



A History of Lutheranism in Ukraine 16th to 20th Centuries

by Mark Rohrback
Church History Paper
Prof. Korthals
May 1, 2001



HISTORY OF LUTHERANISM IN UKRAINE: 16TH-20TH CENTURIES

Brief History of Ukraine

The word "Ukraine" (Ukraina) means "borderland." The name refers to the lands of the Dnieper river basin, a vast frontier, a land on the periphery of the civilized world.¹ In ancient times the land of Ukraine served as a buffer between Europe and the nomadic raiders of the Eurasian Steppe. The rolling and wooded plains known as the *steppes* have trampled by many a hoof over the centuries. Scythians dwelled in the steppes north of the Black Sea from the 7th to 4th centuries BC. After the Scythians, many invaders-- Ostrogoths, Huns, and the Turkish-Iranian Khazars, made parts of modern day Ukraine their camping ground. Beginning in the late 7th century BC, the Greeks also brought their culture to Ukraine as they set up trading posts along the northern shore of the Black Sea.

The first people to bring some sort of control and unity to the land known as Ukraine were known as the Kievan Rus. Some historians say that the Kievan Rus were of Scandinavian descent, when the Varangians (a.k.a. Vikings, Normans) came to the land of Ukraine as warriors and merchants. The Varangians were vital for the political development of the land, which at that time consisted of various warring Slavic tribes. According to Ukrainian historian Orest Subtelny, the Varangians: "either by politically organizing the Slavs over whom they gained control or by posing a threat and forcing the Slavs to organize themselves more effectively, the Varangians acted as catalysts for political development."²

The rule of the Kievan Rus lasted from about 882 AD to 1169 AD. By the late 10

¹Subtelny, O. *Ukraine a History*. p. 105.

²ibid. p.25

century, the city of Kiev had become the center of a vast unified state that stretched from the gulf of Finland to the Black Sea, encompassing most of modern day Ukraine, Belarus and north-central Russia. At a time when Moscow was a little-known town in the sticks, Kiev was the base for the largest political entity in Europe and a major power in the east.

During this time the people of the land along with its rulers were mostly pagan and the worship of idols was widely practiced. Around 869, Christian missionaries and brothers, Cyril and Methodius, came to bring the Gospel to the Slavs. In doing so, they worked out the Cyrillic Alphabet, borrowed from Greek and Hebrew, which came to replace the ancient Slavonic characters. The Cyrillic Alphabet formed the basis for the modern Ukrainian and Russian alphabets. While no one knows how many hearts the Word of God won among the Slavs, it seems that the majority of the people in this immense land remained trapped in their pagan ways.

Perhaps the greatest ruler of this period was Volodymyr the Great (980-1015). In 988, Volodymyr the Great accepted Christianity from Constantinople, which also introduced a Byzantine influence over Ukrainian politics and culture. The story of Volodymyr's conversion is recorded in the *Primary Chronicle*. This chronicle, which deals with history of the Kievan Rus up to the 12th century, was compiled in the Kiev Monastery of the Caves in 1111-13 A.D.. As the *Primary Chronicle*³ recounts:

In the year 987, Vladimir (Volodymyr) summoned together his boyars(nobles) and the city elders and said to them, "The Bulgars came before me urging me to accept their religion. Then came the Germans and praised their own faith; and after them came the Jews. Finally, the Greeks appeared, criticizing all other faiths but commending their own. What is your opinion on this subject, and what do you answer?" The boyars and elders replied, "You have men at your disposal. Send them to inquire about the ritual of each and how they

³ cited from the *Russian Chronicles*, pp.48-52.

worship God." . . . so they chose good and wise men to the number of ten. Then they went on their way.

When they returned, Vladimir called together his boyars and elders and commanded the envoys to speak out, and so they did, saying: "Among the Bulgars, we beheld how they worship in their temple, called a mosque, while they stand ungirt. The Bulgar bows, sits down, looks hither and thither like one possessed, and there is no joy among them, only sorrow. Their religion is not good. Then we went among the Germans, and saw them performing many ceremonies in their temples; but we beheld no beauty there.

Then we went to Byzantium, and the Greeks led us to the places where they worship their God (The Hagia Sophia), and we knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth. For on earth there is no such splendor or such beauty, and we are at a loss how to describe it. We only know that God dwells there among men, and their service is fairer than the ceremonies of other nations. For we cannot forget that beauty. Every man, after tasting something sweet, is afterward unwilling to accept that which is bitter, and therefore we cannot dwell any longer here." The boyars spoke and said, "If the Greek faith were bad, it would not have been adopted by your grandmother Olga, who was wiser than all other men." Vladimir then inquired "from which religion they should all accept baptism", and they replied whichever he wished.

A year later, in 988, the Kievan Rus became a Christian people. However, this was not by their own choosing. Vladimir forcibly converted his subjects to Christianity after his own acceptance of the faith. Again, the *Primary Chronicle* records:

When he arrived at his capital (Kiev), he directed that the idols should be overthrown, and that some should be cut to pieces and others burned with fire. Thereafter Vladimir sent heralds throughout the whole city to proclaim that if inhabitants, rich or poor, did not go to the river, they would risk his displeasure. . . . The next day, Vladimir went to the Dnieper with the priests of the princess (Anna, sister of Basil and Constantine) and those from Cherson, and a countless multitude. They all went into the water : some stood up to their necks, others to their breasts, the younger near the bank, some of them holding children in their arms, while the adults waded farther out. The priests stood by and offered prayers. There was joy in heaven and upon the earth to behold so many souls saved.

The Kievan Rus dynasty came to an end when Kiev was sacked by the Mongols in 1240. After the Mongols left, the weakened Kievan Rus state became increasingly fractured into many little principalities. Its weakened condition, parts of the Kievan Rus

kingdom were gobbled up by neighboring countries. The region of Galicia, in western Ukraine, became attached to Poland. The region of Volhynia, also in the west, was taken over by Lithuania. By 1370, Lithuania had replaced the Mongols as ruler of most of Ukraine. In 1569, the Ukrainian lands under Lithuania became part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

About a century later (1667), Kiev and the Ukrainian lands east of the Dnieper river came under Russian rule. From that time on, Ukraine was known to many as "Little Russia" and Ukrainian culture has ever since been overshadowed by Russian culture. Even after the Russians took over, the western territories still remained under Polish rule. When Poland was partitioned in the 18th century, the western land of Galicia went to Austria. Galicia remained under Austrian rule for the next 144 years. It is interesting to see, even today, how many towns along the western border of Ukraine have Austrian-influenced architecture.

After the Bolshevik revolution in 1917 and the defeat of Austria one year later, Ukraine tried to break with Russia and become its own unified state. However, the new "republic" of Ukraine had become a battleground for Ukrainians, Poles, White Russians, and the Bolsheviks as they all contended for the rich Ukrainian land. When the fight was over Ukraine had once again lost its independence. Galicia and Volhynia were annexed by Poland. The area around the southern slope of the Carpathian mountains was joined with Czechoslovakia. The territories of Bukovina and Bessarabia in the southwest became part of Romania. The rest of Ukraine became a "republic" under the Soviet Union. After WWII, the western provinces once again became part of Ukraine but under Soviet rule.

Forty-five years later, in 1990, Ukraine again declared its sovereignty. In a 1991 referendum, voters chose to be independent from Moscow, and Ukraine remains independent to this day.

Introduction to the History of Lutheranism in Ukraine

The history of Ukraine is rich in its scope and in its events. The preceding history is only a brief summary and due to the nature of this paper I had to leave many events unaccounted. The many essays and histories written on the subject of Ukraine could very well fill a library. Yet, when it comes to the history of Lutheranism in Ukraine, it is difficult to find a single source that deals with the subject in any depth.

The major portion of the following history was gathered from an interview with Pastor Vyacheslav Horpynchuk, a pastor in the Ukrainian Lutheran Church. Thanks to his tireless efforts in gathering all the information he could find, this little-known history is being preserved. Where this history may seem sketchy it is due to a lack of resources and from some of information being passed down by word of mouth. I have tried to include dates where they seem appropriate and when I found them available.

The Arrival of Lutheranism in Ukraine

In the 16th century, the biggest part of Ukraine belonged to Poland. The Reformation had already made its impact on Poland and there were many Lutheran congregations there. From there it was only a short leap and Lutheran churches began to spring up in the western regions of Ukraine under Polish rule. As some of the nobility in that region embraced Lutheranism, they lead the people in setting up Lutheran churches in

many cities.

Around the same time two Ukrainians, Stanislav Kovitsky and Martin Kovikovsky, had traveled to Wittenberg and met with Philip Melancthon. Upon returning to Ukraine, they continued their correspondence with Melancthon. They also wrote several works about Lutherans and Lutheranism in Ukraine. It is not clear whether or not these works are still around today. A sad, yet interesting side note is that Kovitsky later became a Calvinist and then a Unitarian. One would hope this had nothing to do with his correspondence with Melancthon.

According to historian Orest Subtelny, at the time of the Reformation, Calvinism had found favor 25-30% of the nobility in Poland and Ukraine. At the same time, Arianism, which rejected the Trinity and preached pacifism, also began to establish itself in Poland, Lithuania, and Volhynia.⁴ The various Protestant denominations, including Lutherans, began to establish schools, and set up printing presses, which help to further develop Polish as the literary language of the time.

One might ask where the Orthodox Church was at this time. The Orthodox Church was very unhappy with all the Protestant goings on, but due to internal corruption secular meddling, the Orthodox church was in a state of decline and was not free to deal with the Protestants at that time. For the time being Lutherans, as well as all other Protestants enjoyed a period of growth and tolerance.

The first translation of the Bible into the spoken Ukrainian language was made during this time. Under the influence of the Reformation, this Bible was translated from a Polish Bible, which had been translated from Luther's Bible. This Bible helped develop the

Ukrainian language in much the same way the Luther's Bible did for Germany. This Bible is still used today everytime a Ukrainian government official is sworn in.

Yet the honeymoon for Lutheranism in Ukraine was soon over. In 1564 the Catholic Counter-Reformation arrived in Poland. The Jesuits were quite aggressive in stomping out the Reformation in Poland and in Ukraine as well. The leaders of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth became Catholic and from that time on, Poland has been a predominately Catholic country.

Whatever recovery Lutheranism could have made after the Counter-Reformation was stopped in by a series of wars and Cossack revolts beginning in 1648. Following the fighting, at the dawn of the 17th century, Ukraine lay in ruins. It was at this time that Ukraine began its dealings with Russia. Ukrainians have been sorry ever since, for once the Russians took over, Ukrainian cultural development came to a halt, and long with it, Lutheranism. Although some small seeds of Lutheranism still remained in the western-Ukrainian land of Volhynia.

German Settlers

Lutheranism was again brought to Ukraine by Germans who were invited to settle in Russia and Ukraine during the 16th-19th centuries. They were mostly invited to colonize the Steppes by the government. This was especially true during the reign of Catherine the Great (ruled 1762-96) who was a native German by birth. Many of the German colonists ended up living in the Galicia-Volhynia region and in the southwest near the Black Sea. The Germans were enticed to settle by the Russian government which promised that they would be exempt from certain taxes and live in the manner they

⁴Subtelny, p. 92.

wanted.

Yet, due to pressure from the Orthodox Church, they were not allowed to be Lutheran. Lutheran pastors who were among the settlers soon found that if they practiced Lutheranism, the Russian state and Orthodox church would be breathing down their necks. And so those who were Lutheran among the German settlers continued to be Lutheran, but kept it quiet. And that was not the only thing they kept to themselves. The Germans kept away from the Ukrainians around them, keeping their language, customs and bloodlines German. Because of this, Lutheranism never spread outside of the villages where it was privately practiced.

During the WWI, the Ukrainian Germans found themselves between a rock and a hard place. As the Kaiser's army marched toward Ukraine, many of the Ukrainian Germans didn't want to fight their brother Germans. They also didn't want to be disloyal to their adopted Russian government. For these reasons, many of the German settlers left Ukraine for Western Europe, Canada, and the United States. At the time of WWII, the Germans that remained in Ukraine were faced with a similar situation. Rather than fight their brothers, or be deported to Siberia by Stalinist Russia, most chose to flee. Once again, although the seeds of Lutheranism were there, they were not allowed to sprout in Ukraine.

The Seed Sprouts

During the Russian Revolution in 1917, Ukraine attempted to rise up and join with Lenin and the gang in order to once and for all throw off Russian Imperialist rule and make Ukraine it's own republic. By 1921, eastern and western Ukraine had joined

together to form the Ukrainian Peoples Republic. However, one year later, in 1922, the republic had fell under Soviet domination. A peace agreement was made between Soviet Russia and Ukraine, and it became part of the Soviet Empire. Ukraine, with its good farmland and valuable resources, as well as its ports along the Black Sea, was to great a thing for the Russians, Imperialist or Soviet, to give up. In fact, Ukraine was the only nation formerly under Imperialist rule to not gain its independence at the time.

While eastern Ukraine went to the Bolsheviks, western Ukraine once again went under Polish rule. Many Ukrainians in the east fled to the west to get away from the Soviet rule. Because of the great turmoil and feelings of loss, many Ukrainians turned to God. However, many people were also tired of the corruption and empty ritualism of the Orthodox and the Greek-Catholic churches. And so many turned to Protestants who had begun to grow in Polish-ruled western Ukraine. On the 27th of April, 1925 the first Protestant worship service in many years was held in the town of Stanislaviv. It was held by the Reformed not Lutherans.

There was an interest expressed by some western Ukrainians in starting up a Lutheran church. This group was organized and began to have worship services with the help of a Lutheran pastor named Theodore Sodler. Pastor Sodler had been sent from Germany to be a missionary among the Jews in the Galicia region.⁵ He was active among the German settlers in that region and also was supportive of the small Ukrainian Lutheran movement.

During this same time, a man by the name of Socinsky, an Orthodox priest who

⁵Although it is likely, it is not clear whether or not Sodler was sent by one of the German mission societies so prevelant at the time.

had converted to Lutheranism, had revised the *Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*, which was used in worship in the Orthodox church, for use in the Lutheran church.

Socinsky sent his revised liturgy to three universities in Leipzig, Tuebingen and Vienna, and it was appreciated in those places as a good liturgy. Soon after, the liturgy began to be used in the worship life of growing Ukrainian Lutheran church.

From 1925-29, the Lutheran church had been working together with the Reformed of the same region. Yet, when the Reformed began to demand the Lutherans submit to Reformed doctrine, Socinsky called a conference. The conference was held in 1926 and Socinsky protested the Reformed's demands of the Lutherans. He also took a confessional stand and said that he could not compromise the Gospel. By 1929 the Lutherans had split from the Reformed and formed the Ukrainian Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession (UECAC).

During this time, Socinsky began to have personal problems with alcohol and was also accused of mismanaging the church's funds. After calling him to repentance on three separate occasions, Socinsky was eventually asked to leave the church. In 1928 a new leader arrived on the scene. His name was Theodore Yarchuk. Yarchuk was temperate and exerted a wholesome theological presence on the Lutherans on the UECAC.

Theodore Yarchuk had been trained in Rome as a Greek-Catholic priest. The Greek-Catholic church was a sister church to the Roman Catholic Church ever since they signed Union of Brest in 1596. In the agreement the Greek-Catholics were allowed to keep their Byzantine liturgy. The Union of Brest also retained the right for the priests in the Greek-Catholic church to marry. However, in Yarchuk's time, Rome was cracking

down on the Greek-Catholics. They were demanding that the liturgy could only be performed in Latin. Greek-Catholics all over Ukraine were being surprised by coming to mass and hearing the priest speak in a foreign language. Rome also made the demand that priests could no longer be married.

Needless to say, many people were miffed at the direction that Greek-Catholic church seemed headed, including a young priest by the name of Yarchuk. He had been reading the Lutheran Confessions and they had struck a chord with him. While visiting the city of Kharkiv, Yarchuk stopped by the Lutheran church there and was moved by the beautiful singing in Ukrainian. Not long after, he decided that he wanted to go to and study at a Lutheran Seminary. He expressed his interest to Theodore Sodler, who then sent him to the Lutheran Seminary at Tuebingen. When Yarchuk returned to Ukraine, he became an active leader of the fledgling UECAC.

Pastor Yarchuk was blessed with many talents in music, liturgy and languages. He translated Luther's Small Catechism, the Augsburg Confession (with an introduction), and a short history of the Lutheran Church in Ukraine. He eventually wanted to translate all of the Lutheran Confessions into Ukrainian but was prevented by the onset of WWII. Pastor Yarchuk also was the editor of three publications *The Banner*, *Be Sighted*, and *New World*. He also published a worship book, a hymnal, a Bible History book for Sunday School children (translated from a German book), as well as many pamphlets. Yarchuk had also wanted to publish Luther's Works in Ukrainian. This is a project that Ukrainian Lutheran Church of today hopes to carry out in the future.

As the UECAC grew, the Greek-Catholic church began to make slanderous

accusations in order to give Lutherans a bad name. Some of the outrageous charges made by the Catholics were that Lutherans baptize their children with gasoline, and that Lutheran pastors sprinkle perfume on the women who attend worship, which is why they like the Lutheran church. Yarchuk published a pamphlet defending the Lutheran church against the Catholics from his new publishing house in the city of Stanislaviv, which had become the headquarters for the UECAC.

With Yarchuk as its leader, worship was held every Sunday and the church began to grow rapidly. From 1925-39 the UECAC grew to become 25 congregations with somewhere between 10,000-20,000 members. The Lutheran church was popular among the people who were drawn by its teaching of the pure Gospel.

While Pastor Yarchuk was important for the theological life of the Lutheran church in Ukraine, the organizational life was led by Ilarion Shobet. Shobet was half German, half Ukrainian and was a deacon in the Lutheran church. Shobet was active in the translating of the Bible into Ukrainian and his translation is the one used today by Ukrainian Lutherans.

Dark Times

By 1939 the Soviets had come into western Ukraine. Anti-religious persecution began, and within two weeks of their arrival, Theodore Yarchuk was arrested. He was sent to prison in Russia⁶ and was most likely executed in 1941. Imprisonment or death was also the fate many Lutherans at the time. The Soviets militant atheism led them to destroy most of the church buildings as well as church life throughout Ukraine.

⁶at this time many professing Christians were sent to Siberia

When the Nazis came into western Ukraine in 1941, the Lutherans had hopes that their worship life could continue under them. Although their worship life did continue until 1944, it was not to the same extent as before because many of their pastors were gone. When the Soviets came again in 1944, almost all of the Lutheran pastors who had remained in Ukraine fled to the U.S. and Canada. There is the story of a Lutheran pastor at this time, whose name I was unable to locate, who was caught at Stalingrad, and spent 15 years in a Russian prison. By the request of the West German government he was released and served as a pastor in Bavaria until his death in 1968.

Another Lutheran Pastor, whose name I was again unable to locate, fled to the United States. Although he knew no English, he eventually wound serving as a pastor in the Missouri Synod until his death in the 1980's. It was he who preserved Yarchuk's UECAC worship book and hymnal. These books were given to Pastor John Shep, an ELS pastor of Ukrainian-American descent, who used these books to develop a radio program that was broadcast in Ukraine starting in 1979. When Ukraine became independent from Russia in 1991, Shep and the ELS organization *Thoughts of Faith* used this opportunity to make contacts with the people in Ukraine who had listened to their broadcasts. Pastor Shep became the missionary to Kiev, while Pastor Roger Kovaciny was the missionary to the city western city of Ternopil.

After nearly 52 years of seeming to be dead, the Ukrainian Lutheran church was resurrected and the first worship services were held in the cities of Kiev and Ternopil in 1993. In 1994, the Ukrainian Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession was reorganized as the Ukrainian Lutheran Church. That same year Saint Sophia Lutheran

Seminary was begun in Ternopil. The ULC is currently served by 10 Ukrainian pastors, and by 3 American missionaries from the ELS. At present, there are 16 congregations, 4 preaching stations, and 5 congregations that do hold official membership in the ULC but are served by ULC pastors. The ULC publishes a monthly magazine called the *Banner*, and a quarterly youth magazine called *New World*. Both of these magazines get their names from the original publications of Theodore Yarchuk.

In the history of the Lutheran church in Ukraine, one can really see how God preserves His people and His Word despite what the situation may seem at the time. I pray that the story of the Ukrainian Lutheran church may inspire Lutherans everywhere to appreciate and hold fast to their Lutheran heritage, but more importantly to their faith in the grace and love of their Savior God, who rules all history for the benefit of those He loves in Christ!

Bibliography

Allen, W.E.D.. *The Ukraine: A History*. New York: Russell and Russell, 1963.

Chamberlin, William Henry. *The Ukraine: A Submerged Nation*. New York:
The MacMillan Co., 1944.

Horpynchuk, Pastor Vyacheslav. *Personal interview by Mark Rohrback, January 3rd,*
2001.

Hrushevsky, Mykhailo. *A History of Ukraine*. New Haven: Yale University Press,
1941.

Subtelny, Orest. *Ukraine: A History*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press,
1988.

Walters, Cecilia, ed. *The Russian Chronicles*. New York: Quadrillion Publishing,
1990.