Let’s look forward to spring! As winter fades away, children will be celebrating spring with outdoor games, bicycle rides, and holidays celebrated with their families. While the secular holidays of President’s Day and Martin Luther King, Jr. Day are typically used for social studies instruction, the holidays in several of the world’s great religions that occur in the spring are seldom approached as serious opportunities to teach. These holidays include Ramayana (Hindu), Mawlid an Nabi (Islam), Pesach, or Passover (Jewish), Wesak, or Buddha Day (Buddhist), and Easter (Christian), among many others.1 Such religious holidays provide the thoughtful social studies teacher with opportunities to explore world cultures and history with her students.

Pysanky: the Beautiful Easter Eggs of Ukraine
Public school teachers are, of course, careful not to promote or celebrate any religious holiday, but the appearance of Easter on the calendar can be the springboard for exploring the culture and history of the people of a region of the world that was, for many years, hidden by the politics of the Cold War. Ukraine is the home of arguably the world’s most beautiful and elaborately decorated Easter eggs. This work of art can be an introduction to the complex culture of this interesting country.

Not all Easter eggs in Ukraine are elaborate. The krashanka (KRAH-shahn-kah) are simply-decorated eggs meant for eating. It is the other type of decorated eggs, the pysanky (PIH-sahn-kah) that amaze and delight with their intricate designs, rich colors and meticulous work that many consider the most beautiful Easter eggs in the world. Anyone who has seen these eggs would never think of cracking them, and it will come as no surprise that they are gifts that have been traditionally given as a symbol of good luck and protection from misfortune.

The Iron Curtain Rises
When the Cold war began in the 1940s an iron curtain descended across Europe, cutting off the eastern part of the continent from the west. This divide was not only political and economic, but historical in the sense that thousands of years of rich traditions and regional histories were out of reach of Western scholars and tourists. Now, more than a decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the peoples and cultures that make up the nations of Central and Eastern Europe are coming back into focus for the rest of the world, bringing with them wonderful examples to use in our social studies classrooms.2

Ukraine is one of the most interesting and complex nations of Eastern Europe. With a history that includes prehistoric peoples and the intersection of cultures from the East and the West, Ukraine provides an exciting mix of traditions, folklore and history for teaching about various themes of the social studies. Moreover, there are more than 1.5 million Ukrainian-Americans living here now. Bringing literature about Ukraine into the elementary classroom can provide connection to such families in many parts of the United States.

Early Civilization
The history of pysanky pre-dates Christianity in Ukraine. Its roots are linked to the matriarchal Trypillian culture in Ukraine that flourished more than 6,000 years ago. Before the pyramids were built or the Greeks wrote their mythology, a people existed in the forested steppes of Ukraine who produced elaborate symbolic art; lived in large, organized villages, and rode horses. Successive cultures replaced them, including the Rus, who became the original source of all Slavic people. With the introduction of Christianity to Ukraine in 988 C.E., pysanky took on new religious meaning and became linked to the celebration of Easter. As a symbolic artifact, the pysanky should be discussed in a respectful manner, as is required for any peoples’ cultural traditions.
Several excellent examples of children’s literature exist to teach about pysanky through trade books, folklore, and narratives. A volume Ukraine (in the Festivals of the World series) provides a short but balanced treatment of pysanky and the other holiday traditions in Ukraine. An added benefit of this book is the children-friendly instructions for creating pysanky in the classroom. While traditional pysanky are created through a process of wax “writing” and multiple applications of dye, the removal of the wax by candling (slowly melting the wax designs over a candle flame) is too dangerous to use in most classrooms. This book provides an instructional alternative using crayons and common watercolor dyes to create traditional Ukrainian designs.

To explore some of the folklore that surrounds pysanky, one could use either of two books, The Bird’s Gift by Eric A. Kimmel and illustrated by Katya Krenina or Rechenka’s Eggs by Patricia Polacco. Both books tell fanciful and beautifully illustrated stories about the origin of pysanky and explain some of the spiritual symbolism of these works of art. Polacco’s book also demonstrates one of the more important aspects of pysanky and indeed all of Ukrainian culture and history: the contentious relationship between Ukraine and the countries on her border.

A Borderland
The lands of Ukraine have been the home to peoples from both the East and West. Over the centuries, the lands have been divided between successive empires from the Poles to the West, the Russians to the East, and the Austria-Hapsburg and Ottoman empires of the South. Each conquest, settlement, and struggle for independence has left its mark on the land and people of Ukraine.

Positioned between the large nations of Poland and Russia, Ukraine (which actually translates into the term ‘borderland’) has often been conquered and divided by its more powerful neighbors. During the period of the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union, Russian leaders attempted to eliminate Ukrainian culture. They sought to subjugate Ukrainians as “little Russians”—treating them as a rural, provincial, and inferior people.

Polacco reflects this divided history in her excellent story of pysanky called Chicken Sunday. In this book, we are introduced to a Ukrainian/Russian, Jewish immigrant—living in America—who allows young children to sell their pysanky in his shop to make money to purchase a hat for a dearly-loved, African-American grandmother. It is a touching story of multicultural relationships and understanding that uses pysanky as a mechanism for overcoming cultural fears and expressing compassion. Chicken Sunday, like many other works of literature, occasionally blurs the distinction between Ukrainians and Russians, but this does not cause serious problems in this book. Along with the moral and cultural lessons in this book, Polacco also alludes to the Holocaust, which can serve as a transition to other serious topics in Ukrainian history.

Teaching about the Holocaust and Holodomor
The lands of Ukraine were occupied by the Nazi’s for three years and became the sites of several Nazi labor and concentration camps and a multitude of Nazi atrocities. When teaching upper elementary students about the holocaust, teachers are often confronted with the dilemma of how to introduce the topic in a manner that is developmentally appropriate. One book that provides such an introduction is Terrible Things by Eve Bunting and illustrated by Stephen Gammell. This book provides an allegorical story of a dark shadow that slowly overtakes the woods, each time claiming a different victim while assuring the others that they are safe. The book succeeds in providing a disconcerting but appropriate lesson on how individuals can be deceived into allowing awful policies and activities to occur out of fear for their own safety.

Two events in Ukrainian history lend themselves to this interpretation. The first is the Nazi atrocities of Baba Yar. In a ravine north of the capital of Ukraine, Kyiv, German Nazis and Ukrainian collaborators murdered approximately 33,771 people, mostly Ukrainian Jews, over two days.3 Another act of genocide committed against the people of Ukraine (less well known in the United States) was the Stalinist agricultural collectivization that led to the Ukrainian Great Famine (Holodomor).

Stalin’s Obsession
During the years of 1932-33, Stalin ordered the forcible collectivization and confiscation of agriculture in Ukraine. To break Ukrainian independence and weaken resistance to communism in the countryside, Stalin had Communist troops strip Ukrainian peasants of their food supply, which led directly to the death of seven to
ten million people, or nearly a quarter of the rural population. 4 Providing children literature that can appropriately teach about this horror is a challenging task. I think that Enough, by Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch, is a successful example of such a book. It provides an introduction to the Great Famine without the grim details of history. Michael Marchenko provides cartoon-like illustrations that reduce the desperation of the situations while still conveying a serious story. The author further lightens the mood of the book by using the fanciful device of a magical stork that assists the village in surviving their ordeal.

**Customs, Traditions and History**

While Ukraine has experienced great episodes of turmoil, it has also enjoyed periods of abundance, enlightenment and enrichment that have produced unique and rich cultural traditions and folktales. To explore these periods, several excellent examples of children’s literature present themselves. The Mitten, adapted and illustrated by Jan Brett, is a gloriously illustrated story of a boy who finds his lost mitten that has, in the meantime, become shelter for a variety of animals. The artwork evokes a Ukrainian style and the snowy scenes display many traditional Ukrainian artifacts. This book would be especially useful for doing “picture walks” (in which students are questioned about visual clues before a story is read) and teaching the temporal sequencing of events because of its innovative use of sidebar vignettes that foreshadow the events of the subsequent page.

Another delightful children’s book about Ukraine, Babu’s Babushka, was written by an eleven-year-old girl, Bronwen DeSena, illustrated by Linda Hali Zucker, this book tells the magical story of a scarf’s adventures. The scarf is of a type that is traditionally worn by grandmothers in slavic cultures. The book is useful, not only as an example of successful student work, but also in introducing students to traditional Ukrainian customs and terms.

Another children’s book draws direct connections between events of the Ukrainian steppe and the great plains of Kansas. In The King of Prussia and a Peanut Butter Sandwich, Alice Fleming tells the tale of Mennonite communities that fled conscription in the Prussian Army by settling in Ukraine, where they developed a hearty strain of Turkish wheat. When the time arose to flee conscription again (this time in the Russian Imperial Army) they emigrated to Kansas, taking the new variety of wheat seeds with them. Along with teaching the importance of religious tolerance and freedom, the book provides a historical context of the politics and geography of Ukraine and draws direct connections between them and the United States.

**Visiting Ukraine Today**

I have been traveling to Ukraine since 1999 to work with an association of Ukrainian teachers of history, civic education, and social studies (NOVA DOBA) to develop curriculum and teacher training workshops for democratic education. Through my work with these teachers, I have developed a deep appreciation for the history and culture of Ukraine. I believe that the children’s literature referenced in this article can provide teachers with resources for teaching about the complex and often tumultuous history of this nation while integrating several strands of the social studies standards. Nearly a decade has passed since the fall of the Soviet Union; it is time for us to include this region in our social studies curriculum.

This spring, teachers can begin to reclaim this knowledge by introducing their students to the beauty of pysanky and using some of the books discussed above to explore the richness and complexity of Ukraine. 22

**Notes**

1. These religious holidays are listed (among others) at www.interfaithcalendar.org/2005.htm.

**Children’s Literature**


**Alden W. Craddock** is an assistant professor of social studies education and director of the International Democratic Education Institute in the School of Teaching and Learning at Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio.