Ukrainian Studies—Exceptional or Merely Exemplary?
Iaroslav Isaievych replies:

“Does Ukraine Have a History?” was originally the title of a paper proposed by Mark von Hagen for the Second International Congress of Ukrainian Studies in Lviv, August 1993. Readers of scholarly papers and attendees of congresses know that such rhetorical questions in titles do not usually imply totally negative answers, but rather propositions to set limits or give new intellectual dimensions to concepts taken for granted by previous researchers. Even so, the title of von Hagen’s paper sounded unpleasant for most Ukrainian historians, not to say for ordinary citizens “off the street”.¹ The very existence of Ukrainian history was for a long time negated as a means to maintain a hold on Ukrainian lands by those powers who considered Ukraine part of their own history. When Poles and Russians at last recognized the existence of Ukrainians as a separate ethnic community and not as part of their “super-ethnoses,” they began to suggest that Ukrainians had emerged later than other nations, that their history and culture were not complete and thus that their political future was conceivable only under the protection of allegedly more developed nations. Of course, there are arguments for both points of view. Still, Ukrainians prefer to cling to the illusion that western opinion is critical of empire-centered dogma rather than of the alleged primitivism of the opposing thought. It is rather disenchancing to hear that, even after the proclamation of Ukrainian independence, there are authoritative scholars who consider it necessary to discuss the very existence of Ukrainian national history.

Upon reading von Hagen’s text one sees that it is less provocative than its title would suggest; in his conclusion he argues the importance of studying Ukrainian history, mostly for scholarly reasons. I sympathize more with such an approach than with the idea of a pragmatic need to study Ukrainian history, simply to get acquainted with the newly born state and its background. It is a pity that historians are so rarely attracted to particular subjects because of their intellectual challenges rather than because of their respectability or even “political correctness.” I will not deal here with those of von Hagen’s observations that seem to me totally justified; instead I would like to devote my attention to nuances that seem to me not so obvious. In particular, I will try to show that many of the deficiencies and flaws of Ukrainian history and Ukrainian studies, so clearly defined by von Hagen, are

¹. Although I was the chairman of the organizing committee I could not persuade other members that we should not edit the title of this paper when compiling the program. Now, I see that the members who voted for less blunt wording were right because the title as it was proposed could mislead those who had no occasion to get acquainted with the entire paper.

Slavic Review 54, no. 3 (Fall 1995)
not peculiarities of Ukraine and other post-communist countries but, more often than not, can be found elsewhere.

For von Hagen, Ukrainian history is “intrinsically interesting precisely because it challenges so many clichés of the nation-state paradigm.” Recognizing the necessity of a civic, patriotic history for the education of people in the new Ukrainian state, the author postulates that the specific character of the Ukrainian historical process “allows some taking the nation-state back out.”

The question raised by the title of the article is to be understood thus: the alleged lack of legitimacy of studying and teaching Ukrainian history (of course, studying it in the west, which for von Hagen is the only source of legitimacy) means that Ukrainian history differs substantially from the history of “classical nation-states” and, as such, Ukrainian history is not a real history. It is suggested that an ethnic nation without its own state can hardly have a history in the sense generally accepted by the American scholarly community. Quite naturally, for Ukrainian historians the traditions of Ukrainian statehood are not so negligible as they may seem from the traditional Anglo-American perspective. Moreover, not only in Ukraine but elsewhere in eastern and central Europe, the history of any ethnic community is as legitimate a subject of research as the history of a nation-state or, indeed, of an empire. I was educated in a cultural milieu where the term “nation” meant exclusively an ethnic nation, mostly (but not necessarily) with a territory and not necessarily with a state. I studied in a Soviet Ukrainian high school where we had no course of Ukrainian history and later in a Soviet university where they taught a very short and superficial (to say the least) course on the history of Ukraine. Although Russian/Soviet patriotism was the main axis of education, my colleagues and I could not imagine that anybody could question the legitimacy per se of the history of any nation, even the smallest.

I see elements of irony in von Hagen’s discussion of the mentality of the American historical community. Even so, the idea that the non-existence of Ukraine in American academic curricula and the non-importance of Ukraine for American politicians and scholars has something to do with the existence or non-existence of Ukrainian history as such, seems to me extremely strange, if not ridiculous. Histories of the Arctic peoples or, say, the Slovaks are completely legitimate study


3. A good example was Jewish history. Even in Stalin’s times many Soviet teachers and students doubted, though surely not aloud, whether the great leader was correct in denying the existence of a Jewish nation because of its lack of territorial cohesiveness.

4. I call my high school Ukrainian because of its language of teaching. At the Ivan Franko University of Lviv where I studied in 1952–1957, some courses were in Ukrainian but others in Russian, and the official program was not Ukrainian-oriented.
areas, although there are very few western scholars studying these particular histories.

The fact that Ukrainian history is studied in the US mostly by scholars of more or less Ukrainian background indicates that many non-Ukrainian historians still do not realize the importance of Ukrainian studies from a purely scholarly point of view. It may show that, perhaps subconsciously, topics of research more often than not are chosen for emotional or political reasons rather than from considerations of purely academic scholarship. Moreover, Ukrainian scholars have obviated the need to teach the Ukrainian language to students in a country where there were people with some knowledge of the language. If the majority of members of the American Association of Ukrainian Studies have some Ukrainian ethnic connection, this is not the case in similar associations recently founded in Germany, China and Japan. Among the best studies of Ukrainian history in the nineteenth century are monographs by Daniel Beauvois, a Frenchman. Even in the US, a major contribution to the history of Ukraine was made by John Armstrong, a non-Ukrainian. (In Britain, by the way, more non-Belarusians [James Dingley, Arnold B. McMillin and Guy Picarda] than Belarusians are involved in Belarusian studies. Does this mean that Belarusian studies are more legitimate there than Ukrainian studies?)

I cannot but agree that American historiography was strongly influenced by German and Russian historical writing. It seems, however, that in their neglect of the area between Germany and Russia some American historians are much more categorical than their German and Russian colleagues. At least all sound German and Russian scholars treated Polish historiography with due respect. Mykhailo Hrushevsky was highly respected in Russia and influenced such prominent Russian historians as Aleksandr Presniakov and Mikhail Pokrovskii.

Professor von Hagen is correct when he assesses the negative implications of the fact that in contemporary Ukraine histories with a marxist bias are often replaced by histories with a patriotic bias. Grabowicz and he stress, seemingly with indignation, that former professors of party history have become teachers of Ukrainian history. While no one would deny that many of these people have contributed to the primitivization of humanistic scholarship in Ukraine, it is unjust to condemn all former party historians who have included people of various moral and intellectual make-ups. Some are now making careers

5. Strange as it may seem, Russian scholars still have not realized the importance of Ukrainian subjects for Russian studies as such. Even for those who declare Ukrainian history be a part of Russian history, things Ukrainian, perhaps on a subconscious level, are felt alien. On the other hand, contrary to von Hagen's view, the Polish historical community took the initiative in organizing Polish-Ukrainian scholarly forums. There are more studies on Ukraine published in Poland than in any other country except Ukraine; many of those are excellent.

6. Some of those who remain for von Hagen "professional ethnics" learned Ukrainian only at universities.
as “nationally-oriented bolsheviks,” others have proved able to combine Ukrainian patriotism (whether newly acquired or previously hidden and now unveiled) with a devotion to the basic rules of the academic métier.® Nor is the intrusion of political conformity in the academic world unknown in the west, where respectable careers have been made or unmade by extra-scholarly factors.

Mark von Hagen deplores the fact that in contemporary Ukraine the leading principle of historiography is “an overly nationalistic rewriting of the past that posits a sovereign, national state as a teleological outcome of history.” Let us be honest: is not a teleological approach typical for any patriotic textbook of any national history? I have yet to find a history textbook that is not patriotic to some degree (or, more recently, in which patriotic rhetoric is replaced by the rhetoric of supranational values, cross-fertilization of cultures, etc.). I have not experienced the way in which history is taught in American schools, but I see that for a good American citizen a contemporary version of American democracy is the teleological outcome of the previous history of western civilization and its American offspring—perhaps now with some inclusion of the contributions of Afro-Americans to the emergence of American ideals. Of course, many (probably even most) scholarly studies are not written so teleologically as textbooks, but this is also true for Ukraine.

Enumerating the alleged difficulties in writing a true Ukrainian history, von Hagen asks, “Should citizenship and history be reserved for ethnic Ukrainians?” and stresses the political splits in contemporary Ukraine; he also reminds us that the current borders of Ukraine go back only to 1954 (for the Crimea) and 1939 (for western Ukraine). Very similar problems, however, need be solved by authors of histories of many countries, not only Ukraine. Textbooks on German, French, Polish or Romanian history include, in most cases, histories of ethnic territories and political entities (quite naturally taking territorial fluctuations into account), with special emphasis on the “titular” ethnic community but without ignoring ethnic minorities. By the same token, the monumental History of Ukraine by Mykhailo Hrushevsky deals mostly with the development of the Ukrainian ethnos on its territory and, at the same time, pays great attention to all other ethnic communities on that territory. The choice of an object for historical research is always more or less conventional and suggested by the contemporary situation or mentality. There are books on the thousand years of Polish history, although medieval Poland had not much in common with the contemporary Polish state. By the same token, there is nothing exceptional in including in Ukrainian history everything that happened on the territory where the Ukrainian ethnos eventually came into being, absorbing many ethnic entities that preceded it. If we turn to the problem of

---

7. It is strange that authors who have forgiven so many contemporary democratic Ukrainian politicians for their communist past will not extend that forgiveness to historians who are now sincere and serious critics of totalitarianism.
changing borders or political splits in society, German and Polish historians have no fewer problems than their Ukrainian colleagues.

The Ukrainian ethnic community had a very stable territory (except in the south and east, where areas of colonization expanded) and appeared able to survive, despite political divisions, as well as to assure cultural continuity on its territory, for a very long time. While one cannot deny that there was less continuity of political institutions in Ukrainian history than in those of many other countries, the country’s elites did strive to accommodate the heritage of former epochs to the ideologies of new periods. Thus, Cossack historians wrote about the continuation of the glory of the old Kievan princes, while the Ukrainian National Republic in 1918–1920 tried to use Cossack traditions.

For von Hagen, a characteristic feature of Ukraine was “the fluidity of frontiers, the permeability of cultures.” As I have mentioned, only the political and not the ethnic border changed comparatively often. As a matter of fact, any country or region can be studied with emphasis on the permeability of cultures or with emphasis on the “vertical” development of the specific values of each separate culture. It would be best, however, to combine these approaches, avoiding absolutization of either. Permeability of cultures is very productive (and, moreover, is a fashionable field of study); but resistance to permeability is also essential if one prefers a multi-cultural, pluralistic world to a standardized global civilization. Nationalisms limiting permeability contribute not only to inter-ethnic hostilities but also to the creative forces of national cultures. Perhaps Jewish history is a good example since it shows that both assimilationist trends (“permeability”) and anti-assimilationist ones (“resistance to permeability”) are important to the development of a nation and of humanity. I would qualify the assertion that “precisely the fluidity of frontiers and the permeability of cultures” make Ukrainian history “a very ‘modern’ field of inquiry.” True modernity entails an appreciation of the importance of both trends: not only of the integrative but also of the disintegrative, not only the elimination of national differences but also their development. Similarly, I do not agree that the nation-state model of historical process is out-dated and should be left to patriotic history teachers and state-building politicians. If the more sophisticated historians avoid this area, historical education will suffer.

Several questions discussed by von Hagen are developed further by George G. Grabowicz. I cannot but agree with most of his remarks. For me, ukrainoznavstvo and ukraїnistyka are synonyms and both are exactly rendered by the English term “Ukrainian studies.” In some countries, a tradition remains by which such terms as “Germanistik” or “polonistyka” are reserved for philology; on the other hand, in Russian any difference between slavianovedenie and slavishta is now almost entirely lost. The same applies to ukrainoznavstvo and ukraїnistyka, although the merger of meanings proceeds with some delay.

I cannot agree that ukrainoznavstvo implies more amateurishness and tendentiousness than the allegedly more academic term “ukraїnistyka.” Both can designate research and teaching, and neither indicates
the level of sophistication or, indeed, of amateurishness. There is a certain analogy with terms like “American studies” or “Austrian studies.” Many of them appeared in response to educational needs and contributed to the elaboration of organizational patterns for research and educational institutions. Ukrainian, American, Irish or any other studies are not scholarly disciplines in themselves, but only conventional denominations for dealing with various fields of study related to things Ukrainian, American, Irish, etc.

According to Grabowicz, the marginalization of Ukrainian studies was related to the colonial status of Ukrainians in the empires that partitioned Ukraine. This is, of course, true as to the marginalizing attitudes of administrations and academic authorities in Russia and, to a lesser degree, in the Habsburg Empire. On the other hand, professors educated in the populist creed utilized their study of the people to serve them. This was not perceived as marginal at all: it was part of their mission, more important and more legitimate for them than, for example, the study of dynasties by official Russian historiography. Incidentally, groups and movements which consider themselves endangered are usually more fanatical and tendentious than those which are optimistic. There were periods in modern Ukrainian history when populist activists and historians were essentially optimistic: they hoped that the education of ordinary people would eventually ensure social and national justice. It seems that precisely this historical optimism was an important background element in the conscious objectivity of such scholars as Mykhailo Hrushevsky or Ivan Franko. Unlike many later Ukrainian historians, they never denied or omitted references to sources and facts that might seem unpleasant or harmful to the image of Ukrainians. Hypothetically, the great Romanian historian Nicolae Iorga would be more tendentious than Hrushevsky because Romanian politicians were not so sure of the inevitability of success of their policy of national unification.

The deficiencies of contemporary Ukrainian studies as depicted by Serhii Bilokin’ (in the article quoted by von Hagen) and by Grabowicz are genuine. Still, the positive sides of the recent and contemporary situations are not to be ignored. Bilokin’ ignores the scope of activities of those historians who, even in the darkest periods, tried to save as much as possible from the best traditions of Ukrainian humanities.8

8. A more balanced evaluation of historical works which appeared in Soviet Ukraine is in the bulletin Recenzija: A Review of Soviet Ukrainian Scholarly Publications published by the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute in 1970–1979, tactfully prepared so as not to provoke repression against the authors. There were Soviet Ukrainian historians who were only apologists of the regime and others who strove for a decent level of scholarship and to repackage elements of Ukrainian patriotism in an ideologically accepted form. Good insight into the conflict between them is provided in a P.D. dissertation by Ivan Myhul, “Politics and History in the Soviet Ukraine” (Columbia University, 1970). I would like to stress especially the importance of the periodicals Arkhiiy Ukrainy and Istoriychni dzherela ta ih vykorystannia, both edited by Ivan L. Butych: O. Pritsak, “A Serial Publication and a Political Era: An Obituary with a Post-Scriptum,” Recenzija 6, no. 2 (1976) 31–51.
As far as contemporary developments are concerned, it is not quite fair to omit the fact that ideologized, quasi-scholarly Ukrainian writings are criticized not only by foreign observers but also by authors in Ukraine. Bombastic, quasi-patriotic rhetoric is ridiculed not only abroad but also in Ukraine. It is, however, also important not to lose historical perspective, and to understand the sincerity and usefulness of patriotism as an essential element of what is known as the “national re-awakening.”

It is a pity that the current Ukrainian government does so little to improve the situation of the humanities. But as we see from the final part of Grabowicz’s contribution, in some happier countries, too, in order to obtain funding for the humanities one must pretend that one’s research would be useful to market institutions, or something equally noble. This observation brings me to my final remark. Observers from abroad can see the deficiencies and difficulties of the humanities, including Ukrainian studies, in Ukraine more clearly than Ukrainians themselves usually do. The crisis of the humanities in Ukraine is perhaps more visible because it is more brutal and takes more primitive forms than elsewhere. This, however, should not prevent us from seeing that at least some aspects of the Ukrainian crisis reflect a situation that is also developing in other countries, and not only in the post-communist world: a comparison of Ukrainian studies with Belarusian, Polish, American, or other national or regional studies would be interesting for all. From this perspective, the brilliant observations and suggestions made by professors von Hagen and Grabowicz are provocative in the best sense of the word. Having this in mind, I would like to invite American scholars (both those who like quasi-exotic places and those who try to trace similarities among seemingly distant cultures) to the Third International Congress of Ukrainian Studies, to be held in Kharkiv in the last days of August 1996.