kulish (1819-1897) and, above all, Taras Shevchenko (1814-1861). These writers gave shape to the Ukrainian literary language by taking the dialect of the south-east and raising it to 'the status of a language by the adoption of elements from folklore and of styles bequeathed by tradition' (Shevelov 1980:152-3). The deteriorating political situation in 'Russian' Ukraine, however, meant that western Ukraine, in Austria-Hungary, began to exert an influence – there was

an intriguing ‘political dance’ between the two. Political circumstances created linguistic imbalance and discontent: which Ukrainian was ‘purer’? Though there were moments of great progress, moments which indeed may have saved the language for the future, it is probably only now that Ukraine is really shaking off the shackles of centuries of dependence and subordination.

The rule of Lithuania, Poland, Russia, and Austria-Hungary have led to its present diverse and rich cultural heritage. Its size speaks for its reality and importance. In spite of all the travails of their history, the Ukrainians have an extraordinary sense of national identity, from Lviv to (at least) Luhansk, an identity of which the language is a most significant component. Culture, society, history, and sense of identity are crucial elements in understanding anything, and so much of what they represent is reflected in language. Linguistic communities, e.g. the Ukrainian one, have for non-linguistic reasons been ‘fuzzy’ for so long; recent events have enabled a reduction of that ‘fuzziness’ to what we find in most, maybe all, ‘defuzzied’ communities using standardized languages. At long last.

The creation of the language during the period of Romanticism occupies an unassailable and deeply-felt place in the hearts of Ukrainian speakers. As a language of millions and yet about which so few have heard, Ukrainian is now entering a period of changes and standardization. In 2019 a new version of the *Ukrainian Orthography* (Український правопис) was approved – we follow it here.

There is far more to Ukrainian literature and culture than the writers whom we have mentioned, and are about to mention. From the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century we might mention the names of Ivan Nechui-Levytskyi, Panas Myrnyi, Ivan Franko, Mykola Khvylovyi, Valerian Pidmohylnyi, Mykola Kulish, Mykhailo Kotsiubynskyi and Lesia Ukrainka. In the twentieth century Ostap Vyshnia, Volodymyr Gzhytskyi, Mykola Zerov, Pavlo Tychyna, Maksym Rylskyi, and Volodymyr Sosiura (children learn his poems, some of them very touching, in schools) deserve mention, among many others. Bohdan-Ihor Antonych wrote in Western Ukraine under Poland and V. Domontovych (the penname of Viktor Petrov) wrote in exile – the latter returned, to Moscow. Not forgetting the great cinematographers Oleksandr Dovzhenko and Sergei Parajanov.

Among writers of the 1960s-1980s (and beyond...) we might mention Vasyl Stus, Ihor Kalynets, Lina Kostenko, Ivan Drach, Dmytro Pavlychko, Vasyl Horoborodko, Sofiia Maidanska, Natalka Bilotserkivets, Mykola Riabchuk, Taras Prokhasko, and Ihor Rymaruk. Particularly note (they are translated into English) Oksana Zabuzhko, Serhii Zhadan, Yurii Andrukhovych, Mariia Matios, Volodymyr Rafeyenko, and Oksana Lutsyshyna. And, of course, Yurii Shcherbak, whose contribution to modern Ukraine goes far beyond literature. An outstanding translator is Mykola Lukash. We might for now end with Volodymyr Vakulenko and his 2023 diary of occupation, *I am transforming... – Я перетворююся...*