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# John A. Armstrong's contribution to the study of nationalism and Ukrainian nationalism

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John A. Armstrong ([1955] 1963) published his first major study of nationalism using Ukraine as his case example. This was published at Columbia University where Russian and Soviet studies had been launched in 1946. These programmes would eventually become consolidated in 1982 in the Harriman Center. Armstrong's ([1980] 1990)'s groundbreaking study of Ukrainian nationalism was republished on the eve of transformative changes in the Soviet Union and the triumph of Ukrainian nationalism through the creation of an independent Ukraine and the spread of Ukrainian nationalism to central Ukraine during the 2004 Orange Revolution (Kuzio 2010) and 2013–2014 Euromaidan and war with Russia.

Armstrong's study of Ukrainian nationalism was published only three years after the Ukrainian nationalist movement (Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists [OUN]) ended its underground partisan fight in Western Ukraine. The groundbreaking book was important for three reasons. Firstly, experts on the former USSR focused exclusively on Russia and were Kremlinologists; study of the non-Russian half of the Soviet population and Soviet nationality policies was a minority subject in Western European academia (US and Canada were always better) until the 1980s (Subtelny 1994). This was my experience studying in the mid-1980s for an MA in Soviet Studies at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University Of London. Secondly, Armstrong's work was a step into an under-researched scholarly area of Ukrainian history and politics. In the 1950s, American and Canadian academic centres on Ukraine did not exist, and Ukrainian diaspora scholars were not yet established in their professions; the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute was founded in 1973 and Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies in 1976. Further studies of Ukrainian nationalism would have to wait until Yaroslav Bilinsky (1964, 1983) and Alexander J. Motyl

(1980) published their studies of Soviet Ukrainian and Ukrainian integral nationalism. Thirdly, Armstrong used rare sources and undertook many interviews with participants in the Ukrainian nationalist movement who had recently arrived in the US as political refugees. Many of them later became academics in their own right and leaders of Ukrainian diaspora organisations and publishing houses such as the US-government funded Prolog Research Corporation and its Suchasnist publishers and journal (Kuzio 2012).

Armstrong wrote his study of Ukrainian nationalism in an age of the de-colonialisation of European empires when nationalism had a positive image as a national liberation force similar to the image it possessed in the nineteenth century. Anatol Kaminsky (2014), who has published extensively on Ukrainian nationalism and is a leader of the democratic wing of émigré OUNz ( Organisation of Nationalists abroad), said, ‘As one of the most prominent scholars among his western colleagues, Armstrong, better than anyone before him, objectively analysed and described the main elements and characteristics of Ukrainian “integral nationalism” and for that matter Ukrainian nationalism in general. The same high level of scholarship also applies to his scholarly input on Soviet nationalities policy and the Soviet political system in which he properly highlighted the importance of the Ukrainian question, including its significance in the historic context of geopolitics in that region of the world’. Although Ukraine had little place in Soviet Studies in the West (until, for example, the launch of the journal *Nationalities Papers* in 1972) it was the key republic whose August 1991 declaration of independence led to the break up of the USSR (the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic [SFSR] never declared independence from the USSR in 1991).

Since the 1980s and 1990s nationalism has become a term associated with violence, ethnic cleansing and even genocide. Meanwhile, revisionist studies have sought to negatively portray Ukrainian nationalism but without grounding their work in theoretical knowledge and comparative substance (Carynyk 2011; Himka 2011; Shekhovtsov 2011, 2013; Shekhovtsov and Umland 2014). Revisionists would do well to take into account Armstrong’s warning that ‘Integral nationalism was a fever which gripped some of the most active elements of the Ukraine in the generation after, but it is easier to understand and perhaps to condone in this nation than in others which have had more opportunity for self-expression through the development of a state based upon law’ (Armstrong 1955: 23). Since the 2013–2014 Euromaidan revolution it has been Ukrainian volunteer battalions in the National Guard that have borne the brunt of the fighting defending Ukraine against an imperialist Russia, and it is the pro-Russian separatists – not Ukrainians – who have been accused of widespread human rights abuses (Amnesty International, 2014; Council of Europe, 2014; Human Rights Watch, 2014; Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, 2014; United Nations, 2014).

During the second half of the twentieth century Armstrong built his reputation as a leading scholar of theories of nationalism and comparative studies of nationalism while continuing to maintain a focus on Ukraine and Soviet nationality studies, which took off in the 1970s in North America (Ukrainian studies only appeared in Britain the 1990s). Armstrong was one in a small group of scholars who focused on internal dynamics (and of course national communism) in the Soviet Ukrainian elite and its interrelationship with the Soviet metropolis. Armstrong (1959) was a leading scholar in the study of regional Soviet elites and their contribution to Soviet politics. With 3.5 million members Soviet Ukraine possessed the largest republican Communist Party (the Russian SFSR did not create its own republican Communist Party until 1990).

In the post-Stalin era, Ukrainian elites increasingly joined the Soviet elites, but it was highly improbable that a Ukrainian could become a Soviet leader; Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev were both Russians from Ukraine. Armstrong (1959: 18) correctly predicted that drawing the younger brothers into 'indissoluble junior partnership with the Russians as the dominant ethnic group' would fail. The proportion of Ukrainians declined in the Soviet Ukrainian Communist Party as one 'proceeds from the population at large toward the elite strata'. (Armstrong 1959: 17).

Armstrong pointed to how Ukrainians had become, in a similar manner to Scots in the British Empire, 'younger brothers' and were often viewed as 'Russians' spreading Russification to the the three Baltic republics, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Ukrainian younger brothers are culturally close to the dominant Russian ethnic group (Armstrong 1959). As we know from the case of the Scottish who greatly assisted in the building of the British Empire but held a referendum on independence in September 2014, 'younger brothers' have a tendency to grow up and desire to be free of the influence of their elders. Moscow in the 1970s and 1980s trusted Russified Eastern Ukrainians to run Soviet Ukraine on their behalf (Beisinger 1988); nevertheless, Leonid Kravchuk, who was himself from Western Ukraine and was ideological secretary of the Soviet Ukrainian Communist Party, led the Soviet Ukrainian republic to independence in 1991.

Although the USSR is long gone, Russian condescension towards 'Little Russians' (Ukrainians), first studied by Armstrong within the framework of the Soviet elite, remains strong among Russian President Vladimir Putin and his coterie and – until Russia's undeclared war against Ukraine – survived in the postcolonial mind-set of some East Ukrainians. When Putin visited Ukraine to meet Prime Minister and President Yanukovich in 2004 and 2010–2014 respectively he acted as a Russian 'elder brother' and Soviet Communist Party leader still visiting a non-Russian republic.

As an opponent of Soviet totalitarianism, Armstrong did not back some of the Kremlinologists who routinely searched for 'hawks' and 'doves' among Soviet leaders (a practice revived with the 'hawkish' Prime Minister Putin

and 'dovish' President Dmitri Medvedev tandem). Armstrong wrote of Khrushchev not as a 'liberal' but as a Soviet Communist who had helped to establish Stalin in power and led the Soviet Ukrainian republic during the Great Terror (Armstrong 1959: 46).

Armstrong's (1982) most prominent work on the theory of nationalism led the way in stressing the need to view ethnic identity over a long period of time, which influenced a generation of future influential scholars of nationalism such as Anthony D. Smith (1998). Armstrong (1982), like Smith (1998), disagreed with the modernist school of nationalism that argued nationalism was a product of modernity and nation-states where governments promoted state nationalism. Armstrong believed that in effect the North-Western European and North American focus on nationalism as a product of the emergence of their nation-states from the late eighteenth century did not provide a full picture and could not be applied to nationalities such as Ukrainians. Armstrong studied ethnic identity among stateless peoples in regions such as Eastern Europe as a factor that existed prior to the formation of their nation-states and wrote it would be quite wrong to regard Ukraine as an 'ahistorical nation' (Armstrong 1992: 126). Ukrainians, he pointed out, lacked high culture because the gentry and aristocracy was Russified and towns were dominated by non-Ukrainians (they were similar in both regards to the Irish). For Armstrong (1992: 128), 'what is needed, therefore, is a long perspective (*longue durée*)'. Indeed, Ukrainian ethnic identity in the Western region of the country and within the republican Communist Party existed in Soviet Ukraine and together they propelled Ukraine to independence. Armstrong (1959: 122) had predicted decades before that Western Ukraine 'is far from securely incorporated in the Soviet system'.

Armstrong ([1955] 1063, [1980] 1990) analyses the rise of OUN not as a singular phenomenon but as part of the rise of Ukrainian nationalism in the broader understanding of this phenomenon since the nineteenth century as a 'dual imitative-defensive reaction to foreign nationalisms' (Armstrong 1955: 8). This included a national ideology that sought to dissolve competing historical myths through the work of historians such as Mykhaylo Hrushevskyy who became Ukraine's President in the 1918 Central Rada government in the budding independent Ukrainian state (Armstrong 1992: 128–129). The Euromaidan and Ukraine's war with Russia has spread Ukrainian nationalism (ranging from patriotic state nationalism to ethnic nationalism) into Russian-speaking Eastern and Southern Ukraine. The disintegration of the USSR was a process rather than an event as witnessed by the removal of monuments of Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin that began in Western Ukraine in 1990 and continued in Eastern and Southern Ukraine a quarter of a century later where over 500 were dismantled in 2014.

Taking the above into mind, one can therefore safely say that Armstrong's scholarship of nationalism and Ukrainian nationalism continues to hold resonance today.

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