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*Oleh S. Ilnytkyj*

## Reply to Charles J. Halperin (“Rus', Russia and National Identity”)

I would like to express my appreciation to Charles Halperin for taking the time—as a member of the Slavic “interpretative community” (a phrase I borrowed from Stanley Fish<sup>1</sup>)—to respond to my review of Simon Franklin’s and Emma Widdis’, *National Identity in Russian Culture*. Although he takes me to task for calling the book “dangerous,” I interpret Halperin’s comments (perhaps presumptuously) mostly as a vindication. On critical issues, it seems to me, Halperin not only agrees with my objections but also finds a few additional shortcomings that I ignored. His elaboration on several problems is informative and useful. I welcome, in particular, the following observations:

- I think Ilnytkyj has some justification for objecting that the editors should have qualified their exposition, which superficially subsumes Kyivan (Kievan) Rus' into Russia. I just do not like references to a “millennium” of Russian history (p. 159).
- The “millennial” framework contributes nothing to the anthology except perhaps providing a catch phrase to advertise it (p. 159).
- My objection [to Franklin] would be that the identities adumbrated by Kyivan (Kievan) Rus' authors and later articulated by Muscovite ideologues were never “national”—they were dynastic, religious, historical, perhaps even cultural, but never “national,” since “nationalism” was never an element of their worldviews (p. 163).
- Whether one believes that there was any continuity between Kyivan (Kievan) Rus' and Muscovy or not, it remains to my mind irrefutable that Muscovy cannot be understood without access to Kievan antecedents. On this feature of Muscovite culture Franklin is absolutely right. He is not above reproach, however, for not delineating more precisely that the material from Kyivan (Kievan) Rus' might be seen as background, not as an earlier phase of “Russian” history (p. 163).
- Widdis, in a chapter entitled “Russia in Space,” observes that originally the Rus'/Rhos was multi-ethnic, but none of its constituent elements were “Russian.” Again, as a dedicated non-post-modernist, I would have added,

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Fish, *Is There A text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretative Communities* (Cambridge, MA, 1980).

“nor could they have been, because Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians did not yet exist; there were only East Slavs at the time” (p. 164).

- Ilnytkyj devotes serious attention to this section [Franklin and Widdis, pp. 24-28], objecting, rightly in my mind, to the glib invocation of the Latin name for Kyivan (Kievan) Rus' as irrelevant to issues of native identity... (p. 163).
- It would be just as inaccurate to equate Rus' and Ukraine, *pace* Hrushevs'kyi, as it is to project “Russia” onto Rus' (p. 164).
- I would have preferred terminating “early Rus’” with the Mongol conquest (p. 165).
- [I]n the nineteenth century the purpose of articulating national identity was not to recognize a nation, which one would think it presupposes, but to create a nation. The purpose of ideology is to express myths because they are not true, which includes the myth of the Land of the Rus' (p. 161).

I think Halperin and I are also fairly close in our ultimate assessment of the volume. Like he, I would not (and did not) equate *National Identity in Russian Culture* with “the Soviet abomination of a *drevnerusskaia natsional'nost'*” (p. 165). And I agree when Halperin says: “In sum, I believe the authors of *National Identity in Russian Culture* do a fairly decent if not perfect job of distinguishing Rus' and Russia. Could it have been better? Certainly. Could it have been much, much worse? Absolutely” (p. 165). Both of us, obviously, give the book a lukewarm endorsement. Where we seem to differ is in our recommendations and level of tolerance for scholarly imprecision. A “fairly decent” book is one I would not suggest as an “introduction” for “students,” especially when it is so confusing on issues of terminology, “national” chronology and “national” space.

However, speaking of “dangerous” books and sharp tones, I will admit that I was somewhat dismayed by Halperin’s reference to *Mein Kampf* and military invasions at the end of his piece. More fitting was his initial observation (p. 158) that I was concerned with the effect of the book on students. I wrote: “It is the combination of the reasonable and the outrageous that turns this into a dangerous publication. The core difficulty is that in presenting “Russian habits of self-representation” (p. 2), the book uncritically replicates these self-depictions as its own underlying structure, endowing mythic ideas with scholarly authority. As is evident from the passages quoted above, the “imaginary” (p. 33) and “imagined” millennial Russian nation—“constructed,” as most reasonable scholars would admit, by much later generations—is narrated as a factual story in the voice of Slavic scholarship” (p. 128).

In other words, I used the word “dangerous” in the sense of “likely to cause problems or difficulty” (for students) and “likely to have adverse or unfortunate consequences” (for Slavic Studies). This is something I am happy to reiterate, especially given, Halperin’s own confirmation, that even “impeccable scholars” continue to use outdated and confusing terminology when referring to East Slavs

and/or Rus'. My notion of "impeccable" would have scholars not only adhere to the facts but to proper terminology as well. In short, should not the Slavic field have higher expectations from books like Franklin's and Widdis'? We are, after all, in the twenty-first century, producing scholarship fifteen years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. If we embrace Halperin's position—i.e., politely tolerate the type of terminological and "national" imprecision witnessed in Franklin and Widdis or view their practice as a harmless custom among those who are simply "more interested" (p. 165) in Russia than Ukraine—then, of course, Cambridge University Press and others will simply produce more such outdated books for students.

Halperin seems to ask us not to judge the book too harshly because of Franklin's truly excellent background and good intentions. He focuses especially on what the editors did and did not *intend* (p. 159); he notes Franklin's "*commitment to a non-nationalist interpretation of the Kyivan (Kievan) period*" (p. 160). From this, he concludes: "Therefore, *if the book fails to present that argument clearly*, then it is a failure of execution, not *intent*. *A failure in execution should not be evaluated as if it were a failure in intent*" (emphasis added—OSI). Halperin also states that those students Franklin and Widdis will "teach using this anthology will neither be mislead nor confused by any gaps in its presentation of this issue." But surely, the editors alone will not be teaching from this book? Will all readers and teachers know Franklin's other works and his good intentions—and make the appropriate adjustments in their interpretation of a millennial "Russia"? Surely not! The onus lies on the book and the editors to make things clear. In short, without rehearsing the meaning of the "intentional fallacy," I will simply state that in my review I focused on what the editors actually wrote rather than what they intended. If I did "[attribute] unconscious Great Russian chauvinism to the editors" (p. 162), then it is because I cannot read their good intentions, only their text. I agree with Halperin when he criticizes me: "Imputing interpretations to the authors by "reading between the lines" must take second place to reading what they actually wrote" (p. 164).

Similarly, I find it difficult to absolve the book of its "millennial" faults by blaming advertising departments or portraying editors/authors as hapless victims of the publishing industry (Writes Halperin: "Authors do not necessarily choose the titles of their books—and most definitely authors and editors are not responsible for the prose on book jackets or inside covers"). First, I do not think authors are so powerless. Secondly, in this instance, the cover and the preface are a fairly accurate reflection of how the book ultimately treats the Russian "national" identity. Both reveal the book's inability to draw a clear line between Russian "self-perceptions" and perceptions of a more scholarly nature.<sup>2</sup> Halperin, following Franklin, tries to excuse this by saying this is not Franklin's and Widdis' position but the position of

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<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, the "millennial" claims are also on Cambridge University's web site: <<http://www.cambridge.org/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=0521024293>> (accessed 16 May 2006).

Russian “cultural discourse,” which they simply report or repeat (p. 159). This strikes me as a poor defense. First, because the book often does not signal whose “discourse” is speaking and, second, if the topic of a book is “national identity” then one cannot avoid the responsibility of critically evaluating Russian myths of Self. As I pointed out, the book is not coy in debunking some Russian nationalist positions: it simply does not want to deal with the central ones, like the millennial idea or the existence of three consecutive “Russian” states on East Slavic territory.

Halperin is quite forgiving about Franklin’s chapter “Russia in Time,” accepting as sufficient Franklin’s disclaimer (p. 162) that “The Land of the Rus’ is not—one should stress—modern Russia.” My focus on the chapter title is described as “excessive” (p. 163). But it is worth reiterating that just prior to launching his elucidation of “native historical thought” in Rus’, Franklin writes this: “The first part of this chapter consists of... an overview of some of the ways in which ‘significant’ time has been conceived in *Russian cultural discourse*” (p. 11; emphasis added). And: “...I emphatically do not claim to be surveying what *Russians* ‘in general’ thought” (p. 12). And: “One cannot skip through a *thousand years* in a few pages without a degree of over-simplification” (p. 12). Such statements definitely confuse and conflate *Kyivan Rus’* writers with Russian writers, because, before setting out the thoughts of Rus’ writers, Franklin has already made them *Russians* and placed them in *Russian cultural discourse* (not the East Slavic). I think it is one thing to speak of cultural continuity, even cultural antecedents, when studying the formation of Russian “national” culture, but it is quite another matter to *a priori* designate the antecedents as nationally Russian.

On the preceding topic, I would also like to refer to another point made by Halperin: “That such expressions of identity might even predate writing among the East Slavs is not so astonishing a notion as Illytzyk implies (p. 127), since the legends about the early Rus’—recorded only much later by the Kyivan (Kievan) chronicler, let alone folklore—would antedate the conversion of the East Slavs to Christianity.” I would tend to agree with such a formulation as long as the words East Slavic are used instead of “Russian.” The problem with Franklin’s and Widdis’ book is that from the start they identify the earliest East Slavs as “Russians.” I can live with the idea that the Rus’ or the East Slavs might have had some form of “national” identity or consciousness, but I do object strenuously to the idea that they represented “Russia’s cultural opinion-formers,” as the book states.

Twice Halperin uses the construction “Rus’/Russian history”: “What is the frame of reference for judging a thousand years of Rus’/Russian history?,” “Even on its own terms, it would have been preferable to say “more than a thousand years” of Rus’/Russian history” (p. 159). If, Halperin meant, “Rus’/East Slavic history,” then we probably agree here as well. Otherwise, we do not.

Halperin also says that “To some extent Illytzyk is criticizing the editors for not writing a different book” (p. 162) and that I am wrong to expect from the editors greater insight into Russian-Ukrainian “interrelationships” since their book is only about Russian identity “and Illytzyk cannot imagine a book on the latter that does

not devote more space to the former.” In response, let me say that it is *the editors* who introduced the problem of the Ukrainian-Russian relationship. My objection is *not* that they devoted too little (p. 162) *space* to the relationship, but that they handled it so *poorly*. Even Halperin’s reading of Widdis’ chapter ends with this appropriate comment: “An explanatory, heuristic comment on the conflicting Ukrainian and Russian claims to Kyivan (Kievan) Rus’ would definitely have been in order here” (p. 164). That is my sentiment exactly.

Stanley Fish’s concept of an “interpretative community” has been nicely summarized by Julian Wolfreys: “Any reader is a part of a community of readers and their response to a text will be determined by the conventions of reading within which he or she is educated in a given socio-historical context.”<sup>3</sup> As I look at Halperin’s criticism of my review, I see a scholar who is conscious and critical of the limitations of the “reading community” he came from—namely, the one that easily dubs East Slavic space as “Russian national.” What surprises me is Halperin’s apparent willingness to still tolerate that community, to be concerned with questions of tone while making excuses for serious errors. Franklin and Widdis are in a somewhat similar situation. It is hard to know for sure, but they appear to write for a community of readers that wants to be reassured that Rus’ and Russia are one and constitute an uninterrupted thousand-year old history. They themselves may not be part of that community whole-heartedly, but neither have they demonstrated *in their book* an ability to escape its influence.

I described the Franklin and Widdis anthology as wrong for Slavic Studies, not as an insult to Ukrainians. I do not think scholars should describe Rus’ in one way for those who are “more interested in Ukraine” and another way, for those who are more interested in Russia. The latter is a problem exhibited by *National Identity in Russian Culture*.

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<sup>3</sup> Julian Wolfreys, ed., *Literary Theories. A Reader & Guide* (New York: New York UP, 1999) 195.