

Oleksandr Shyshko. *To Get Ukraine: A Report from Inside the Country, for Those Looking On from the Outside*. Translated by Huw Davies, Glagoslav Publications, 2015. 252 pp. €19.99, paper.

In the wake of the Maidan protests of 2013-14, Ukraine received heightened attention from the European and international media. Many discussions have since been conducted about the history, culture, and heritage of the country, with experts from all over trying to explain how and why the current situation there arose. The recent occurrences in the Crimea necessitate even more profound investigation. This is why it is of the highest importance to understand Ukraine from the inside—to highlight the country's struggle for independence and to reveal the long shadow of the Soviet system, which has caused persistent instability in the country. In this context, Oleksandr Shyshko's book helps the Western reader to understand the multi-faceted aspects of Ukraine—its history, the mentality of the people, and the characteristic features of the state.

Shyshko's book is 252 pages long and is divided into 66 chapters, each of which is rather short (most are one to three pages in length). The topics include historical affiliations with Poland and Russia, traditions and food, geographical particularities, and recent population statistics. In my review, I will comment on some of the more interesting chapters, starting with the one on the origins of the name *Ukraine*. Here, the author briefly explains that *Ukraine* simply means "country" and not "periphery of the Muscovite land" (19-20). Against this backdrop, it is obvious that the Ukrainian and the Russian perspectives on the country's role in history are often distinct; the Russian perspective suggests an option to see Ukraine as a permanent part of Russia. Thus, in the chapter that follows, entitled "Rus, Muscovy and Ukraine" (21-24), Shyshko points out that "[h]ad the Russian leaders exhibited a little less imperial ambition, Ukraine would be more than happy to work with Russia . . ." (22). After several attempts by Ukraine to gain independence (which are discussed chronologically, in several chapters of the book), an initial renaissance of Ukrainian self-consciousness occurred, when in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries, writers started to produce texts that became classics of Ukrainian literature (45). After the battles of World War I, the Communist regime was installed, in 1919. A tragic result of Communist governance and the collectivization of farms was the Holodomor, the Great Famine of 1932-33, and the author comments that "Ukrainians have every reason to believe that what took place was a policy of the genocide of their people" (85). With the end of the disastrous World War II, during which the country suffered a huge number of casualties, the political situation in Ukraine changed again. It was characterized by a strong Russification of the entire society, a fact that also held true for the entire

USSR in the domains of education, science, army, broadcasting, general society, and so on. The result of this shift was the radical decline of the Ukrainian language in favour of the Russian language as the more promising one (106-07). In 1986, the careless actions of workers caused the Chornobyl explosion, with devastating consequences for both people and the environment. In this context, as might be expected, in the early 1990s, the newly independent Ukrainian state had to struggle with a large number of economic and structural problems, which explains why emigration became a major movement and has remained so since that time (126).

Having a look at present-day Ukrainian society, Shyshko focuses on some interesting facts. One of them is the multilingual landscape: While nowadays most of the population uses Ukrainian in daily communication, speakers of other languages (for example, Russian) do not experience any problems (130). But nonetheless, some sort of language conflict was claimed by Moscow during recent political tensions. Another section of the book that is worth reading is the one dealing with ancient traditions—here, we learn about Easter, various customs, colourful embroidery as a part of a rich national heritage, and delicious homemade cuisine (160-68). The author makes another significant point—about the Ukrainian mentality, which is described in connection with the shadow of the Soviet regime. The time of Communism shaped peoples' states of mind, and, therefore, Shyshko argues, "the biggest weakness that our people have inherited from Soviet times is our complete inability to plan our economic future" (181). After 1991, alongside the huge disappointment in economic development and a growing poverty, several groups of nouveaux riches emerged (184-91). It is clear that the circumstances described by the author are also a fundamental cause for the mass emigration of well-educated people (and brain drain is itself a reason for some delays in structural reform). Shyshko concludes by reiterating that his goal in the book is to explain his country to outsiders, and he underscores the difficulty of this task (216).

Shyshko's book, with its neutral approach in the creation of a mosaic of history, culture, economy, society, and politics, really helps the reader to understand Ukraine's past and present. Thus, the English-language translation *To Get Ukraine* is a useful publication for Ukrainians and non-Ukrainians alike who wish to familiarize themselves with the realities of Ukraine—that fascinating country in the heart of Europe.

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