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IN HISTORIES AND STORIES

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Volodymyr Yermolenko (ed.)

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With a preface by Peter Pomerantsev

With an introduction by Andriy Kulakov

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CONTENTS

PREFACE by <i>Peter Pomerantsev</i>	11
INTRODUCTION: Tabula Rasa, or How to Find A Ukrainian Terra Incognita, by <i>Andriy Kulakov</i>	15
HISTORIES	
Ukraine: A Brief but Global History of Ukrainian Bread, by <i>Yaroslav Hrytsak</i>	23
Rus', Cossacks and Ukraine's Identity, interview with <i>Serhii Plokyh</i>	41
IDENTITIES	
Ukrainian Culture and Literature, interview with <i>Yuri Andrukhovych</i>	57
Ukrainians. From A Historical Matrix to the Present Day, by <i>Andriy Kurkov</i>	81
ARCHETYPES	
Steppe, Empire, and Cruelty, by <i>Volodymyr Yermolenko</i>	93
A Split Heart of Incompleteness, by <i>Andriy Bondar</i>	109
STORIES	
Ukraine as a Movie, by <i>Irena Karpa</i>	125
You Know It Better Than Me, by <i>Haska Shyyan</i>	141
MOTHERLANDS	
Majority as a Minority, by <i>Larysa Denysenko</i>	155
Gaining a Motherland, by <i>Vakhtang Kebuladze</i>	169

PAINS

- Donbas—Ukraine, a Life Journey, by *Volodymyr Rafeenko* **183**
Ukraine and Crimean Tatars, interview with *Alim Aliev* **195**

RELATIONS

- Ukrainian-Polish relations, interview with *Ola Hnatiuk* **207**
Ukrainians and Jews, interview with *Leonid Finberg* **227**

STEREOTYPES

- Neither Admiration Nor Fear:
Stereotypes About Ukraine in Germany, by *Andrii Portnov* ... **245**
Insecure Security of Ukraine, by *Hanna Shelest* **259**







PREFACE

One of the curiosities with Ukraine is that no one really knows where it is. For many, not least Vladimir Putin, it's an extension of neo-Tsarist Russia. For others, it's another Central European state, a proto-Poland of frustrated blood and language nationalism which just needs the chance to build strong state institutions to express its essence. A leading group of Ukrainian sociologists, the Nestor Group, argues that Ukrainians' value system rejects both the Russian model of paternalistic deification of authority and the language-and-bureaucracy-makes-a-state logic of Central Europe. Instead, Ukrainians lean towards horizontal civil society bonds, family and church and small business, which puts Ukraine in the same bracket as southern, Mediterranean countries such as Italy or Greece. Writing in 1977, the Russian language writing, Soviet Ukrainian raised, Austro-Hungarian-inspired, British citizen Igor Pomerantsev seemed to anticipate the sociologists, describing Ukraine as part of 'a greater Mediterranean':

*Strips of light
in a room.
Daytime.
July.
Kiev.
The lightest strip
breathes alongside
on the divan.*

*On a map for fingers
Kiev
is somewhere near
Alexandria.*

Ukraine seduces and confuses because parts of all these identities, more journeys than identities, exist simultaneously and form their own type of meanings. Russian identity here is not like Russian in Russia; Eastern European not like Poland; Mediterranean not quite the same Mediterranean as Sicily or Greece, and if it's Alexandria, it's the half hallucinated one of Lawrence Durrell. Of course this polyphony has confused Western writers and commentators who want to see things in simple, straight lines. But Ukraine resists straight lines—it's a space that breaks all the old, limited models of identity. Its casual bilingualism makes a mockery of the Herderian idea that language makes a nation. It's a space where Muslims and Jews have traditionally helped each other out. Where nationalism can be associated with the most liberal democracy (as well as the more predictable fascism), while multiculturalism can be used to pursue Empire. It's a country where very different stories of the past play out simultaneously, but where the question of what Europe means is now contested most fiercely and existentially. It is, in this sense, at the avant-garde of the present. While other, supposedly more developed countries have nervous breakdowns about how to balance their identity with the fluctuations and instabilities of globalization, Ukraine has been negotiating the paradoxes of being a non-linear nation for much longer.

This makes the writers and thinkers who come out of this creative flux such a vital reading. One of the great failures of the literary and media classes in what was once known as the West has been the inability to find Ukrainian voices to talk about the Ukrainian experience. Thank goodness there have been a few exceptional Western academics to help out, but it's high time for the Ukrainian experience to be related by Ukrainians. Though of course, what makes Ukraine so exciting is the definition of Ukraine in a state of becoming. This is something I've experienced first hand.