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A History of Ukraine

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Introduction

The history of Ukraine is both a saga of resilience and a testament to the enduring human spirit. A land at the crossroads of great civilizations, Ukraine has, for millennia, been the arena of migrations, conquests, alliances, and cultural syntheses. Its landscapes have witnessed the rise and fall of empires, the flourishing of urban centers, and the relentless pursuit of independence by its people. From the earliest tractable human footprints near the banks of the Dniester and the steppes where horses were first tamed, to the vibrant streets of Kyiv and the battered settlements along contemporary frontlines, Ukraine's story is one of profound transformation and perpetual renewal.

To understand Ukraine is to recognize its extraordinary role as both frontier and crucible. Ancient tribes and travelers, Greeks venturing north from the Black Sea, formidable steppe nomads, and Slavic settlers all left indelible marks on its past. The creation of Kievan Rus', an early medieval superstate, stitched together diverse ethnic and religious communities and cemented Kyiv's stature as a beacon of culture and faith in Eastern Europe. Yet, the glories of monarchy gave way to the devastations of Mongol incursions, the fragile divides of feudal princelings, and the recalibration of boundaries under the banners of Lithuania, Poland, and the Ottoman Empire.

For centuries, the lands that make up modern Ukraine were partitioned, ruled, and shaped by competing powers. Here, distinct communities—Ruthenians in the forested north, Cossacks on the wild steppe, Tatars along the Black Sea—maintained separate yet interconnected traditions, crafts, and political ambitions. The Cossack Hetmanate, emerging from popular rebellion and military ingenuity, stands as a touchstone of Ukrainian legacy: the dream of autonomy, hard-won but often imperiled, against the encroachments of Moscow, Warsaw, and Vienna.

The modern age brought both promise and catastrophe. Empires collapsed, and Ukrainians made audacious claims to sovereignty in the tumult of revolution, civil war, and foreign partition. The twentieth century was no less dramatic—a time of great hopes, genocidal famine, brutal wars, and cycles of oppression and resistance. Soviet rule, for all its promises of unity and progress, engendered new traumas and engineered some of the darkest episodes in Ukrainian memory. Yet, it also brought about demographic and territorial changes that continue to shape the present.

The collapse of the Soviet Union opened an era of independence, reform, and self-determination—each phase marked by both setbacks and stirring achievement. At the Maidan, the heart of Kyiv, hundreds of thousands dreamed out loud for democracy, dignity, and a European future. The subsequent war and the full-scale invasion in 2022

have transformed Ukraine into a symbol of global resistance to aggression, placing its struggle for sovereignty at the center of international attention.

This book seeks to chart Ukraine's remarkable course from ancient settlements to modern statehood. Each chapter invites the reader to explore the rich tapestry of its history, peeling away the layers of myth, ideology, and misunderstanding to reveal a dynamic, pluralist nation whose past—often turbulent, always complex—still shapes its destiny.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Land and Its Peoples: Geography and Early Human Settlement

Ukraine, the second-largest country in Europe, occupies a pivotal position in Eastern Europe, its geography shaping its history and the movements of peoples for millennia. It's a land where the vast East European Plain dominates, giving way to modest mountain ranges in the west and on the Crimean Peninsula. This mostly flat to gently rolling landscape, a legacy of the stable East European craton, has an average elevation of just 175 meters above sea level. The lack of significant natural barriers across much of the country has historically made it a crossroads, open to both trade and invasion.

The country's varied topography includes not only expansive plains but also a few distinct highland regions, such as the Volyn-Podillia Upland in the west and the Dnieper Upland on the right bank of the Dnieper River. In the west, the Carpathian Mountains present a more rugged terrain, with Hoverla Peak reaching 2,061 meters, the highest point in Ukraine. The Crimean Mountains grace the southern edge of the Crimean Peninsula, creating a distinct, almost subtropical zone along the coast. The eastern part of the country also features some eroded mountains within the Donets Ridge.

A defining feature of Ukraine's geography is its extensive river system. Over 95% of the country's rivers drain into the Black Sea and the smaller Sea of Azov. The mighty Dnieper River is central to Ukraine, flowing south and unifying the central part of the country both geographically and historically. Other major rivers include the Siverskyi Donets, Dniester, and Southern Bug. These waterways have served as crucial arteries for communication, trade, and settlement throughout history. The Danube River's delta in the southwest also provides Ukraine with an outlet and connection to the Balkans, Austria, and Germany.

The soils of Ukraine are renowned for their fertility, particularly the rich black soil, or chernozem, which covers large areas of the central and southern regions, making the country exceptionally well-suited for agriculture, especially grain farming. This natural endowment has long been both a blessing and, at times, a curse, attracting various groups and empires seeking to control these productive lands.

Ukraine's climate is generally temperate, described as cool and semicontinental. It represents a transitional climate, differing from the Central European climate to its west and the more continental climate of the Moscow region to its east, while also showing some transition towards the Mediterranean climate in the south. This varied

climate supports a range of natural vegetation zones, from forests in the northwest to the predominant meadow steppes that blend into forest-steppe, and further south and east into the drier steppe vegetation. The Black Sea coast even exhibits some Mediterranean flora.

It was within this geographical mosaic, shaped by rivers, plains, and a variable climate, that the earliest inhabitants of the land that would become Ukraine made their mark. Evidence of human presence stretches back deep into the Paleolithic period, also known as the Old Stone Age, a vast span of time coinciding with the Pleistocene epoch, marked by significant climate shifts and glacial cycles. The Pleistocene saw alternating periods of cold glacial expansion and warmer interglacial retreats across Europe, which dramatically influenced landscapes, vegetation, and the movement of early human populations.

Remarkable evidence of the earliest hominins in Europe has been unearthed at the Korolevo archaeological site in western Ukraine, situated on the left bank of the Tysa River in Transcarpathia. Discovered in 1974, this multi-layered site has yielded thousands of stone artifacts from a depth of up to 14 meters, representing occupations spanning the Lower to the Upper Paleolithic. The oldest stone tools found at Korolevo have been reliably dated to approximately 1.4 million years ago, making this one of the earliest securely dated instances of hominins in Europe.

These ancient tools, crafted in the basic Oldowan style, are believed to have been made by *Homo erectus*, an early human species known for its expansion out of Africa. The presence of these tools at Korolevo, bridging a significant spatial and temporal gap between older sites in the Caucasus (around 1.8 million years ago) and later sites in southwestern Europe (around 1.1-1.2 million years ago), supports the hypothesis that early humans migrated into Europe from the east or southeast. The Tysa River, a tributary of the Danube, likely played a role in this migration corridor, as early hominins exploited warmer interglacial periods to move into higher latitudes.

While no human remains have been found alongside the earliest tools at Korolevo, the sheer abundance and variety of artifacts across numerous cultural layers highlight the significance of this location for early human activity over a vast period. The site's lower Paleolithic layers also contain tools characteristic of the Acheulean culture, dating back hundreds of thousands of years. These early inhabitants lived in hunter-gatherer bands, their lives dictated by the availability of resources and the challenging, often cold, climate of the Pleistocene.

As the Paleolithic era progressed, different groups of hominins inhabited the territory. The Middle Paleolithic, roughly spanning from 300,000 to 40,000 BC, saw the presence of Neanderthals in Ukraine. Their tools, associated with the Mousterian culture, have been found at various sites, particularly in the middle Dniester and Dnieper Rapids regions, as well as in the Crimean Mountains, where caves provided essential shelter.

These locations offered access to game animals and vegetation, vital for survival in the colder conditions.

The transition to the Upper Paleolithic, beginning around 40,000 BC, marked the arrival of early modern humans, *Homo sapiens*, sometimes referred to as Cro-Magnons. This period is characterized by significant advancements in toolmaking, with a greater variety and sophistication of implements appearing in the archaeological record. Sites from the Upper Paleolithic in Ukraine, such as those in the Kyiv, Chernihiv, and Poltava regions, reveal evidence of larger settlements, including dwellings constructed from mammoth bones.

The presence of both Neanderthals and early modern humans in Ukraine towards the end of the Middle Paleolithic suggests a period of coexistence. Archaeological findings, such as a burial in Crimea with modern human remains surrounded by Neanderthal artifacts, even hint at potential interaction and possibly interbreeding between these groups before Neanderthals eventually disappeared.

Thus, the land that is now Ukraine, with its diverse geography ranging from open steppes to river valleys and mountainous refuges, provided a long and continuous stage for early human development. From the earliest pioneers who left behind their stone tools 1.4 million years ago to the hunter-gatherer societies of the Upper Paleolithic, the deep past of this region is etched into its soil and landscapes, offering tantalizing glimpses into the ancient world of its first inhabitants. The story of Ukraine's history is intimately tied to this ancient past and the enduring relationship between its peoples and the land itself.

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