

ROLE OF BLACK SEA-STEPPE OPPOSITION IN MEDIEVAL UKRAINIAN HISTORY IN LIGHT OF THE STUDIES OF M.HRUSHEVSKY

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Introduction

In the framework of early historical studies in Ukraine, the 'Black Sea' and the 'Pontic Steppes' are traditionally regarded as complex entities bearing not only geographical and environmental, but also cultural, ethnic, and historical implications. Such was their widely-held status up to the beginning of the twentieth century, and today, this perspective is gradually regaining popularity in Ukrainian historiography based upon its importance for understanding ethnic, social, and economic processes over the entire territory of contemporary Ukraine, and especially so if one examines the two entities as opposing forces.

In such a context, the Black Sea usually is regarded as a 'stable unit' contributing to (1) permanent settlement since the time of the Greek colonization, (2) intensive development of trade and a market economy leading to the growth of social inequality, and (3) the establishment of regular links with remote territories that promoted interethnic contacts. In general, the geographic and environmental conditions of the Black Sea coast can be regarded as favoring the formation of the Ukrainian nation. The social and ethnic history of the Pontic Steppes is deeply connected with the non-Slavonic nomad population of the Eurasian Steppes, the impact of which upon the formation of the Ukrainian ethnos can hardly be understood as positive: as is well-known from archaeology and written sources, their belligerent behavior toward the sedentary population of the Black Sea coast (in fact, the southern edge of the Ukrainian steppe zone) imposed severe restrictions on local economic development and, as a result, on the evolution of political and social processes. The present contribution will examine these traditional ideas of Ukrainian historiography in order to elaborate upon a balanced approach to understanding of role of the opposition between the Black Sea and the Pontic Steppes in early Ukrainian history.

The Black Sea-Pontic Steppes Opposition: Understanding Mikhailo Hrushevsky

Prominent representatives of Ukrainian national historical science in the second half of 19th and beginning of the 20th century tended to evaluate Ukraine's steppe regions mostly as a negative factor in the political, economic, social, and ethnic development of Ukrainians. Constant fighting with nomads in medieval times sapped national energy and offered no chance to integrate politically, strengthen economically, and move towards the Black Sea coast. The misfortune of the Ukrainian ethnos was the 'fatal blame' imposed by its unsuitable living space, primarily the steppes (Balushok, 2003). One of the principal adherents of this idea at the beginning of the 20th century was the "father of Ukrainian history", Mykhailo Hrushevsky. It is worth mentioning that, later, he also introduced the concept of 'Black Sea orientation' into scientific circulation, underlining the fact the geographic conditions of the coast prompted Eastern Slavonic tribes to face south toward an environment more conducive to economic productivity and an easier life. According to his understanding, the Black Sea acted as connecting link among the ethnoses that populated its coastal zone, and a potent enabler permitting them to merge in favor of intensive economic growth (Hrushevsky 1991). In the 1920s and 1930s, Hrushevsky proposed a scientific problem that

could not be conceptualized properly within the framework of the Soviet intellectual regime and which remains difficult even today. He argued for the need to conduct complex investigations of 'oncoming traffic', which included the process of Forest-Steppe and Steppe border colonization as well as further movements within the Steppe zone on one hand, and Black Sea coastal zone occupation by populations that transmitted Mediterranean and Near Eastern cultural influences into the dry steppe 'corridor', on the other. Such an understanding of the Black Sea-Pontic Steppes opposition provides important background for studies of the northwestern Black Sea region as a multilevel contact zone for different cultures and economies (Hrushevsky 1991-1992).

Black Sea and Pontic Steppe Integration: Civilization Approach

The advance of Slavonic tribes and, later, of the Ukrainian ethnos toward the Black Sea coastline took place under difficult and sometimes painful direct confrontation with nomads of different origin and ethnicity. Ethnography provides us with a set of Ukrainian cultural elements that were borrowed from the nomads at different stages in the development of the Ukrainian ethnos. They were reflected in folk architecture, clothing, household objects, traditional symbols, as well as rites and customs; these remain aspects of Ukrainian life today. The borrowing and incorporation of these and other time-tested 'nomadic' traits could be regarded as a peculiar form of Slavonic (and Ukrainian) adaptation to a new natural environment (Balushok 2003).

It is just this thesis which lies in the background of Ukrainian scientific and public thinking during the last hundred years regarding the place of Ukraine on the crossroads of Eastern and Western civilization (Dashkevich 1991). Most arguments in the contemporary discussion favor a Western bias, implying in this way that the role of the Pontic Steppes with its higher contribution of Oriental culture elements to the territory of Ukraine and the role of the Black Sea coastal zone are still in need of an objective conceptualization on the basis of a revised empirical database (Yakovenko 2002).

Conclusions

Considering the fact that, nowadays, there is a tendency toward approaching contemporary Ukrainian studies in ecological terms (Vasyuta 1994) and conducting historical studies in a more interdisciplinary manner, the landscapes of Steppe and Sea should be viewed as undoubtedly interconnected and interacting spheres, which, in their natural and artistic unity, substantially influenced the cultural and historical development of the northwestern Black Sea region over the whole course of Ukrainian history. Details of this process are still awaiting clarification and theoretical conceptualization.

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