Before the Kievan Rus came into being, the vast land south of the Vikings was populated by ancient pagan tribes. The Vikings were much better organized than their neighbors to the South, so Viking attacks were frequent and brutal. The Vikings who found their way from the Baltic to the Black Seas through the Russian river systems came to be called "Varangians" (from their name in Slavic, now Varyag in Russian), but as they settled in the area, another name stuck: they became the Rus.

These early tribes used the waterways like the Volga and the Don rivers to trade with a more developed and prosperous Byzantine.

However, around 350 AD, a small settlement emerged on a high bank of the Dnieper River. The name of the settlement was Kiev. Its population was pagan and their wild celebrations of ancient Gods were colorful and mystical.

Most “Russian” territories at the time were governed by the "Varangians" (known as Nordic tribes) who belonged to the Rurik Dynasty from Scandinavia. They governed Northern Russia. The most prominent territory was Novgorod. But gradually, the center of Russian power started moving to Kiev.

The "Varangians and the Slavs were assimilating very quickly. Inter-marriages were common. To fit better into the Slavic cultural and ethnic landscape, the "Varangians" started using two sets of names: Nordic and Slavic.

Kiev wished to trade with Byzantine and benefit from the exposure to the declining but still proud and powerful civilization. By doing so, they wanted to put an end to endless bloody confrontations with their Southern neighbor. This pragmatic decision became one of the most pivotal moments in Russian history.

**SECOND PERIOD: The Rurik Dynasty (988 AD - 1597)**

**1. ADOPTION of CHRISTIANITY**

This is what the old Chronicles revealed to us. Rurik had a daughter-in-law. Her name was Helga (= Olga in Slavic). Olga had the title of the Regent of Kiev from 945 AD to 957 AD. On one of her trips to Constantinople Olga converted to Christianity. Olga’s conversion led to the conclusion of a new *modus vivendi* – a peaceful trade agreement between Byzantine and Kiev. With that act, the way of the future began to open up for Kievan Rus. Over time, it would open so wide that Russia would become to be known as the Third Rome...
A monument to Princess Olga (Helga), who was the first to convert to Christianity

However, the Third Rome came much later. After Olga’s conversion, Pagan Kievan Rus was not ready to give up worshiping of numerous Gods right away. It happened two generations later. Olga’s grandson, - Vladimir, - the Great Duke of Kiev, baptized the citizens of the Kievan Rus in the waters of the Dnieper River to become Christians. It happened on a beautiful summer morning of 988. And the rest, as they say, - is history.
Great Prince Vladimir was a very progressive man. Among his achievements was the introduction of compulsory education for sons of priests and boyars (upper class). Vladimir taxed his people to support the Church. The Chronicles say that just before he died, there were four hundred churches and eight markets in Kiev.

It was during this period in the Russian history that two Greek missionary brothers, Cyril and Methodius, devised the first Cyrillic alphabet that allowed Kievan Rus to read the Scriptures in their written language and not in Greek.

And one more important fact needs to be mentioned here. Vladimir’s son, - Yaroslav the Wise (1019-1054) initiated the first legal code that replaced the barbaric practices. The legal code was called “Russkaya Pravda” (Russian Justice)

2. TATAR-MONGOLIAN YOKE AND ITS IMPACT ON THE COUNTRY

As the young Kievan Rus was growing in power and expanding North and South, East and West, a boy was born in a far-away Mongolia in 1162. His name was Timujin. How, would you ask, is this boy connected to the Kievan Rus? Well, over time that boy Timujin would become known to the world as Genghis Khan which meant “the Power of God on Earth”. And by becoming Genghis Khan he would ultimately change the fate of Kievan Rus and would lead to its demise.
As is well known, Genghis Khan first attacked and conquered China and parts of India. From there he drafted a course to conquer the world. Russia to the north and east was a very desirable piece of a pie.

The first Tatar-Mongolian invasion took place in 1223 while Genghis Khan still lived. The battle was fierce and lasted three days. To illustrate the shrewdness and the cruelty of the invaders, historians discuss the following event. When the Russian troops were defeated, there were three Russian Princes among the captured. Mongolian customs forbade them to shed the blood of the rulers. So, with much noise and laughter a solution was found: the three Princes were used as a foundation for a platform on which the Mongols celebrated their victory. No blood was shed but the three Princes were crushed to death.

This was the beginning of what became the most tragic and the longest stretch in Russia's history in fighting the foreign oppression. It lasted 250 years. This stretch of time is known as the Tatar-Mongolian yoke.

When in 1237 the Mongols returned to Russia, they started burning, killing, enslaving, and imposing unbearable taxation on the Russians. Many principalities resisted and challenged the invaders. A story has it that when a tax collector came to a little principality of Ryazan (not far from Moscow), their Prince answered: "When there are none of us left, then all will be yours". But it was either die or pay, there was no other choice.

No Russians resisted harder than the Kievans. But the Mongols built a wall around the city to protect themselves and to prevent the escape of the Kievans from the city. When the walls fell, the Kievans found refuge in the many city churches. But they were outnumbered and, thus, doomed. The city was totally destroyed and burned down.

With the decline of Kiev, Moscow started gaining political weight. Through the experience gained from the Mongolians, the decision was clear: in order to prevail over the Mongols, wars and animosities among Russian principality had to come to an end.

**Great Lithuanian Principality**

*(13-th century – 1596 AD)*

The Great Lithuanian Principality came into being in the 13-th century. It controlled most of the Ukrainian and Belorussian territory. However, religious differences between the Western part of Ukraine (Catholics) came into a direct conflict with Eastern Ukraine (Russian Orthodox).

Ukrainians were split as a nation but their national dignity could not tolerate the dominance of Lithuanians and Poles. As a result, a national movement called “The
“Brotherhood” emerged. Free-minded individuals, former criminals, run-away slaves started congregating along the banks of the Dnieper River as early as the second half of the 15-th century. That area received the name of a “Wild Field”. The outcast and the outlaw felt free in the wide fertile valleys but Mongols and Poles were constantly attacking the rebels. By 1648 the outlaws were calling themselves the COSSACKS and their leader, Bogdan Khmelnitsky led the uprising against the oppressors.

But history is never simple. After a few victories, the Cossacks suffered defeats from the Mongols. That situation led to secret negotiations of the Cossacks with the Poles. However, that victory was short lived. In 1654 Lithuanians attacked the Cossacks. Ukrainians turned to Russia asking to be their protector.

Thus began a new period of relationships between Ukraine and Russia.

From 1654 through the early 20-th century Ukraine was mostly an agrarian state.

**Stolypin Reforms in Agriculture and Conquering of Siberia**

Late 19-th - early 20-th century saw two major developments in Ukraine: Jewish pogroms (purges) and the exodus of poor Ukrainian farmers East to Siberia.

**Socialist Revolution of 1917 and its Consequences**

Between 1917 and 1920, there were 16 self-proclaimed “states” in Ukraine. The country fell into a fee fall situation and the power was bouncing from one group to another, - a brutal Civil War was ranging along with WWI. In February-April of 1918 German troops occupied Ukraine.

During this time power changed hands several times: from the Whites to the Reds but finally the military dictatorship with Simon Petlyura as its leader prevailed (1918-1919) that terrorized the nation. However by December 1919 the Bolsheviks defeated Petlyura and other factions and proclaimed Socialist power on most of the Ukrainian territory.

Doctor Zhivago, the movie, vividly depicts the events in Kiev during the Socialist Revolution.

**Ukraine joins the USSR**
On December 30, 1922, Ukraine signed the Union Agreement and along with Russia, Belorussia, and the Caucasus Republic became a part of the USSR.

According to the 1920 Census, the population of Ukraine was 25.5 million, - almost 21 million of whom lived in the rural areas.

During the first few years the Soviets were encouraging the policy of cherishing the Ukrainian roots which led to opening more schools that used Ukrainian as their official language. The slogan of the day was: “National in form but Soviet in content”. Ukrainians were proud that their culture and language were going through a revival. But their national pride was put to test once again: by the end of the 1920’s the Ukrainian language was being ousted by Russian. Many Ukrainian writers, actors, scientists were arrested and sent to Stalin’s gulags (prison camps).

The 30’s were characterized by rapid industrialization of Ukraine, by building hydroelectric stations, metallurgical and machinery building plants, - that was the urban landscape. As to rural Ukraine, the 30’s were the time of denouncing of “wealthy” farmers and of confiscation of their property. The great famine of the 30’s took millions of lives and many think now that that famine was “man made”.

**The Great Patriotic War (1941-1945)**

Ukraine was occupied by the Nazi troops from the first days when the war broke out (June 21, 1941).

This period in the history of Ukraine is known as the Gorilla War country. The Nazis were exceptionally cruel to the Jews. In Kiev alone 100,000 Jews were killed in a ghetto.

Ukraine lost more than 5 million people were killed and about 2 million were sent to concentration labor camps. 700 cities and towns and 28 thousand villages were totally leveled. Over 10 million people were left homeless. The Ukraine economy suffered a terrible blow.

Ukraine was liberated by the Soviet troops in 1944.

**Ukraine: 1944-1991**

Since the creation of the United Nations Organization in 1945, Ukraine along with Russia and Belorussia, became a member of the UN General Assembly.
In 1945 some parts of Western Ukraine that had been under the Polish rule for years, were given back to Ukraine.

Chernobyl became a horror story in modern human history after an explosion of a nuclear reactor on April 26, 1986.

When USSR President, Mikhail Gorbachev, launched Perestroika (the policy of Reconstruction and Openness), the nationalistic movement for independence from the USSR swept Ukraine. On August 24, 1991 the Ukrainian Supreme Rada (Congress) adopted the Declaration of Sovereignty.

**Independent Ukraine**

The first years of Ukrainian independence were not easy. Inconsistent economic and political reforms led to a deep economic crisis which, consequently, deepened the political crisis.

This was the time when Iowa extended a helping hand by providing practical assistance to Ukrainian agriculture. In 1992 Iowa helped create two ABCs (Agro Business Centers) in Ukraine, - one – near Kiev and another one in the Kherson Region (Southern Ukraine). The purpose of ABCs was to showcase the best practices of American farming from planting, to harvesting, to storage and processing. In addition, Ukrainian farmers were exposed to the best seed companies, i.e. Pioneer Hi-Bred Intl and Stine Seed, to John Deere and Kinze machinery. Iowans also conducted a few seminars for Ukrainian farmers on crop production, livestock, the use of fertilizers and pesticides.

**Ukrainian Presidents (1991-2013)**

President **Leonid Kravchuk** (December 1991 – July 1994)
President **Leonid Kuchma** (July 1994 – January 2005)
President **Victor Yushchenko** (February 2005 – January 2010)
President **Victor Yanukovich** (February 2010 – present)