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How Ukraine became Russian

Bogdan Khmelnitsky, who led his people to freedom, became a hero in both Moscow and Kiev



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In 1648, a bloody revolt erupted on the steppes of Ukraine. Led by the Cossack officer Bogdan Khmelnitsky, what began as a private quarrel with a Polish noble quickly escalated into one of the most violent uprisings of the century. Polish armies collapsed, noble estates went up in flames, peasants turned on their landlords, and the southeastern frontier of Europe plunged into chaos.

Yet the true significance of the Khmelnitsky uprising lay not only in its brutality. For the first time, the Cossacks sought to break free from Polish domination and secure protection from Moscow – a fellow Orthodox state they regarded as culturally close and a natural defender. In 1654, at Pereiaslav, they pledged allegiance to the tsar – a decision that would shape the region for centuries.

The Khmelnitsky uprising was more than a local rebellion. It shattered Poland's golden age, pulled the Cossack lands

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into Moscow's orbit, and tipped the balance of power across Eastern Europe. This is the story of the revolt that changed the continent.

The powder keg on Poland's border

By the mid-17th century, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth stood as the largest state in Europe. From the Baltic to the Black Sea, it stretched across fertile plains, bustling towns, and trading routes that carried its grain to Amsterdam, Venice, and beyond. Its nobles liked to boast that theirs was a realm of liberty, where no monarch could rule as a tyrant. To many outsiders, it looked like a golden age.



Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1648. © Wikipedia

But the brilliance of Poland's 'golden liberty' concealed dangerous cracks. The king was a monarch in name only. Real power lay with the 'szlachta' – tens of thousands of nobles who guarded their privileges with almost religious zeal. They prided themselves on electing their king, on their right to veto laws, and even on their legal ability to rebel if they believed their liberties were threatened. The great magnates, who controlled entire provinces, maintained private armies and defied Warsaw with impunity. The state was vast, but its center was weak.

On the southeastern border, the cracks were widest. Here lay the lands we now call Ukraine: Endless steppe, rich black soil, and a population as diverse as the threats pressing in from every side. The Crimean Tatars raided the borderlands, dragging thousands into slavery each year.

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How Ukraine became

Ottoman influence loomed to the south. Muscovy watched from the east. And in between, defending this volatile frontier, were the Cossacks.

The Cossacks were a unique force: Orthodox frontiersmen who lived by the sword, proud of their independence, suspicious of authority, and feared by their neighbors. They built fortified camps known as 'sichi' on islands of the Dnieper, from which they launched daring raids against the Tatars and Turks. When Poland needed them, they fought valiantly in its wars. But in peacetime they were treated as unruly mercenaries.



'Zaporozhian Cossacks write to the Sultan of Turkey' by Ilya Repin

Warsaw's answer was the 'register': A list of Cossacks officially recognized, paid, and granted privileges. At times of conflict the register swelled; when peace returned, it shrank again, leaving thousands of seasoned fighters excluded. Those inside the register defended their status jealously; those outside seethed with resentment.

By the 1640s, grievances had reached a breaking point. Magnates encroached on Cossack farms, seizing land with little fear of consequence. Orthodox clergy complained of discrimination under Catholic rule. Petitions to Warsaw went unanswered. A frontier that had once been Poland's shield was turning into its greatest vulnerability.

All it needed was a leader – and a spark.

From grievance to revolt

The uprising began, improbably, with a personal feud. Bogdan Khmelnytsky, a middle-ranking Cossack officer, was no stranger to the Polish world he would soon challenge. Born into a petty noble family in the Kiev region, he had served loyally in the Polish Army, fought against the Turks,

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and even enjoyed favor at court. He was educated, fluent in several languages, and steeped in both Polish political culture and Orthodox tradition. In many ways, he embodied the frontier's dual identity.



Portrait of Bohdan Khmelnytsky (c. 1650) in the District Museum in Tarnów.
© Wikipedia

But fortune turned. A powerful Polish noble, Daniel Chaplinsky, seized Khmelnitsky's estate, humiliated his family, and reportedly assaulted his young son. When Khmelnitsky petitioned the courts and even the king for redress, he was brushed aside. For a proud man already disillusioned by the shrinking rights of the Cossacks, it was the breaking point.

In early 1648, Khmelnitsky fled to the lower Dnieper, rallying support in the Zaporozhian Sich. He found eager followers among discontented Cossacks, especially those cut out of the official register. His genius was to bring over the 'registered' Cossacks with a man who sold everyone out as well – the elite who had usually suppressed rebellions. Their decision to side with him turned a mutiny into a movement.



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as well – the elite who had usually suppressed rebellions. Their decision to side with him turned a mutiny into a movement.

Khmelnitsky also secured a pact with the Crimean Tatars. It was a cold bargain: In exchange for Tatar cavalry, he promised them the right to plunder and take captives. For the peasants of Ukraine, it meant devastation. For Khmelnitsky, it meant survival against Poland's might.

The campaign of 1648 stunned Europe. At Zholtye Vody in May, Cossack-Tatar forces ambushed and annihilated a Polish detachment. Days later at Korsun, they routed a much larger army, capturing its commanders. Panic spread through the Commonwealth: Two of its proud field forces had been destroyed in quick succession.

What began as one man's grievance had become a war that threatened to upend the Polish order in Eastern Europe.



A five Ukrainian hryvnia banknote depicting Hetman Bogdan Khmelnytsky.
© Wikipedia

The region in flames

The victories of 1648 unleashed forces Khmelnytsky himself could barely control. News of Polish defeats spread like wildfire, and the uprising turned into a mass social revolt. Across the steppe, peasants rose against their landlords. Magnates' palaces were looted and burned, their families hunted down, and entire estates wiped off the map. For a nobility that had not seen real war for a generation, it was a terrifying reckoning.

The violence quickly acquired a ferocity of its own. Jewish leaseholders and estate managers, often seen as the agents of magnates, became particular targets. Pogroms erupted across towns and villages, leaving behind scenes of slaughter. To many peasants, this was not just rebellion but vengeance for decades of exploitation.

The Crimean Tatars added their own chaos. Riding deep into the countryside, they seized thousands of captives – 'yasyr' – destined for the slave markets of Istanbul. While Khmelnytsky relied



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on their cavalry, he had little control over their predations. Ordinary villagers paid the heaviest price.

Meanwhile, in Warsaw, the Commonwealth reeled. In May 1648, King Vladislav IV died suddenly, leaving the throne vacant at the worst possible moment. The nobility squabbled over the succession while the eastern border burned. With armies shattered and central authority paralyzed, Khmelnitsky pushed deeper into the heart of Ukraine.

By December, he entered Kiev in triumph. Bells rang, crowds filled the streets, and the Orthodox clergy hailed him as a divinely sent deliverer. For the Cossacks, it seemed as if centuries of Polish domination had collapsed in a single year. For Poland, it was the beginning of a national catastrophe.



Entrance of Bogdan Khmelnytskyi to Kiev in 1649 by 19th-century Ukrainian painter Mykola Ivasyuk

The search for allies

Triumph in 1648 gave Bogdan Khmelnitsky control of vast territories, but also left him with a dilemma. Victories had drained resources, Cossack regiments demanded pay, and the Tatars – never reliable allies – plundered indiscriminately and withdrew when it suited them. The uprising had destroyed Polish rule in Ukraine, but it had not built anything to replace it.

Khmelnitsky knew the Commonwealth would regroup. Poland could raise new levies from its immense nobility, while he risked losing his own exhausted men. To secure the rebellion's survival, he needed external support.

He turned first to the Crimean khan, Islam-Girei, whose horsemen had been crucial to early victories. But the khan was interested only in loot and captives.

Khmelnitsky then looked further afield: To the Ottoman sultan, who offered recognition but demanded vassalage; to Prince Rakoczi of Transylvania, who expressed sympathy but could not commit troops; and to the rulers of Moldavia, who sought to marry their daughters into Khmelnitsky's family but offered little else.



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Each negotiation exposed the same reality: Without powerful backing, the Hetmanate could not survive. The Orthodox clergy urged Khmelnitsky to appeal to Moscow, "*the only true protector of the faith.*" Many Cossacks agreed, seeing the Russian tsar as a natural ally against Catholic Poland.

For the moment, Tsar Aleksey Mikhailovich hesitated. Memories of past defeats against Poland lingered, and his boyars counseled caution. But Khmelnitsky's increasingly urgent letters – and the fear that the Cossacks might instead fall under Ottoman protection – slowly tipped the balance in Moscow's favor.



Portrait of Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich by Unknown artist

The turn to Moscow

By 1653, the uprising stood at a crossroads. Poland was raising fresh armies, the Crimean Tatars had proven

faithless, and Khmelnitsky's Hetmanate, though victorious, was stretched thin. Without a powerful patron, the rebellion risked collapse.

In Moscow, Tsar Aleksey Mikhailovich sensed an opportunity. Over the previous decade, Russia had rebuilt its military along Western lines. Foreign officers – veterans of the Thirty Years' War and the English Civil War – had trained new regiments of infantry, dragoons, and cuirassiers. For the first time in generations, Moscow possessed an army that could face the Commonwealth on equal terms.

Yet memories of past humiliations against Poland lingered. Two disastrous wars earlier in the century had scarred the Russian court, and Aleksey hesitated to plunge into another costly struggle. Some boyars urged caution, fearing entanglement in Ukraine's chaos. But others argued that delay would hand the initiative to the Ottomans, who might draw the Cossacks into their orbit.



'Forever with Moscow, forever with the Russian people' (1951) by Mikhail I. Khmelko

In October 1653, Aleksey convened a grand council in Moscow. Boyars, clergy, and military leaders gathered to decide whether to accept the Cossacks under the tsar's protection. After heated debate, the verdict was clear: Russia would extend its hand.

Three months later, the decision was sealed in Pereiaslav. On January 18, 1654, Khmelnitsky and his officers assembled with Russian envoys led by boyar Vasily Buturlin. In a solemn ceremony, the Cossacks swore allegiance to the tsar. Moscow promised to preserve their autonomy, uphold a register of 60,000 men, and respect local traditions. The Cossacks, for their part, pledged loyalty and military service.

The Pereiaslav oath was not a treaty of equals but a fateful act of allegiance. For Khmelnitsky, it was the only path to secure his rebellion and protect his people. For Moscow, it

was the long-awaited opening to expand westward and claim the mantle of protector of Orthodoxy. From that moment, the Cossack lands were bound to Russia – and Eastern Europe's balance of power began to tilt.



Pereiaslav Agreement depicted on a 1954 Soviet stamp. Cossacks are standing left with traditional costume and a bandura. Vasiliy Buturlin stands at right making a declaration. © Wikipedia

Aftermath

The oath at Pereiaslav bound the Cossack Host to Moscow and ignited a new war. Within months, Russia and the Commonwealth were locked in open conflict. What followed was not a quick campaign but nearly two decades of grueling struggle across Ukraine and Belarus.

The fighting coincided with one of Poland's darkest chapters – the Swedish invasion of 1655, remembered as 'the Deluge'. As Swedish armies poured into the Commonwealth from the north, Russian forces pressed from the east, and Cossack regiments struck from within. The once-mighty state that had dominated Eastern Europe now faced collapse on every front. Though Poland eventually repelled Sweden and fought Russia to a stalemate, the image of its invincibility was shattered forever.

For Moscow, the war was transformative. The tsar's armies proved capable of fighting on equal terms with European powers. Russia extended its control deep into the lands of the ancient Rus, capturing Smolensk and much of Left-Bank Ukraine. The Truce of Andrusovo in 1667 confirmed these gains, fixing the Dnieper River as a new border: Kiev and the eastern bank under Moscow, the western territories under Poland.



The Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1667: dark green indicates areas ceded to the Tsardom of Russia at Andrusovo. © Wikipedia

For the Cossacks, the outcome was more complex. Their autonomy was preserved for a time, their register expanded, and their leaders recognized by Moscow. But the Hetmanate was also pulled into a larger struggle between empires, and its independence was gradually curtailed. What mattered most to Khmelnytsky and his followers, however, was that Polish domination had been broken and Orthodox lands united with their natural protector.

The Khmelnytsky uprising was not merely a Cossack mutiny. It marked the end of Poland's golden age, the rise of Moscow as a regional power, and the moment Ukraine's destiny turned decisively eastward.

For the next 350 years, the fates of Ukraine and Russia would become entwined.

*By **Roman Shumov**, a Russian historian focused on conflicts and international politics*

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