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## Lessons in History

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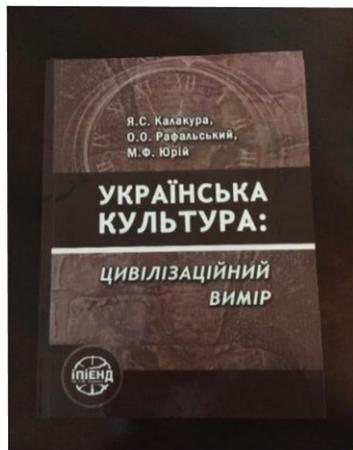
# Lessons in History

Book Review: Kalakura, Y. S., Raphalskij, O. O., & Yuriij, M. F. (2015). *Ukrainian culture: A civilization dimension*. Kyiv, Ukraine: IPIEND. 491 pages.

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**Author Note:** The reviewed volume is published in Ukrainian. There is no known translation of it into English. The reviewer is a native Ukrainian speaker. The reviewer took the liberty of writing the review based on her own translation of the title and the content of the book. Therefore, this review represents an individual interpretation. The reviewer obtained permission from the authors to publish this review.

“Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”  
—Edmund Burke (1729-1797)



The above epigraph and its variations can be attributed to several authors, including English philosopher Edmund Burke (1729-1797), Ukrainian writer and artist Taras Shevchenko (1814-1861), American philosopher and writer George Santayana (1863-1952), and former British prime minister Winston Churchill (1874-1965), to name a few most frequently quoted authors. Regardless of its origin, this quotation speaks directly to the people of Ukraine, who have been learning hard history lessons throughout the centuries, often under very tragic circumstances affecting their lives.

Ukraine is located in Eastern Europe, bordering Belarus, Poland, the Slovak Republic, Hungary, Romania, Moldova, Russia, and Turkey across the Black Sea. Vast in its territory (Ukraine is approximately the size of Germany and France combined), Ukraine is rich in human and natural resources and used to be known as a “bread basket of Europe,” particularly in the 20th century. The history of Ukraine dates back to the ninth-century Slavic state Kievan Rus; however, “Ukraine” as the name attached to the nation state appeared on the world map only in the 20th century (Sakwa, 2016).

Because of their specific geopolitical location and rich lands, Ukrainian territories have been contested and ruled by different warring empires and factions for centuries. Ukrainians have survived the Mongol invasion in the 15th century and the domination of Poles, Lithuanians, Germans, and Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires in the subsequent centuries at certain points of history (Sakwa, 2016; Subtelny, 2009). Worth noting is that Ukrainians have never invaded other territories or conquered neighboring states. To the contrary, throughout most of its history, Ukraine had to defend its own borders and fight for sovereignty and independence. As a result, Ukrainian society “had endured massive changes and traumas” (Sakwa, 2016, p. 10). It was only in 1991, after the dissolution of the former Soviet Union, when Ukraine became a truly independent nation comprising the territories whose boundaries were drawn and internationally recognized after WWII. Today, Ukraine has to defend its borders again and fight against the Russian aggression, costing Ukrainians more than 13,000 lost lives to date. My hope is that the tragic history of the 20th century, particularly between the two world wars, will never repeat itself and that Ukrainians will never suffer the losses of the previous generations.

The book *Ukrainian Culture: A Civilization Dimension* by Kalakura, Raphalskij, and Yuriij (2015) is a timely reminder to contemporary reading audiences both in Ukraine and beyond its borders of the lessons in history and the importance of learning from them. The book was handed to me by one of my Ukrainian-American friends who felt I might be interested in writing a review of it. I could not resist. My only hesitation was due to the fact that I am not a historian by training and that my review could not do proper justice to this monumental volume.

Suffice it to say, my friend convinced me that a review of this book written by a layperson could bring a fresh perspective untainted by an overly scholarly analysis, so to speak. Moreover, the book has not yet been translated into English, and such a review can familiarize English-speaking audiences, in general terms, with the current developments in the historical scholarship in Ukraine. My recent search for academic sources for one of my projects related to Ukraine resulted primarily in publications by Canadian, English, and American authors. In this regard, the book by Kalakura, Raphalskij, and Yuriy represents a rare study conducted specifically by Ukrainian scholars.

The moment I immersed myself in reading the book, I realized how deeply it cuts through the history of my family as well as the history of millions of Ukrainians who lived through the horrors of the two world wars. Under the Soviet occupation of Western Ukraine during and after World War II, both of my parents, now deceased, along with thousands of others were captured by the KGB (Committee for State Security, also known as the Soviet secret police) and spent ten years in Gulag labor camps only because they empathized with the liberation movement in Ukraine at that time. They were later rehabilitated, exiled in Kazakhstan for five years, and eventually returned to Ukraine. I documented my family history, in part, in my first publication in the U.S. (Lukenchuk, 2001).

Kalakura, Raphalskij, and Yuriy's publication is a gem to be treasured and an important lesson in history to learn from. I have no doubt it has been touching the minds of many Ukrainians. The authors present a compelling analysis of all stages of Ukrainian history, from the antiquity of the first Slavic state of the ninth century to the Revolution of Dignity of 2013–2014. Theirs is certainly not the only exhaustive account of Ukrainian history. A potential "rival," in terms of the scope and detail, would be perhaps Subtelny's (2009) widely acclaimed volume published in English by the University of Toronto Press. Whereas Subtelny focuses primarily on the chronology of the events and stays within the parameters of history as the discipline in his analysis, Kalakura, Raphalskij, and Yuriy, on the other hand, attempt a multidisciplinary approach that, in the authors' view, can uncover the full complexity of the historical events and their actors.

By appealing to many and diverse areas of inquiry such as mythology, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, theology, politics, linguistics, and cultural studies, Kalakura, Raphalskij, and Yuriy weave together a powerful and seamless narrative that casts a spell on the reader's attention from the very first pages onward. Instrumental to their multidisciplinary approach is what they call a "civilization dimension" that situates a human being in the epicenter of historical events at each epoch. The authors claim that the analysis of history through the lens of the civilization approach brings novelty to the methods of analysis employed in historical studies. Further, they insist that such an approach constitutes a new methodological paradigm grounded in anthropological and cultural theories focusing specifically on a human being as a driver of cultural progress (p. 13).

While embarking on this complex analysis, the authors seek to accomplish the following tasks:

- To address the philosophical and historical understanding of the relationship between culture and civilization and a contemporary rendition of Ukrainian culture,

- To identify the peculiarities of a mythological worldview of ancient people comprising the pre-Christian nation of Ruso-Ukraine,
- To explore the phenomenon of Ukraine during the medieval times and the advent of printing and enlightenment,
- To shed the light on the cultural processes in Ukraine within imperial Russia and its influence on the formation of Ukrainian identity,
- To examine the role of Ukrainian revolution and nationhood from 1917 to 1921,
- And to unpack the transformative processes in Ukrainian culture in terms of post-Soviet events that have led to Maidan and the Revolution of Dignity within the contexts of resistance to Russian monopolism. (pp. 9–10).

This monumental, 491-page volume is composed of ten sections detailing the history of Ukraine from ancient times to modernity. The authors outline several key concepts and trends as the backdrop for their analysis: (a) globalization, modernization, explosion of information, and dynamic change in all spheres of the lives of individuals; (b) an exponential growth of the importance that a human being plays in the advancement of civilization; (c) a human being as a key mediator between culture and civilization; (d) an internalization of local and global trends toward a better understanding of Ukrainian culture within the context of the Revolution of Dignity and the choice for European integration; and (e) an understanding of Ukrainian culture within the context of an undeclared war with Russia.

Given the focal point of their analysis, the authors define Ukrainian culture as a “unity of spiritual and material developments by various generations of the Ukrainian people throughout their unbroken history, from antiquity to the present, and forms and ways of life of people. It organically perpetuates the beauty of Ukrainian nature and simultaneously creates a unique environment and cosmos” (p. 8). The authors place a premium on this definition when underlying the foundation for their “civilization dimension” approach to the analysis of Ukrainian history positioned within the history of Europe and the changing regimes of powers in the Ukrainian history.

When I encountered the complex material within each of the ten main sections, I was awed by the breadth and versatility of the authors’ knowledge and their skills to communicate the most difficult concepts in a fairly comprehensive manner to broad reading audiences. The process of plowing through the dense content a multitude of pages makes me realize how many more history lessons I still have to learn and how much precious knowledge still remains to be uncovered to fill in the gaps in my own professional expertise.

To summarize the strengths of the volume, I would emphasize its laser-focused and detailed analysis, the richness of the material presented and analyzed, its persuasion of argumentation and its proper and strong support, and an independent and critical stance the authors take and defend very effectively throughout the study. The text would be difficult to digest for a layperson or a novice researcher precisely because of its specialized nature intended primarily for specialized audiences, though I do not consider this to be a weakness of the work.

All in all, it is impossible to overestimate the value of this volume and its contribution to the field. It is truly monumental in scope and outstanding in quality. It is, in my view, a must read for all professional historians versed in Ukrainian and for all readers interested in the history of Ukraine and fluent in the Ukrainian language.

As mentioned earlier, *Ukrainian Culture: A Civilization Dimension* speaks to me at a very personal level. It reminds me of the generations of Ukrainians—wonderful, hard-working, educated, compassionate, and talented people—who have been fighting for their country’s independence and its territorial integrity for centuries. I am proud of my cultural heritage with all the controversies that may surround it. I am proud of my family history with all of its tragic and triumphant parts. Perhaps it is the tragedy of my parents and everything they taught me that has not just made me the person I am today, but also has made me more aware of and sensitive to the states of the human condition, such as adversity and the capacity to cope with and overcome it, and, on the other hand, the enjoyment of life despite all of its challenges. Reviewing this volume was yet another important history lesson I learned.

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