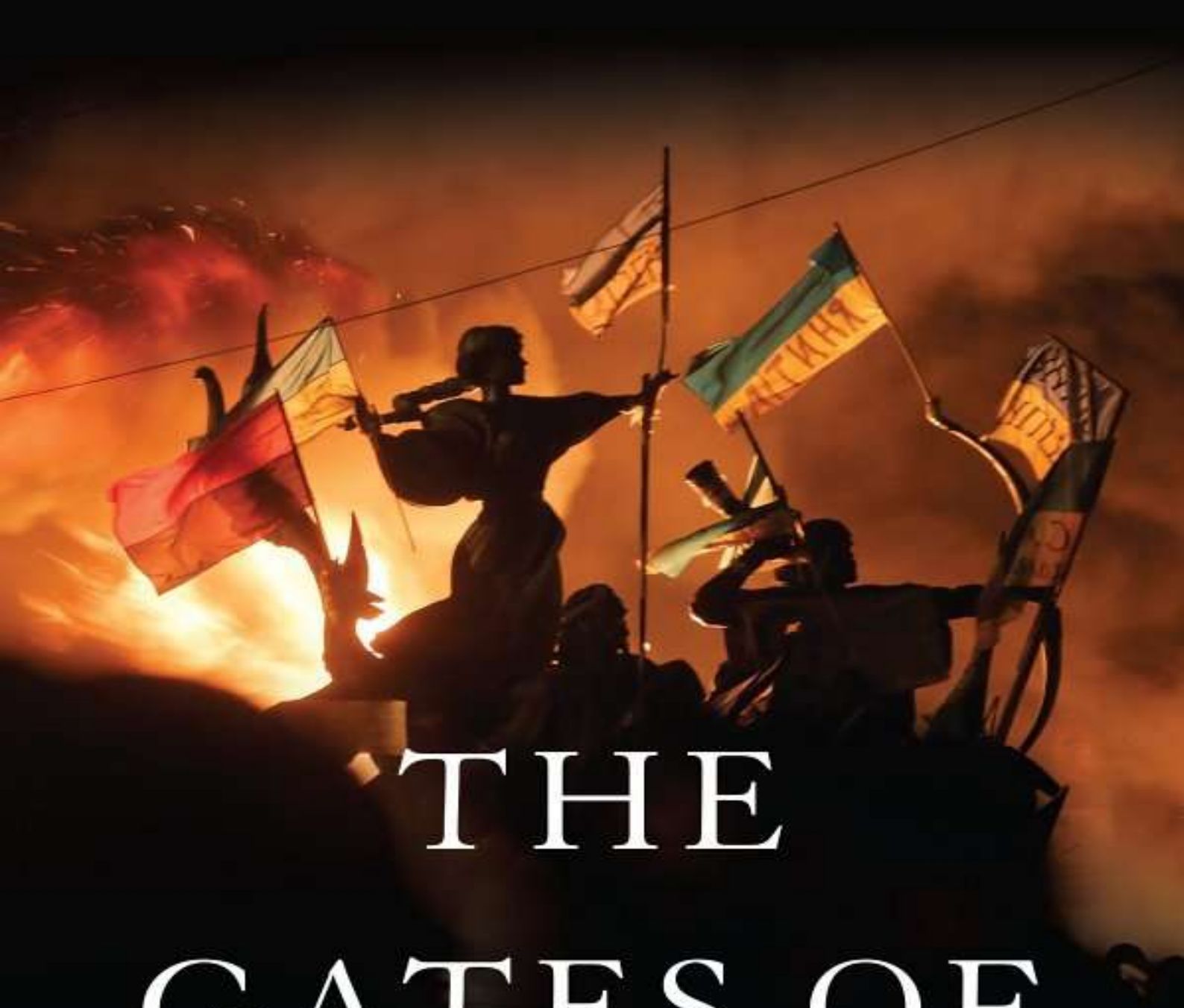

THE GATES OF EUROPE

A HISTORY *of* UKRAINE

SERHII PLOKHY

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New York

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Designed by Trish Wilkinson

Set in 11-point Adobe Garamond Pro

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Plokhy, Serhii, 1957–

The gates of Europe : a history of Ukraine / Serhii Plokhy.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-465-07394-8 (ebook) 1. Ukraine—History. I. Title.

DK508.51.P55 2015

947.7—dc23 2015015256

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To the people of Ukraine

CONTENTS

Maps

Introduction

I. ON THE PONTIC FRONTIER

CHAPTER 1 The Edge of the World

CHAPTER 2 The Advent of the Slavs

CHAPTER 3 Vikings on the Dnieper

CHAPTER 4 Byzantium North

CHAPTER 5 The Keys to Kyiv

CHAPTER 6 Pax Mongolica

II. EAST MEETS WEST

CHAPTER 7 The Making of Ukraine

CHAPTER 8 The Cossacks

CHAPTER 9 Eastern Reformations

CHAPTER 10 The Great Revolt

CHAPTER 11 The Partitions

CHAPTER 12 The Verdict of Poltava

III. BETWEEN THE EMPIRES

CHAPTER 13 The New Frontiers

CHAPTER 14 The Books of the Genesis

CHAPTER 15 The Porous Border

CHAPTER 16 On the Move

CHAPTER 17 The Unfinished Revolution

IV. THE WARS OF THE WORLD

CHAPTER 18 The Birth of a Nation

CHAPTER 19 A Shattered Dream

CHAPTER 20 Communism and Nationalism

CHAPTER 21 Stalin's Fortress

CHAPTER 22 Hitler's *Lebensraum*

CHAPTER 23 The Victors

V. THE ROAD TO INDEPENDENCE

CHAPTER 24 The Second Soviet Republic

CHAPTER 25 Good Bye, Lenin!

CHAPTER 26 The Independence Square

CHAPTER 27 The Price of Freedom

Epilogue: The Meanings of History

Acknowledgments

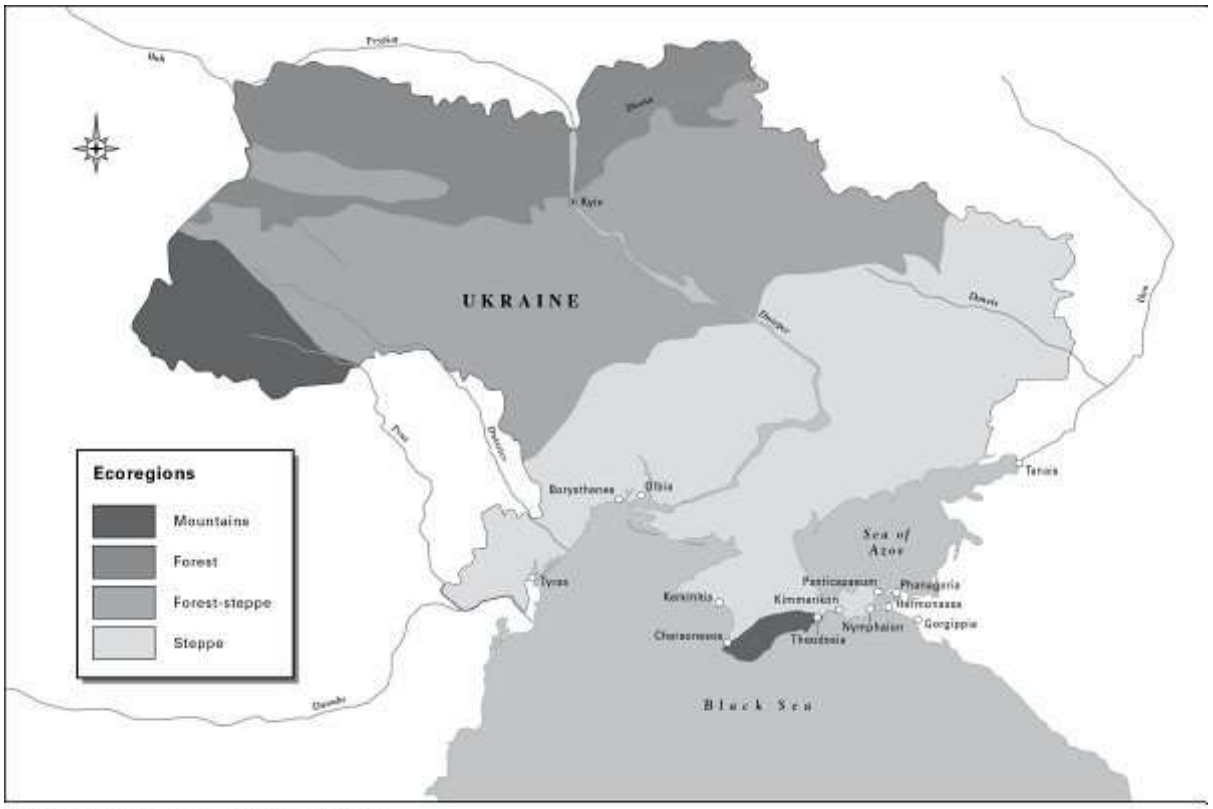
Historical Timeline

Who's Who in Ukrainian History

Glossary

Further Reading

Index



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Kyivan Rus', 980–1054

SOURCE: Zenon E. Kohut, Bohdan Y. Nebesio, and Myroslav Yurkevich, *Historical Dictionary of Ukraine* (Lanham, Maryland; Toronto; Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2005).

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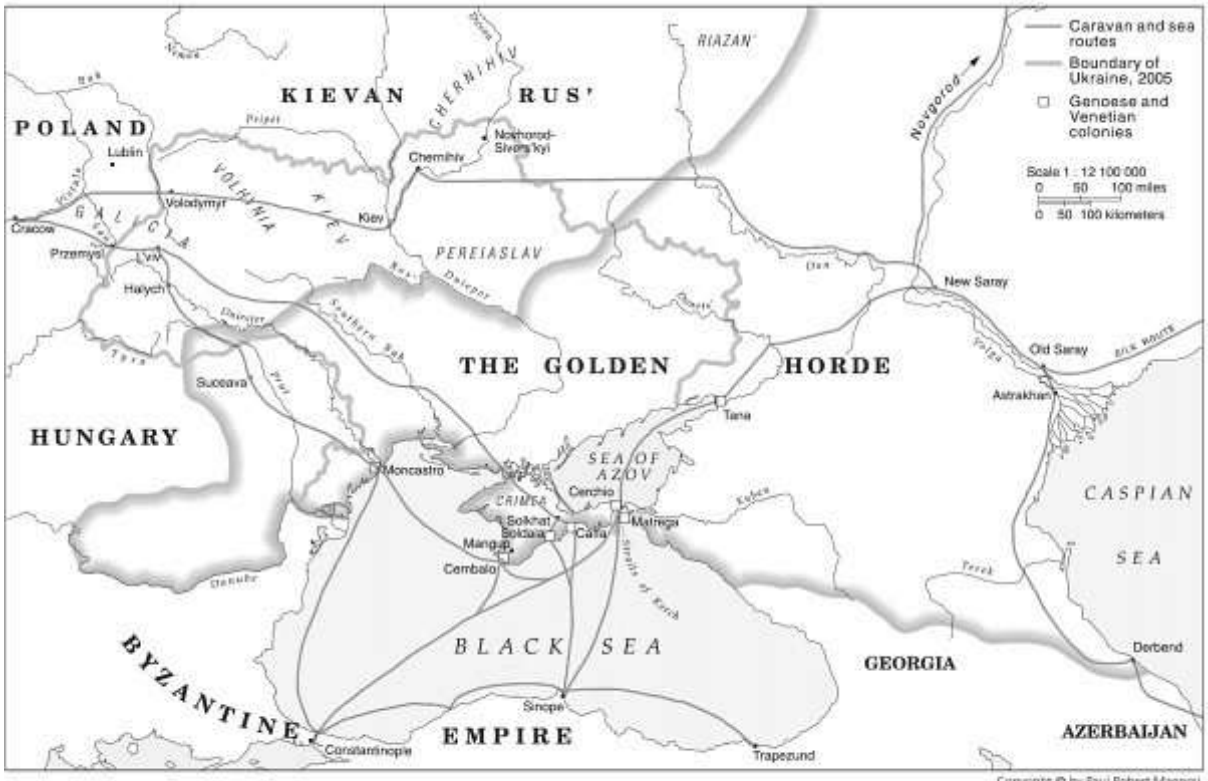
SOURCE: *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Russia and the Former Soviet Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).



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The Golden Horde ca. 1300

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The Russo-Ukrainian Conflict

INTRODUCTION

UKRAINIANS PROBABLY HAVE just as much right to brag about their role in changing the world as Scots and other nationalities about which books have been written asserting their claim to have shaped the course of human history. In December 1991, as Ukrainian citizens went to the polls en masse to vote for their independence, they also consigned the mighty Soviet Union to the dustbin of history. The events in Ukraine then had major international repercussions and did indeed change the course of history: the Soviet Union was dissolved one week after the Ukrainian referendum, and President George H. W. Bush declared the final victory of the West in the prolonged and exhausting Cold War.

The world next saw Ukraine on television screens in November 2004, when festive orange-clad crowds filled the squares and streets of Kyiv demanding fair elections and got their way. The Orange Revolution gave a common name to a number of "color revolutions" that shook authoritarian regimes from Serbia to Lebanon and from Georgia to Kyrgyzstan. The color revolutions did not change the post-Soviet world, but they left a lasting legacy and the hope that it would change one day. Ukrainians reappeared on the world's television screens in November and December 2013, when they poured onto the streets of Kyiv once again, this time in support of closer ties with the European Union. At a time when enthusiasm for the European Union was at a low ebb among its member countries, the readiness of the Ukrainians to march and stay on the streets in subzero temperatures for days, weeks, and months surprised and inspired the citizens of western and central Europe.

Events in Ukraine took an unexpected and tragic turn in early 2014, when a confrontation between the protesters and government forces violently disrupted the festive, almost street-party atmosphere of the earlier protests. In full view of television cameras, riot police and government snipers opened fire, wounding and killing dozens of pro-European demonstrators in February 2014. The images shocked the world. So did the Russian annexation of the Crimea in March 2014 and, later that spring, Moscow's campaign of hybrid warfare in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine. In July, the downing by pro-Russian separatists of a Malaysian airliner with almost three hundred people on board turned the Russo-Ukrainian conflict into a truly international one. The developments in Ukraine had a major impact on European and world affairs, causing politicians to speak