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Shaping Russian and Ukrainian Identities in the Russian Empire During the Nineteenth Century: Some Methodological Remarks

An overwhelmingly illiterate peasantry constituted over 90% of the East-Slavic population of the Russian Empire throughout the nineteenth century. Most authors agree that even on the eve of the First World War these peasants had no clear-cut national identity.¹ The time between the 1830s, when different projects of nation-building concerning Eastern Slavs were first formulated or imagined, and the first decades of the twentieth century, when some form of national identity became established as a mass phenomenon, was the period open for alternatives in the process of nation-building. What is now called “The Russian-Ukrainian Encounter” was in fact not the interaction of two shaped nations but a rivalry between different projects of nation-building, promoted by the elitist groups of national activists and to some degree by the bureaucracy.²

The project of building the Ukrainian nation as a self-sufficient entity is well known – it was first articulated by the members of the Society of Cyril and Methodius in the 1840s. T. Shevchenko, N. Kostomarov, P. Kulish and their colleagues reformulated the ideas and emotions of traditional regional separatism of the elites of the Hetmanate into a modern nationalist ideology. Its major, but not the only rival was the project of an All-Russian nation, which deserves more explanation.

Many authors stressed the fact that such terms as *Russian nationalism* and *Russification* are used to designate very different ideological phenomena and practices.³ Let us here attempt to systematize the different approaches to the problem of Empire and Nation in Russian

¹ See BOHDAN KRAWCHENKO *Social Change and National Consciousness in Twentieth-Century Ukraine*. New York 1985, p. 3; THEODORE R. WEEKS *Nation and State in Late Imperial Russia. Nationalism and Russification on the Western Frontier, 1863–1914*. DeKalb 1996, p. 125; STEPHEN VELICHENKO *Empire Loyalty and Minority Nationalism in Great Britain and Imperial Russia, 1707 to 1914: Institutions, Laws, and Nationality in Scotland and Ukraine*, in: *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 39 (1997) pp. 413–441, here 414.

² I have suggested the interpretation of the Russian-Ukrainian encounter as a competition of contradictory projects of nation-building in an article published in 1997; see ALEXEI MILLER *Rossija i russifikacija Ukrainy*, in: ALEXEI MILLER, BORIS FLORIA, VLADIMIR REPRINTSEV (eds.) *Rossija-Ukraina: istorija vzaimootnoshenij*. Moskva 1997, pp. 145–155. The same year Roman Szpoluk wrote about competition of Russian and Ukrainian projects of nation-building, but he interprets the Russian project as either imperial, or strictly ethnic, Great-Russian; see ROMAN SZPOLUK *Ukraina: ot periferii imperii k suverenomu gosudarstvu*, in: DMITRI FURMAN (ed.) *Ukraina i Rossija: obshchestva i gosudarstva*. Moskva 1997, pp. 55–63.

³ EDWARD C. THADEN (ed.) *Russification in the Baltic Provinces and Finland*. Princeton, N.J. 1981, p. 8–9; IDEM *Russification in Tsarist Russia*, in: EDWARD C. THADEN with collaboration of MARIANNA FORSTER THADEN *Interpreting History: Collective Essays on Russia's Relations with Europe*. New York, Boulder 1990, pp. 211–220; IDEM *Conservative Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Russia*. Seattle 1964; ANDREAS KAPPELER *Einleitung*, in: IDEM (Hrsg.) *Die Russen. Ihr Nationalbewußtsein in Geschichte und Gegenwart*. Köln 1990, pp. 7–15, here p. 9; IDEM *Bemerkungen zur Nationsbildung der Russen*, in: KAPPELER (Hrsg.) *Die Russen* pp. 19–35, here p. 21; DIETRICH GEYER *Funktionen des russischen Nationalismus*, in: HEINRICH AUGUST WINKLER (Hrsg.) *Nationalismus*. Königstein 1978, pp. 173–186.

thought of the 19th century. We shall operate with ideal types, but in fact it is possible to find examples for each of the positions mentioned.

It was possible to be a Russian imperialist without being a Russian nationalist. The best example were the Romanovs, who reluctantly accepted the nationalization of the dynasty only at the end of the nineteenth century. (All the ruling families of Europe faced a similar problem, but most of them accepted nationalist legitimation of their power earlier.) It was also possible to be a Russian nationalist and to opt for the dissolution of the Empire, believing that the interests of the Russian nation suffered from the Empire no less than did the interests of other peoples under Romanov rule. Many other options were possible between these two extremes.

The wish to maintain and even to broaden the Empire could be combined with Russian nationalism, if one believed that it coincided with the interests of Russians. Some people wanted to transform the Empire as a whole into a nation-state, either with the help of the autocracy and Orthodoxy, or – more in correspondence with modern nationalism and the know-how of assimilation politics – through democratization, schooling, and economic development.

But many in the nineteenth century distinguished between the Russian core of the Empire, which had to be transformed into a nation, and the imperial borderlands, which were not considered to be an object for a wholesale Russification within this concept. Those who were ready to acknowledge the fact that the Russian nation was less than the Empire inevitably had to answer the question of what is Russianness, and where are the territorial, ethnic and/or cultural borders of the Russian nation or nation in the making. There were two interpretations of Russian ethnic borders. Those who believed that Russian equaled Great-Russian (*velikorusskii*) were a minority. The majority interpreted Russian as a common name for Great-Russians (*velikorussy*), White Russians (*belorussy*) and Little Russians (*malorussy*), the latter being the most widespread name of what is now usually called Ukrainians. The differences between these “branches of the Russian people” were interpreted not as national, but as regional, developed as a result of the regrettable partition of the Russians after the collapse of Kievan Rus'. For this majority the Russian nation had to embrace all the Eastern Slavs, and the “national territory” had to include also the lands of contemporary Ukraine and Belorussia.

The roots of this concept can be traced back to the seventeenth century, when it was formulated in the “Synopsis” which had more than 30 editions and remained the only textbook on the history of Russia until the 1760s.⁴ As means of legitimizing Russian claims to the eastern territories of the partitioned Polish Commonwealth, the concept of the All-Russian nation gained additional political importance at the end of the eighteenth century.

From that time on the conflict between All-Russian and Polish versions of the “ideal Motherland,” the latter always claiming the “borders of 1772,” remained a key issue in Russian political life and thought.⁵ In the 19th century the territory of contemporary Ukraine

⁴ The “Synopsis” was published in Kiev around 1674 and was prepared by some Kievan cleric, most probably Innokentii Gizel.

⁵ On the role of the Polish factor in the Russian-Ukrainian encounter see: ANDREAS KAPPELER *Rußland als Vielvölkerreich: Entstehung, Geschichte, Zerfall*. München 1992, p. 179; SZPORLUK *Ukraina*. The Russian debate about to whom the eastern part of the Polish Commonwealth belonged during the late 18th – early 19th century, when the nationalist argument was used for the first time, was analyzed by ANDRZEJ NOWAK in his *Jak rozbił Rosyjskie Imperium?* 2nd ed. Kraków 1999, pp. 11–38.

became an object of a terminological war. Poles called the right bank of the Dnieper *kresy wschodnie* (eastern borderlands) or *ziemie zabrane* (occupied lands). In St. Petersburg and Moscow these territories were called *jugo-zapadnyj kraj* (south-western lands) or *vozvrashchennyje zemli* (restored lands). Poles called the Orthodox and Uniate population of contemporary Ukraine *rusiny*, while Great-Russians were called *moskali*, stressing the ethnic difference between them, and sometimes, particularly in Galicia, insisting on the interpretation of *rusiny* as a branch of the Polish people. In Russia the term *russiny* was always used with double “s” to stress they belonged to the All-Russian unity. More common was the term *malorossy* (Little Russians). Since the 1840s Ukrainian nationalists also joined this terminological battle, introducing the terms *Ukraine* and *Ukrainians* in their contemporary meaning.

In the nineteenth century the meaning of the word *Russkij* (*Russian*) differed from contemporary usage. It embraced all the Eastern Slavs and designated the nation, which was expected to include Little Russians, Great Russians, and White Russians, as the German nation was supposed to include all Germans in some concepts of German unification. Russianness was an ethnic concept, stressing the difference between Eastern Slavic population and the rest, but Little and White Russians were included within this unity. Even at the beginning of the twentieth century in the most xenophobic versions of Russian nationalism only Little Russians and White Russians were never designated as *inorodtsy* (ethnically alien).⁶ On the personal level they were never discriminated against on ethnic grounds.⁷ But at the same time all claims for a collective identity separate from Russian were rejected and suppressed as attempts to split the Russian body-national. The situation of other ethnic groups was exactly the opposite – being discriminated against on the personal level, Poles, Jews, etc. were always easily recognized in their separateness as ethnic groups. That meant that the perception of the Ukrainian and Belorussian national movements was fundamentally different from the perception of other national movements in the Empire. The latter were challenging (openly or potentially) the unity of the Empire, while the former – the unity of the nation as well. In addition, the politics of Russification towards other ethnic groups, particularly Poles, were often perceived in St. Petersburg and Moscow as a kind of punishment for disloyalty and a subject for bargaining, while the Russification of Little and White Russians was not.

During the 18th century the spontaneous Russification of the elite of the Hetmanate proceeded quite smoothly.⁸ Catherine II justified her actions during the partitions of the Polish Commonwealth with the argument that “we were taking what belongs to us,” but the problem of the Russification of newly acquired territories remained marginal until the Polish uprising of 1830–1831. Thereafter the Government refused to consider the local peasantry either as the economic, or as the cultural property of the Polish landlords.⁹ The problem of “processing” the bulk of East-Slavic peasantry of the Empire into Russians became particularly urgent after the abolition of serfdom and other reforms of Alexander II.

⁶ See JOHN W. SLOCUM Who and When, Were the *Inorodtsy*? The Evolution of the Category of “Aliens” in Imperial Russia, in: *The Russian Review* 57 (1998) pp. 173–190.

⁷ ANDREAS KAPPELER Mazepincy, malorossy, khokhly: ukraintsy v etnicheskoi ierarkhii Rossijskoj imperii, in: MILLER, FLORIAN, REPRINTSEV (ed.) *Rossija-Ukraina: istorija vzaimootnoshenij* pp. 125–144, here 134–135.

⁸ ZENON E. KOHUT The Ukrainian Elite in the Eighteenth Century and Its Integration into the Russian Nobility, in: IVO BANAC, PAUL BUSHKOVICH (eds.) *Nobility in Russia and Eastern Europe*. New Haven 1983, pp. 65–98.

⁹ DANIEL BEAUVOIS *Polacy na Ukraine, 1831–1863*. Paryż 1987.

La Questione de la lingua became the focal point of their activities – they insisted on using Ukrainian in primary schools. While Ukrainian nationalists were trying to promote the standardization and development of the Ukrainian language, the proponents of the All-Russian project were referring to it as the Little-Russian vernacular, located in the hierarchy together with other local Great-Russian and White-Russian dialects below the literary Russian language, the common standard for all Russians. This debate had quite direct practical implications, because after the abolition of serfdom, millions of former serfs had to be educated. The language of instruction became a key issue.

Due to the liberalization of censorship and other reforms, the beginning of the 1860s was marked by the rapid development of a public sphere, with public opinion and the press as the main means of public communication. This was a necessary precondition for the reproduction of nationalist discourses.¹⁰ The challenge from Ukrainian nationalists together with the Polish uprising of 1863 served as the main catalysts for the development of a Russian nationalist discourse.

The frontline in this debate did not run along the ethnic lines. Some of the Great Russians were ready to recognize the claims for Ukrainian separateness. But the majority, together with numerous Little-Russian intellectuals, strongly opposed the Ukrainian project, insisting on a combination of All-Russian and Little-Russian identities.¹¹ All the participants in the debate tended to look at the problem in a comparative context. The proponents of the All-Russian project insisted on the analogy between “the Little-Russian vernacular” and Provençal, Celtic and other vernaculars, suppressed by French, Spanish and English. Their opponents mostly argued against this comparison. But one of the leaders of the Ukrainian movement of the 1870s, M. Drahomanov, was ready to accept it when he came to the conclusion that the French government was about to make some concessions to the Felibres and Celtic movements.¹² Until recently this comparative context, unfortunately, was not appreciated by historians who studied the nationalist encounter.

Why do I believe in the heuristic value of this comparison for a contemporary historian? Immanuel Wallerstein begins his essay “Does India exist?” with the statement that he has no doubt that India exists as a state and nation today.¹³ But what about books titled “The History of India in the Sixteenth Century,” asks Wallerstein? As a result of the different scenarios of colonization and later decolonization of the sub-continent, instead of contemporary India we might have witnessed two separate states – say Dravidia and Hindustan. This would mean that now we would be reading books titled “The History of Dravidia (or Hindustan) in the Sixteenth Century.” The past is determined by the present and not vice versa. This observation is relevant also for European history, and particularly for the history of Eastern Europe.

In the nineteenth century all the European and semi-European empires were dealing with the problem of consolidating an imperial core into a nation.¹⁴ The continental cores of Spain

¹⁰ ANDREAS RENNER *Russischer Nationalismus und Öffentlichkeit im Zarenreich 1855–1875*. Köln [usw.] 2000.

¹¹ ALEXEI I. MILLER *Osvaivaja logiku nacionalizma. Vlasti imperii i obshchestvennoje mnenije stolic v ich otnoshenii k ukrainskomu nacionalnomu dvizheniju v pervyje gody carstvovanija Aleksandra II*, in: *Russkij istoricheskij zhurnal*. Tom 1 (1998) no. 2, pp. 87–130.

¹² M. DRAHOMANOV *Chudacki dumki pro ukrainsku nacionalnu spravu*, in: M. DRAHOMANOV *Vybrane*. Kyiv 1991, pp. 533–534.

¹³ IMMANUEL WALLERSTEIN *Does India Exist?* in: IMMANUEL WALLERSTEIN *Unthinking Social Science. The Limits of Nineteenth-century Paradigms*. Cambridge 1995, pp. 130–134.

¹⁴ The only exception was Austria, but Hungarians in Transleithania launched the same politics of nation-building as soon as they became possible after 1867.

and France and the island core of Britain were ethnically and culturally heterogeneous. The conditions were different, and the strategies also varied – from the French politics of wholesale administrative centralization and cultural homogenization to British policies aimed at partial, “hybrid assimilation” to combine regional identities with a concept of Britishness.¹⁵

Very different was the point of departure for Germany and Italy, which first had to solve the problem of state unification. The differences in vernaculars, in cultural and historic traditions certainly provided sufficient material for the formulation of a project of, for example, a Bavarian or a Prussian nation.¹⁶ Most likely, however, the problem of unification so dominated the political agenda that such projects did not materialize. Or, should we say, did not occur at that time, having in mind the recently formed separatist Lombard League?

Such continental Empires as Russia and the Ottoman state had more difficulties distinguishing between the imperial core which had to be processed into a nation and the periphery of the Empire. But they also faced the same problem, although later than the western Empires, where the core (in other words, the area of implementation of the nation-building project) was separated from the periphery by lots of water. In the Ottoman and Russian cases the ideological responses in the nineteenth century were rather similar. The Ottoman, Pan-Turkish, and Turkish ideologies had their analogies in Russia – dynastic loyalty, Pan-Slavism, and Russian nationalism.¹⁷ In both cases nationalism emerged outside the imperial bureaucracy. In Russia it was gradually, partially, and reluctantly adopted by the ruling circles only in the last decades of the nineteenth century, while in the Ottoman Empire even later, at the beginning of the twentieth century.

If we accept this comparative context as relevant and the interpretation of the situation of the nineteenth century as indefinite and open for alternatives, it allows us to ask some previously overlooked questions and leads to some important implications.

First of all, the contemporary terms “Russians” and “Ukrainians” become irrelevant for the situation in the nineteenth century. In some cases we should accept the usage of these terms as an inevitable evil, but not in studies of identities and the nation-building process. Instead, we should use the terms actually used during the epoch, which, exactly due to their multiplicity and contradictory character, reflect the specific features of the situation.

Second, we should take as a unit of analysis not a nationalist movement, but a structure of interaction of different nationalist projects among themselves and with the state’s structures. This would allow us to see the unique features of the Ukrainian and Belorussian national movements in the context of the Russian Empire, a perspective often overlooked by historians.¹⁸

¹⁵ EUGENE WEBER *Peasants into Frenchmen. The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914*. Stanford, CA 1976; PETER SALINS *Boundaries. The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees*. Berkeley 1989; LINDA COLLEY *Britons. Forging a Nation 1707–1837*. New Haven 1992; JOSEPH R. LLOBERA *The God of Modernity. The Development of Nationalism in Western Europe*. Berg, Oxford, Providence 1994, especially p. 214.

¹⁶ KLAUS ZERNACK *Germans and Poles: Two Cases of Nation-Building*, in: HAGEN SCHULZE (ed.) *Nation-Building in Central Europe*. Leamington Spa, Hamburg, New York 1994, p. 159.

¹⁷ Orthodoxy failed to constitute a separate ideological trend, similar to pan-Islamism, being instead heavily represented in other major ideological options, particularly Pan-Slavism. See BERNARD LEWIS *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*. 2nd ed. London, Oxford, New York 1961, pp. 323–361; DAVID KUSHNER *The Rise of Turkish Nationalism 1876–1908*. London 1977.

¹⁸ See, for example, RICHARD RUDOLPH, DAVID GOOD (eds.) *Nationalism and Empire. The Habsburg Monarchy and the Soviet Union*. New York 1992; RONALD GRIGOR SUNY *The Revenge of the Past. Nationalism, Revolution and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*. Stanford, CA 1993.

Finally, such an approach allows us to ask one of the most important questions, why the Ukrainian project won in the rivalry with the All-Russian one? In order to answer it, we should compare the efforts to promote the All-Russian project and the conditions of the implementation of these efforts in the Russian Empire with the more successful enterprises of nation-building in Spain, France or Britain. An initial attempt to do this has recently been undertaken by the author of this article.¹⁹ In my book I stress the complexity of the causes of the historically implemented outcome.

Some of the crucial factors have already been mentioned – the role of Galicia as a base for the Ukrainian movement outside the control of St. Petersburg,²⁰ the role of the Poles as an ever-present third actor in this rivalry,²¹ the dedication of the activists of the Ukrainian movement, and the demographic factor.²² But the explanatory value of these factors should not be overestimated. Galicia played an important role as Ukraine's cultural Piedmont only after the 1880s, and this role was to a large extent dependent on the resources of the "Russian" Ukraine. Polish politicians provided nationalist patterns and also activists in the early stages of the Ukrainian national movement. But at the same time Poles were perceived as the main enemy by many intellectuals who identified themselves with Little Russia and by the majority of the peasant population, thus helping to promote loyalty to Russia through the mechanism of negative choice. The demographic mass of Little Russians/Ukrainians was huge, but their proportion to Great Russians was close to the proportion of *patois* speakers to French speakers in France in the middle of the nineteenth century.

The relative backwardness of the Russian empire was also important. The social and economic factors – urbanization, industrialization, universal conscription, and other means to increase social mobility – which were crucial to the success of assimilation in France, as we know thanks to Eugene Weber, started to work in Russia not only several decades later than in France or Britain, but also several decades after the Empire confronted nationalism; while in Western Europe the industrial revolution preceded nationalism. But we should also keep in mind the Spanish case, where relative backwardness was also present, while the nation-building project happened to be relatively more successful.²³

This brings us to two specific features of the Russian experience. One is the inability of the government to use efficiently those instruments of assimilationist politics which were at hand. The poor state of primary schools, which until 1894 got only 11% of their funding from the state budget,²⁴ reluctance to allow the peasants of Ukraine to resettle in the free lands of

¹⁹ SZPORLUK *Ukraina*; VELICHENKO *Empire Loyatism and Minority Nationalism*; A. I. MILLER «Ukrainskij vopros» v politike vlastej i ruskom obshchestvennom mnenii (vtoraja polovina XIX v.). S.-Peterburg 2000.

²⁰ JOHN-PAUL HIMKA *The Construction of Nationality in Galician Rus': Icarian Flights in Almost All Directions*, in: *Intellectuals and the Articulation of the Nation*. Ed. by Ronald G. Suny and Michael D. Kennedy. Ann Arbor 1999, pp. 109–164.

²¹ See IVAN RUDNYTSKY *Essays in Modern Ukrainian History*. Edmonton 1987.

²² DAVID SAUNDERS *Russia's Ukrainian Policy (1847–1905): A Demographic Approach*, in: *European History Quarterly* 25 (1995) pp. 181–208.

²³ That is not to say, that "processing Catalans into Spaniards" necessarily went faster than "processing Little Russians into Russians." But the integrity of Spain as a state survived all the political turmoil of the 20th century, including civil war and the collapse of the Empire, while the projected All-Russian core was transformed into three nominally separate republics during the revolutionary crisis after World War I and fell apart together with the Empire.

²⁴ BEN EKLOF *Russian Peasant Schools. Officialdom, Village Culture and Popular Pedagogy, 1861–1914*. Berkeley 1986, pp. 89, 94.

Siberia and the Far East,²⁵ and awkward and counterproductive restrictive measures against the Ukrainian language should be mentioned first of all.

Second is the profound political and social crisis – or, more correctly, catastrophe – which Russia has suffered since 1917. The legitimate, or at least acceptable, center simply disappeared, propelling the centrifugal movements all over the collapsed Empire and definitely burying the prospects of the All-Russian project. So one might say that the outcome of the rivalry between the All-Russian and the Ukrainian projects of nation-building could be better described as a defeat of the All-Russian project, than as a success of the Ukrainian one.

²⁵ Ukrainian peasants desperately wanted to resettle already in the 1870s, and, unlike their Great Russian counterparts, were able to move, because only a minority had land in communal property. Formally, they were allowed to do so in the 1880s, but the government did its best to prevent mass resettlement. When peasants were encouraged to resettle during the short-lived Stolypin reform of 1906–1914, more than 2 million of them used the opportunity and were rapidly assimilated.