

Nationalism after communism: reflections on Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Poland*

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Introduction

In addressing the subject of nationalism after communism, one might do one or both of the following two things: treat the subject from 1989/91 to the present, as the title of this lecture suggests; or, understand one's task differently and revisit the subject of nationalism before and during the communist era. What the communist and pre-communist periods can tell us about nationalism might help us to evaluate nationalism today, after communism.

Since the author is relatively least ignorant about the cases of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Poland, it is about them that I will speak today. Needless to say, this topic itself is broad, so of necessity our treatment will be crude and simplistic, and for this I must apologise in advance.

After communism

Ernest Gellner's essay, 'Return of a Native', published in 1996, shortly after his death, defines the postcommunist agenda as 'the problem of erecting a liberal, stable and prosperous society on the ruins of a totalitarian industrial ideocracy'. This problem 'is historically absolutely new, and no one knows what the answer or answers is or may be, or indeed whether there is one' (Gellner 1996: 12).

Others agree: for example, Robert Skidelsky regards 'the replacement of Communism by capitalism' as 'an entirely novel experience in human history'.

No society has ever been centrally planned down to the last detail before. So the dynamics of the transformation are unpredictable. Conservative philosophies of change can offer no guide to the future. The social institutions needed to contain the

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new forces will have to be recreated from the fragments of broken systems. (Skidelsky 1997: 173)

One supposes that in this enormous task of transformation and recreation, there is work for scholars representing a broad range of disciplines. What do they bring to the task?

According to Skidelsky, 'economists are a more cheerful breed than historians, political philosophers, sociologists – and priests. This is probably because they suffer from almost total historical amnesia – if indeed they ever learnt history in the first place.' Can historians help then? Not much, Skidelsky says: historians 'tend to be pessimistic, for the only future they can imagine is the past' (Skidelsky 1997: 163–4).

Indeed, one of the subjects on which historians definitely differ from many other social scientists, experts on Soviet matters and/or Marxism, is the role of nationalism in the collapse of communism. To quote one, by no means isolated, opinion of a political scientist:

the main point I would make is that one should not see the break-up of the USSR in terms of the rise of nationalist oppositions; rather one should see the rise of nationalist oppositions as a rational response to the breakdown of USSR state power, as the 'politics of inheritance' based upon the republics.

... The failure of the coup in that month [August 1991] quickly led on to the collapse of the USSR. In this process 'nationalism' must be seen as a logical political response to the unraveling of Soviet state power, rather than a 'natural' identity which was chosen by large numbers of people as soon as political controls were relaxed. (Breuilly 1994: 350, 344)

The break-up of the USSR deserves a closer look, however. Why did the collapse of communism or Marxism-Leninism not leave the state within its borders, with a new name in place of the Soviet Union?

There are several reasons why one might have expected the state to survive. First, because during more than seventy years of Soviet rule a new social and cultural community called 'Soviet people' had actually taken shape. This opinion was commonly held by Western Sovietologists.

Second, the USSR was a continuation of imperial Russia, albeit under a Marxist-Leninist cover, and a synthesis or fusion of Russian nationalism with communism had taken place under the Soviets.

The tradition of Russian statehood has been the tradition of an empire; in the Soviet period, this tradition merged with Russia's role as the leader of the communist world. The spread of communism and the expansion or reassertion of Russian rule were almost synonymous . . . (Nodia 1994: 19–20)

Following this line of thought, quite a few 'bourgeois' experts on Russia who were not at all sympathetic to Marxism or communism used to believe that 1917 played a role in the formation of a modern Russian/Soviet nation similar to that of 1789 in the making of the French nation.

Third, the USSR was a success story of national modernisation, even

though it appeared in a Marxist or communist costume as socialist industrialisation.

Over three decades ago, in an early statement of his view of nationalism, Ernest Gellner speculated that ‘though there may be little to suggest that the Soviet state will wither away, there may be some hope that Marxism itself will do so’. Marxism, Gellner thought, would end up occupying ‘the kind of modest place in Russian national pride, patriotism and disbelief, as do traditional faiths in the life of other nations’ (Gellner 1964: 125) – but the state it created would survive.

For Gellner, Soviet Marxism was a Russian form of nationalism. This perspective suggests the need for a reformulation of our topic: the possibility of treating communism as a kind of nationalism and the need to compare it with other kinds of nationalism.

Of course, it is easy now to see what Gellner overlooked. First, forgivably at the time, he ignored the non-Russian nationalities in the USSR and *their* national ideas and ideals. But we may presume that within his terms of reference they did not matter because a successful Marxist industrialisation would function as an ethnic melting pot. Second, Gellner did not consider the possibility that the Russians themselves might have *other* ideas, besides the official one, about their national identity.

What was understandably overlooked in the early 1960s is harder to accept in the 1990s, however. A historian – a contemporary historian – has to express his disagreement with views like this:

In the Russian case, there had been no ‘nationalist’ objective. The fusion of Russian with Soviet institutions had meant that any sense of Russian superiority has been associated with the maintenance of the USSR, not the creation of an independent Russia. However, once the conclusion was reluctantly drawn that Russia had to move in that direction, this did create the possibility of nationalist politics. (Breuilly 1994: 350)

In fact, an anti-Soviet Russian nationalism had existed long before August 1991. The rise of Russia against the USSR was not an afterthought (Allworth 1980; Dunlop 1993; Petro 1995; Szporluk 1989). When Jerry F. Hough says that ‘ultimately, it was Russia that ended “the Russian Empire” by seceding from it’ (Hough 1997: 374), we see this as a conclusion of a process which goes back a considerable time. Moreover, for the first time in history three East Slavic states emerged. The USSR was dealt the fatal blow by Russia and its ‘younger brothers’, Ukraine and Belarus. These three republics were the closest on ethnic, linguistic and historic grounds and formed the core of the Soviet state (Armstrong 1968: 3–49). It is very hard for a student of history to believe that such an extraordinary outcome was simply an afterthought of a failed *coup d'état*.

The events of 1991 had their intellectual pre-history. In the late 1980s to early 1990s a ‘reconceptualisation’ of the Soviet Union occurred – from a successful case, indeed a ‘role model’, of non-capitalist transitions to

modernity into a twentieth-century survivor of nineteenth-century empires. In its final years the Soviet Union came to be seen as an empire – a colonial empire, to wit. Mark R. Beissinger reminds us that:

In the late twentieth century, empires have come to represent the antithesis of the norms of the modern state system. . . . constituting a term of opprobrium and reproof by those claiming the status of nation and seeking a major alteration in state boundaries. The master frame of nationalism which spread throughout much of the Soviet Union was essentially an anti-colonial frame. What once was routinely referred to as a state suddenly came to be universally condemned as an empire. (Beissinger 1996: 115)

Among those anti-imperial and anti-colonial nationalists were Russians, and the Russian Republic was among the first in the ‘parade of sovereignties’, that avalanche of declarations of independence in the name of national self-determination which led to Belovezha/Bialowieza. Even before 1991, one could read in the (then) Soviet press articles with headlines like ‘Russia against Moscow’ or ‘Russia Leaving the USSR’.

In the opinion of Nicolai N. Petro, ‘The success of the Russian idea in forging an alternative conception of Russian national identity also helps to explain the striking absence of popular support for the CPSU when it belatedly attempted to democratize itself after 1989’ (Petro 1995: 119).

While the Russians’ rejection of the empire in the name of Russia’s national self-determination was new, the idea of the USSR as a successor of the tsarist empire was born in Eastern Europe much earlier. Therefore, for help in understanding the strange phenomenon of Russian anti-imperialism in the late 1980s to early 1990s, and other events of those years, we need to turn to earlier history.

The need to do so has been suggested by Gellner, who noted that countries of the former Soviet bloc are moving away from communism at different rates and under different conditions. ‘What is certain and obvious is that the pattern [in transition] will not be the same in all the ex-communist countries. . . . The real question mark hangs over the eastern Slav states, the Muslim ex-Marxist world to the south-east, and the Caucasus’ (Gellner 1996: 13).

To understand the present condition of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, and to think about their prospects, one especially needs to know their precommunist history. Anthony D. Smith has been wisely reminding us that ‘to understand modern nations and nationalism, we have to explore not only the processes and requirements of modernity, but also the genealogies of nations’.

Smith does not deny that Ernest Gellner’s ‘modernism tells us how a modern nation operates, indeed must operate, in the modern, industrial age’. But he insists that Gellner’s method ‘cannot tell us which nations will emerge where, and why these nations rather than others’ (Smith 1996: 376–7).

The rightness of Smith's observation on what theory 'cannot tell us' can be illustrated through a very recent event: the break-up of the USSR. Without entering the discussion of the causes for the fall of communism, a topic which requires the work of many scholarly disciplines, not just historians, let us take a look at some of the nations that emerged out of the USSR and then reflect briefly why they did so in the way they did. Let me stress that we are not claiming that nationalism was *the cause* of communism's fall; we are interested in how the communist collapse – whatever its many causes – resulted in the break-up of the state and the emergence, among the new states, of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus in particular.

From preexisting cultures to nationalism to nations

Even though the amazing developments of 1991 were a surprise to historians too, we need to turn to historians for the whys and hows of those events. Perhaps their familiarity with 'the genealogies of nations' will enable them to shed light also on the fates of those nations in our time. So let us begin with Russian nationalism, the Russian nation and the Russian Empire at the beginning of the age of nationalism and then trace nationalism's relations with Marxism and communism, first before and then after 1917.

Richard Pipes has noted in many of his works that Russia became an empire before the formation of a Russian nation (Pipes 1975). Russia was also an empire before the rise of modern Russian nationalism. Historians place the beginnings of Russian nationalism in the eighteenth century, and they argue that modern nations, with the sole exception of the English, who were the first modern nation, formed themselves in confrontation with those which had advanced to modern nationhood earlier. Liah Greenfeld writes:

As the sphere of influence of the core Western societies (which defined themselves as nations) expanded, societies belonging or seeking entry to the supra-societal system of which the West was the center had in fact no choice but to become nations . . .

The West was an integral indelible part of the Russian *national* consciousness. There simply would be no sense in being a nation if the West did not exist. (Greenfeld 1992: 14, 254)

Thus, Russian nationalism, and modern national consciousness, formed as the West impressed itself on Russian consciousness and on government policies during the reign of Peter the Great and then again in Catherine II's time. The new intelligentsia had to address the question of the emerging nation's relation to the premodern autocratic state. Catherine's reign and even that of Alexander I were periods when the state led the process of Russia's modernisation – including its nation-formation, and in so doing enjoyed the support of the rising intelligentsia.

Before long the new Russian intelligentsia began to ask for a limitation

of autocracy but the tsarist state refused to transform itself into a constitutional monarchy. The only ‘concession’ it made to the new spirit of the times was in the form of a declaration about ‘Orthodoxy, autocracy and nationality’. This amounted to making autocracy not only a divinely ordained system but also a defining feature of Russian *national* identity.

The result was *A Parting of Ways*, to quote the title of Nicholas V. Riasanovsky’s study of how the educated and modernising Russia split into two hostile camps (Riasanovsky 1976). Considering the intensity of the conflict, it is possible to argue that two rival Russian nations were forming, one official and loyal to autocracy, and the other advocating constitutionalism, and later – revolution.

That intra-Russian split, which is so familiar to all students of imperial history in the nineteenth century, was made even more complicated by Muscovy’s and then imperial Russia’s territorial expansion to the West. The first wave of that expansion, in the second half of the seventeenth century, produced what Nikolai Sergeevich Trubetskoi (1890–1938) called a ‘Ukrainianisation’ of Muscovy. After 1654, native Muscovite or Great-Russian elements were suppressed and a new, single imperial culture and identity was created in St Petersburg and Moscow that drew upon the contribution of the Russian West, i.e. what we call now Belarus and Ukraine. Trubetskoi claimed that, by the early eighteenth century

the intellectual and spiritual culture of Great Russia was Ukrainianized. The differences between the West Russian and the Muscovite variants of Russian culture were eliminated through the eradication of the latter . . . this culture lost over time any specific Great Russian or Ukrainian identification and became *all-Russian*. Its future development was determined in large measure by this shift from a limited, local identification to one that was all-embracing and national. The West Russian variant of Russian culture was formed during a period when Ukraine was a province of Poland, while Poland, in a cultural sense, was a province (a remote province) of Romano-Germanic Europe. Because this West Russian variant of Russian culture became the all-Russian culture after Peter, it also became willy-nilly the culture of the *capital*, while Russia herself began to aspire to a place among the most important powers of ‘Europe.’ This is how Ukrainian culture moved, as it were, from an insignificant provincial town to the capital . . . It strove to free itself from everything that was specifically Polish and to replace it with corresponding elements from the basic Romano-Germanic cultures (German, French, and so on). Thus, Ukrainianization became a bridge to Europeanization. (Trubetskoi 1991: 251)

However, even if the fusion of Ukrainian culture with the Muscovite state appeared successful to the contemporaries of Peter or Catherine, the empire’s next move westward posed challenges to it and to the Russian nation-building project that in the end would prove to be unsurmountable. The partitions of Poland put that part of Ukraine to the west of the Dnieper, all of today’s Belarus and most of Lithuania, under the tsars. By 1815, core areas of ethnic Poland likewise were within the empire.

In the nineteenth century the ‘Russian synthesis’, of which Trubetskoi

spoke began to be undermined by the 'Ukrainian idea'. If one looked at it from a Russian point of view, the idea that Ukraine was a distinct nationality, similar to the Czechs or Poles and equal to the Russians, was a proposal for the unmaking of Russia (Szporluk 1997). One is led to the reflection that in the nineteenth century imperial Russia did not repeat its early success, when, *before* the rise of nationalism, it integrated 'Little Russia', i.e., Ukraine to the east of the Dnieper. The second wave of acquisitions, the addition of 'Little Russians' and White- (or Belo-) Russians into the tsarist state from the Polish state, called for the reconstruction of history – the creation of a new scheme of 'Russian history' – and eventually resulted in the assertion of a common 'Russian' ethnicity among these three groups.

Our remarks about Ukraine also hold true for Belarus, except that the Russian public was even less aware of a distinct Belorussian national identity than it was of the Ukrainian one. It is necessary to bring in Poland at this point of our story because of Poland's place in the formation of Ukraine and Belarus, and thus also indirectly in the course of Russian nation-formation. From the very dawn of its history Poland had most intimate relations with the ancestors of today's nations of Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania and Russia. The distinguished Ukrainian-American Byzantinist and historian of East Central Europe, Ihor Sevcenko, writes that 'without Byzantium there would have been no Ukraine and Belorussia, but . . . on the other hand, without Poland there would also have been no Ukraine and Belorussia . . .' (cited in Kłoczowski 1994: 19). Literally, until the Second World War, Belarus and Ukraine were a battleground in the Russian–Polish struggle. (Szporluk 1992, 1997).

Russo-Marxism

We shall return to Poland in our reflections on nationalism during and after communism. Now, however, we need to bring in Marxism, the other force that intervened to disrupt nation-building in Russia. In the second half of the nineteenth century socialist and communist ideas, in particular Marxism, won the allegiance of a significant part of educated society before issues raised by Russian nationalism had been fully debated and before the conflict of the two visions of the nation – tsarist and liberal – was resolved. Thus, Marxism interjected itself into the intra-Russian debate on Russia's proper identity and mission – and, in effect, created an alternative 'Russia', in the form of the revolutionary movement. This channelled a significant number of non-ethnic Russians whom official Russia had assimilated into Russian language and culture into an anti-state, revolutionary Russia.

Because of the depth of this chasm between the two Russian nations, Marxism in Russia did not undergo the same process of nationalisation which had been its fate everywhere else in Europe. For, even in the Austrian

half of the Habsburg monarchy, the originally unitary and centralised Social Democratic party transformed itself into a federation of national or ethnic parties before 1900.

While non-Russian (or minority-nationality) socialist parties did emerge in the Russian empire, Russians themselves never formed their own ethnic Russian or *russkaia* Social Democratic party. They belonged to a party that insisted on calling itself *rossiiskaia*, which meant that it regarded the whole empire (excepting Poland and Finland, however) as its zone of operation and that it was open to all subjects of the tsar, regardless of ethnic origins.

Russian Social Democracy was able to attract many persons of non-Russian ethnic backgrounds. These 'ethnics' opposed tsarism and its Russification policies, but did not become separatists or nationalists advocating the separation of their particular ethnic groups and/or homelands from the empire. Instead, they joined Russians and other ethnics in an alternative political movement that accepted the borders of empire as its sphere of operation. Many of these individuals had been introduced to the Russian language and culture as a result of the Russification policies of the tsarist state, but, having acquired a familiarity with official Russia, they joined its alternative – the revolutionary camp. Alfred J. Rieber has noted:

A wholly unexpected consequence of assimilationist policies was to expose the non-Russian educated elites to the subversive doctrines of the Russian intelligentsia, mainly through the medium of Russian universities. . . . the leading exponents of both populism and Marxism among the Finnish, Jewish, Baltic, and Transcaucasian intelligentsia were to be found among the most Russified elements of the population. . . . In 1905 the tsarist autocracy reaped the whirlwind of its errant cultural sowing. (Rieber 1994: 81)

My view on this is slightly different: the revolutionary movement was an aspect of the Russian nation-making process, or, more precisely, it was a symptom of its anomalous course, one is tempted to say, of the unmaking of the Russian nation. Where assimilation succeeded, it often went to the wrong address, for assimilated members of minorities often joined the revolutionary cause, a counter-Russia or 'anti-Russia'.

As Rieber notes, official Russification also stimulated minority nationalisms, 'an ethnic backlash among the non-Russian populations of the littoral . . . For the Finns, Baltic peoples, Armenians, Jews, and Tatar Muslims, it was an era of national awakening' (Rieber 1994: 79–80).

Thus, Russian Marxism accommodated itself to, and then reinforced, two peculiar features of Russian development: first, a multiethnic empire, and second, one in which the largest ethnic group had not yet formed itself as a nation.

Lenin was determined to turn these facts to his advantage, even though his view of the national question under capitalism would have called for another policy. While his party claimed to be internationalist, Lenin acknowledged openly that the nation-state was the direction of development

under capitalism. He was convinced that imperatives of capitalist development required the nation-state. Here is Lenin *before* 1917:

Throughout the world, the period of the final victory of capitalism over feudalism has been linked up with national movements. For the complete victory of commodity production, the bourgeoisie must capture the home market, and there must be politically united territories whose population speak a single language, with all obstacles to the development of that language and to its consolidation in literature eliminated. Therein is the economic foundation of national movements. Language is the most important means of human intercourse . . .

Therefore, the tendency of every national movement is towards the formation of *national states*, under which these requirements of modern capitalism are best satisfied. The most profound economic factors drive towards this goal, and, therefore, for the whole of Western Europe, nay, for the entire civilized world, the national state is *typical* and normal for the capitalist period. (Lenin 1964: 396–7).

In this connection it is revealing to recall, by way of digression, that Gorbachev's ideological secretary, Alexander Yakovlev, allegedly confessed sometime during the glasnost period that he had learned from Gellner that introducing capitalism would require the acceptance of nationalism in the USSR (Hall 1994: 126). Had Yakovlev read his Lenin, he would not have needed Gellner to tell him that, in the age of capitalism, what is real is national, and what is national is real.

But Lenin himself did not take his theory as a guide to his own political action. Not only he did not *advocate* the break-up of the Empire into nation-states – he opposed those who did. He did not reorganise his party into a *Russian* national party and denied the right of other nationalities to form their own parties that would work along with their non-Marxist compatriots for the establishment of an independent Armenia, Latvia and so forth. Instead, he insisted that in the Russian empire all socialists had to belong to a *single* party.

Lenin justified this position by arguing that, other things being equal, large states were preferable – from the point of view of the proletarian cause internationally. In this respect his 'Russo-Marxist' position replicated the stand of leaders of 'Austro-Marxism' in the Habsburg monarchy. Neither he nor the party he led considered its goal to be the unification or integration of all nationalities of Russia into a single *Russian* – albeit socialist – nation. In an age he himself characterised as one of national states Lenin looked toward a future in which nations would be transcended in a higher unity.

Lenin's approach can be contrasted with that of his former comrade and later ideological enemy, Peter Struve, who had moved from Marxian socialism to Listian nationalism. When he saw that the Ukrainian national movement was gaining strength, Struve warned against the danger of a 'bifurcation' ('and should the Belorussians follow the Ukrainian example a trifurcation') of the Russian nation (Pipes 1980: 211–12). As Struve was going to see only a few years later, both the Ukrainians and Belorussians –

or some of them – would soon attempt to secede from Russia during 1917–20. Lenin was not concerned about the national unity of the Russians as Struve understood it: in 1914 he wrote an article on ‘The National Pride of the Great Russians’ in which he espoused his theory of *two* Great-Russian nations, one of the Decembrists and Chernyshevsky, and the other of Pobedonostsev and the Black Hundreds.

The Soviet experiment

In 1917 it became clear that the Bolsheviks did not aspire to being nation-builders of any kind. The Bolshevik-led proletariat did not, as Marx had said the proletariat would, ‘constitute itself as a nation’ when it seized power. The Bolshevik ‘1917’ proclaimed as one of its goals the unmaking of the Russian nation and viewed it as a step towards international revolution. In the end, its effect would be to save as much of the empire as possible from nationalist revolutions of the non-Russians, including those revolutions that were led by socialists, as in Georgia or Ukraine.

When the Bolshevik revolution failed to become international in the sense in which Lenin and Trotsky had intended, the idea of socialism in one country was born. This gave birth to the concept – and, as we shall argue later, also to some extent a reality – of ‘the Soviet people’. To some historians of imperial Russia the Soviet people bore a striking resemblance to Official Nationality in a new costume. Official Soviet Nationality adopted Russian as its high language and incorporated carefully selected elements of Russian culture into its canon. But just as under tsarism even state-supported culture was not subservient to the values of autocracy, so in the Soviet Union many works of Russian classical literature and art offered a non-Soviet Russian identity to the Soviet citizen. Rather than creating a fully subservient Soviet-Russian culture, the authorities in the end produced a peculiar blend of Sovietism and Russianism containing built-in contradictions which eventually facilitated the ‘secession’ of ‘Russia’ from ‘Sovietism’ (Barghoorn 1956).

The official treatment of the non-Russian nationalities also lacked consistency, or, as Arkadii Lipkin has noted, the nation-formation process in the USSR had a certain ‘paradoxical’ character. On the one hand, according to Lipkin, nationalities in the Soviet Union acquired ‘territorial-political boundaries’, i.e. republics, even when they had not yet passed out of the pre-capitalist social structure. Thus, nation-formation in Russia and the USSR differed from the same process in Western Europe. In the West, territorial states were formed first. In imperial Russia (and elsewhere in Eastern Europe) nations first constituted themselves as ‘national-historical cultures’ – and acquired political and territorial status next.

On the other hand – and it is here that Lipkin sees a paradox – these developments, which were analogous to the much earlier Western experience

in territorialising nationhood, ‘coincided with the eradication [iskorenie] of the national-historical cultures which had been formed in the nineteenth century as “bourgeois.” . . . Only ethnographic, folk layers of culture were preserved and even cultivated.’ The place of the national cultures whose existing elements were destroyed by the Soviets ‘was taken by the “proletarian” culture of “socialist realism” . . . and the ideology of Marxism-Leninism’ (Lipkin 1995: 64).

Thus, according to Lipkin, the Soviet system aimed at reducing all non-Russian nationalities of the USSR to (or kept them at the level of) folklore or ethnographic nations. They were not to be allowed to become modern nations in the sense in which scholars like Gellner understood nations in the age of industrialisation and science. Oddly, Marxism, especially its Russian or Leninist-Stalinist variant, treated the nationalities as ethno-cultural communities, not as societies rooted in modern political and economic structures. Lipkin also offers a persuasive interpretation of what happened after Stalin’s death. After 1953, he writes, a ‘social demand’ for the revival of nineteenth-century national cultures emerged, which he explains as a result of the intensive urbanisation these peoples were undergoing.

Thus, as the nation-formation of the non-Russian nationalities resumed in the less oppressive decades after Stalin, the nation-builders in the republics turned to their respective nations’ nineteenth-century achievements as they sought to urbanise their respective nations. As they did so, their eyes turned to the West for inspiration and models. Speaking about the pre-Soviet period, Lipkin rightly observes that in the nineteenth century St Petersburg played the role of Paris, ‘a world capital’, for Ukraine, Belarus, the Baltic region and Moldova (Lipkin 1995: 64n). This comment calls for qualification, however. Some nationalities which became Soviet only during or after the Second World War had also been under the influence – even mainly – of other world capitals in the nineteenth century. For the West Ukrainians Vienna was such an alternative centre, and for the Balts – Berlin. And we must not forget the role of Polish culture and Polish nationalism in the large space to the west of the Dnieper and to the south of the Dvina in the formation of modern Ukrainian, Lithuanian and Belorussian cultures and nationalities.

During the de-Stalinisation period these traditional ‘Western’ rivals to the cultural primacy of the imperial capitals of St Petersburg and Moscow began again to exercise an influence in the European republics of the USSR. The Soviet Union in 1945 was very different from the Soviet Union in 1938 because of the Soviet annexation of the Baltic states and the west Ukrainian regions previously within Poland, Czechoslovakia and Romania. By making this new Ukraine, united in borders only the most daring nationalists could dream about, the Soviets removed Poland as a historic enemy from the stage of Ukrainian history, and transformed it into a potential ally – while simultaneously allowing Ukrainians to concentrate their attention on their relations with Moscow (Rudnytsky 1987: 469–73).

At the same time, by removing Ukraine from *Polish* history, by creating a new Poland as an ethnically homogeneous state, Stalin made it easier for Polish nationalism to become associated with democracy. After 1945, the Poles accepted the loss of their old eastern regions and became deeply engaged in forging a new Poland reaching to the Baltic and the Oder–Neisse rivers. Some non-communist Poles concluded that achieving Poland's independence from Moscow would be easier if the Poles supported the national aspirations of Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania. The emergence of an independent Ukraine was greatly facilitated by the support of Poland, the Polish state and Polish society. Poland also gave unqualified support to Lithuania and Belarus.

These three nationalities, on their side, were more receptive to the idea of good relations with Poland. They saw in Poland a window to the world at large. For reasons of their own, throughout the 1950s the Russian intelligentsia, especially students, also found in Poland an important source of information about, and a link to, the non-Soviet world.

After 1945, and especially after 1953, developments in the Soviet Bloc in Europe, and also in the world communist movement – themselves set in a broader frame of the Great Contest between the two world social and political systems – became factors in Soviet internal life, especially in the area of ethnic relations. To think about the Soviet '1991' without recognising among its sources or antecedents the Polish and Hungarian '1956', the Prague Spring of 1968, or Gdansk and Solidarity of 1980, is to have a very narrow view of the world. Andreas Kappeler's argument that the Polish national movement played a crucial role in undermining the Russian empire in the nineteenth century and the Soviet empire at the end of the twentieth century appears convincing to me (Kappeler 1992: 179; see also, Potichnyj 1980).

In this new international setting after 1953–6 an Official Soviet Nationality was being promoted even as a counter-trend resumed – the formation of *modern* nations. The latter process benefited from the fact that the Soviets had retained the Union republics with some paraphernalia of statehood. The formal retention of those symbolic elements – the territory, the map – made the break-up of the USSR in 1991 smoother, but the Soviet Union did not fall apart into sovereign entities aspiring to be nation-states just because of its administrative subdivisions. Also important was the fact that Moscow and Leningrad had lost their role and status as centres of world civilisation. Not only the nationalities but the Russians themselves were looking to the West for inspiration. The Soviet Project – an alternative world civilisation – was losing its Great Contest with the capitalist West (Arnason 1993). The East Europeans knew it first, and gradually this knowledge reached the peoples of the USSR as well, with the Balts playing the key role in the process, while in Ukraine the newly Soviet west Ukrainians served as a 'transmission belt' of Western ideas to places like Kiev and further east.

Thus, in the second half of the twentieth century a process was underway which was comparable to what occurred in eighteenth-century Russia (see Greenfeld above), except that now several non-Russian nationalities and also a self-conscious Russian nationalism openly defined themselves in opposition to Marxism-Leninism, the Soviet social system, and the country's territorial and political system, which they condemned as imperial. Such developments as the dissident phenomenon constituted the broader historical, intellectual and psychological background to what happened in 1991. This side of history after Stalin's death is a major theme in John Keep's *History of the Soviet Union from 1945 to 1991*. Before 1991 Sovietologists generally neglected this theme, and one of their greatest oversights was the gradual emancipation of Russia from Sovietism.

Nationalism and nations after communism

What has the encounter of nationalism with communism taught us about nationalism that was not known before 1917?

In his *Nations and Nationalism* Gellner wrote that 'Nationalism is not what it seems, and above all it is not what it seems to itself.' He explained:

The basic deception and self-deception practiced by nationalism is this: nationalism is, essentially, the general imposition of a high culture on society, where previously low cultures had taken up the lives of the majority, and in some cases of the totality, of the population. . . . It is the establishment of an anonymous, impersonal society, with mutually substitutable atomized individuals, held together above all by a shared culture . . . in place of a previous complex structure of local groups, sustained by folk cultures reproduced locally and idiosyncratically by the micro-groups themselves. That is what *really* happens.

But this is the very opposite of what nationalism affirms and what nationalists fervently believe. (Gellner 1983: 56–7)

This is not the place to argue with Gellner as to whether all nationalists have been guilty of deception and self-deception. Some nationalists said what they were after quite explicitly: we might call them representatives of 'scientific nationalism' as opposed to 'Utopian' nationalism. Of the former, an early spokesman had been Friedrich List, whose followers in Russia included Sergei Witte and Peter Struve (Szporluk 1988). But Gellner's comment that what nationalism says is different from what nationalism does can be developed further in light of what we have learned about nationalism in the era of communism.

Kenneth Minogue and Beryl Williams, following their own line of argument, manage to say some of the things I see to be in accord with Gellner's line of thought. They claim that 'nationalism, as an ideology, is ultimately no less universalistic than communism itself. . . . both these doctrines (like all ideologies) will be found to be compositions of both universal and particular . . .' (Minogue and Williams 1992: 233).

Interestingly enough, contemporary, i.e. post-Soviet, Russian authors, as they try to understand why the Soviet Union collapsed, arrive at a similar conclusion about a ‘universalistic’ component in nationalism. They note that anti-communist national movements dominated by pro-Western elites were strongest in the European republics of the USSR (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania as well as in western parts of Ukraine), and, very importantly, they stress that a pro-Western Russian nationalism had its centre in Moscow. These anti-communists wanted to reject ‘Soviet civilisation’ in favour of Western (that is, ‘universalistic’) values and Western civilisation.

In his condemnation of anti-Soviet and pro-Western nationalism in Russia and other ex-Soviet republics Leontii Byzov refers to the nineteenth-century Russian thinker Konstantin Leontiev, who, as quoted by Byzov, saw a ‘destructive cosmopolitan content in movements that call themselves national’. Commenting on the unification of Germany under Bismarck, Leontiev wrote that ‘contemporary political nationalism is nothing but . . . cosmopolitan democratization that merely assumes different forms of expression’. In Byzov’s opinion exactly the same could be said about the ideas of Moscow-based ‘Russian democrats’ in the final years of the Soviet Union. He notes with approval that Central Asian republics did not participate in the break-up of the USSR, and regrets the passivity of provincial Russia during that time (Byzov 1996: 148–9).

Nationalism’s confrontation with communism in practice, as distinct from theoretical or philosophical debates, revealed not only its own ‘universalism’ but also made visible often disguised weaknesses of Soviet communism. Their full-scale confrontation became possible only after 1945, after the establishment of Russian-style communist regimes in countries which had advanced farther towards modern nationhood than Russia or any other Soviet nationalities. It also took place on a global stage: in a world engaged in the ‘Great Contest’ between the two world systems. In that contest the Soviet model of modernity failed, and communism came to be seen, also in the USSR itself, as ‘an abortive form of modernisation’ (Minogue and Williams 1992: 241).

Looking back at the Soviet ‘ethnicisation’ of nationalities in Stalin’s time and later, we see how one-sided was the communist perception of nationalism. Modern nationalism *speaks* the language of particularism but practices universal engagement: it measures its own performance according to universal values and standards, it looks up to those who are the most advanced – just as the Russians had done in Catherine’s time. It is easier now to see that the nationalist movements within the USSR drew their strength from the fact that they were doing two things at the same time. What looked like ethnic parochialism or even isolationism was not only isolationism from Moscow but also a call for joining the world directly – bypassing Moscow.

Nationalism is about subverting and liquidating empires – and the

civilisations with which they are usually identified. Nationalism is about escaping – transcending – the confines of empires and civilisations. Nationalism does not just subvert empires intellectually, by promoting a view of one's national condition in a global context: it preaches self-determination of units that are subordinated to empires and civilisations – in the name of universal principles. Recognition of this subversively universalising role of nationalism is missing in Samuel Huntington's diagnosis of the clash of civilizations in the postcommunist world (Walt 1997: 183–4, 187).

Thus, the emergence of nation-states in the post-Soviet space has made it easier for the peoples of the USSR to participate in the common affairs of humankind than was the case in the 'internationalist' Soviet empire. The break-up of the USSR in 1991 does not mean, however, that E. J. Hobsbawm is absolutely right when he says 'the simplest way to describe the apparent explosion of separatism in 1988–92 is thus as "unfinished business of 1918–21"' (Hobsbawm 1992: 165). It may be true that 'the eggs of Versailles and Brest-Litovsk are still hatching' and that *some* of the 'explosive issues of 1988–92 were those created in 1918–21' (1992: 164), but there are also some *new* issues on the current agenda. They are a legacy of nationalism's experience with communism between 1917 and 1991.

On the one hand, there exists a state called the Russian Federation and that state considers itself to be a multiethnic nation-state. In this respect we have here a radical break with the history of Russia as an empire based on non-ethnic principles. But, on the other hand, the debate continues within Russia about the identity of the Russians: are they as an ethnic community (*russkii narod*) distinct from the Russian political nation (*rossiiskii narod*, or *narod Rossii*)?

Some of those who reject any political or legal definition of the Russian nation insist that Western ideas and institutions are inapplicable to Russia as a matter of principle. One such author, Vladimir Makhnach, declares:

Nation as a sum of citizens of a state is a concept that exists only in the West. In Russia, in all of Asia, in Africa, nation is the ethnos and only the ethnos. . . . There will never be an 'India' nation and there never will be a 'Russia' [*rossiiskaia* as distinct from *russkaia*] nation. (Makhnach 1997: 12)

For Makhnach (and many others), Ukraine and Belarus are parts of Russia, and Ukrainians and Belorussians are as Russian as the 'Great Russians' or *velikorossy* (Makhnach 1997: 12–13).

Still others call on their compatriots to abandon the traditional Russian debates about Russia's relationship to 'Europe' (whether one's stand is for or against engagement in Europe) and to adopt another definition of Russia, that would view as its core the European region with the Urals, and Siberia (Tsymburskii 1993).

Even though post-Soviet Russia considers itself a democracy based on the same principles as Western democracies, there are people in Russia who

demand that the imperial triad of Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality be accepted today (quoted in Petro 1995: 149). Small wonder then that Western specialists express opinions on Russia of the 1990s that might have been equally validly applied to Russia of the 1890s. Thus, Bruce Porter sees Russia's problem today to be the same that 'has plagued Russia throughout the modern era'. 'This problem of achieving a long-overdue fusion of nation and state is the defining challenge of Russian political life today' (Porter 1996: 132–3).

Independent Ukraine has managed to escape ethnic and religious conflicts and has not become 'another Yugoslavia', as some commentators were predicting in the early 1990s. (For an original attempt to compare the Soviet and Yugoslav break-ups by reference to their precommunist histories, see Vujačić 1996.) But, like Russia, it faces basic questions regarding its identity as a nation and a state. Its first post-Soviet constitution (1996) defines the people of Ukraine as embracing all citizens of the state, but there are some who insist that 'real Ukrainians' are those who speak Ukrainian as their first language and consider themselves Ukrainian by 'nationality', that is, ethnically. Support for an ethnic or linguistic definition comes from opposing political groups, for example, Ukrainian nationalists in the western regions and Russian nationalists who want Ukraine to be viewed as a binational state – Ukrainian and Russian (the place of the Crimean Tatars, whose historic homeland is here, is often forgotten in these polemics).

Ukraine's internal questions are inseparable from the external matter of relations with Russia. Ukrainians are debating whether they should once more become closely tied to Russia, in the form of a Eurasian community, for instance, or rather seek closer relations with the other major power in their history, Poland, and Europe in general. 'Ukraine: On a Borderline between Civilizations' is the title of a work by two Ukrainian historians which deals with some of these broader issues and explores the implications of Ukraine's transition from Soviet to Western values (Tkachenko and Reyent 1995).

While the Russian connection is central for Ukraine, Ukraine remains just as important for Russia. The recently published volume of essays by Russian and Ukrainian scholars under the title 'Ukraine and Russia: Societies and States' (Furman 1997) is a valuable introduction to history and current issues engaging both parties.

Independent Russia and independent Ukraine in their own ways define themselves through negation of the Soviet system. Independent Belarus, as represented by President Lukashenka, does the opposite: this head of state is an open advocate of a new Soviet state. Lukashenka does not call for transforming Belarus into a province of Russia with a governor-general in Minsk: he wants Russia and Belarus, and others, to join a new larger entity. His neo-Sovietism has an enemy in the Belorussian national movement which wants Belarus to be part of *Europe* as an independent democratic

republic. Thus, in Belarus it is possible to see not so much two competing concepts of Belorussian nationhood but rather two national identities, one Belorussian and the other 'Soviet'. While the latter definitely favours the Russian language, it is not Russian nationalist. Which of these will ultimately prevail will depend not only on what the people of that country will do but also on external factors. Foreign relations, and the world community with its universal standards, play a major role in influencing and indeed forming national identities. Ethnicity influences foreign policies – but the reverse is also true (Prizel 1994).

Does it make sense to speak of a Soviet national identity, as I have just done in connection with Belarus? Apparently yes, it is possible to do so – up to a point. The Soviet state had to collapse first for the world to discover to what extent the Soviets had in fact succeeded in forming a Soviet people. Now we see that some categories of citizens of the former USSR do belong to that amorphous mass of Soviet people. But is there a Russian-speaking Soviet people? This option cannot be dismissed *a priori*. There is evidence from public opinion surveys that a considerable number of residents of eastern Ukraine, for example, whether of Russian or Ukrainian nationality as recorded in their passports, believe themselves to be primarily 'Soviet', with a secondary regional identification (Pirie 1996). In so far as a Soviet identity survives, it does so mainly in the 'Rust Belt' of the old Soviet Union, and because of their attachment to Soviet values and practices, one is tempted to call those Soviet people the Luddites of the postcommunist era. (To quote Minogue and Williams again: 'All socialist utopias are dreams of social reorganization tied to the current level of technology. This is the reason they go out of date so rapidly. Bolshevism was a form of socialism inspired by the emergence of heavy industry and the assembly line' (Minogue and Williams 1992: 237)).

One may ask why a Soviet people, a Soviet popular movement, did not stand up for the Soviet system when communism was still in power? One answer would be that the 'Soviet people' had been by definition a people which did not do anything on its own but was led in all matters by the party. And when the party was either divided from within or its leaders were failing, there was no room for other legitimate organisations (for instance, trade unions or youth organisations) to defend the system, if necessary, against the state's leaders. Another factor would be the success of anti-Soviet alternatives in capturing support or at least paralysing the communist side. In any case, in Ukraine, Russia and Belarus, precisely because they are not yet firmly defined nationally, there still exists a large national or ethnic 'floating vote'. Some of these people are Soviet in the morning, Russian in the afternoon and Ukrainian in the evening – the order may change. It is impossible to predict now whether they will eventually opt for one fixed and mutually exclusive national identity (Russian, Ukrainian or Belarussian), or whether some new regional-cum-ideological entities will emerge, such as some kind of Donbass regional identity with *Soviet* political

and cultural ideals, which will seek to define itself simultaneously against Russia and Ukraine. Contrary to what Hobsbawm has said, the post-1991 scene is not simply a return to 1917–20: communism *did* have a profound impact and has left a social and psychological legacy that survives beyond its political/institutional death.

Conclusion

Ernest Gellner's reflections on the consequences of the fall of communism reveal deep pessimism. He wrote:

I deplore the disintegration of the Soviet Union not because I ever sympathized with the ideology which had inspired it – on the contrary, I always found it repellent – but from rather more abstract considerations concerning the need for continuity, and the consequences of discontinuity.

The Russians have a bitter saying concerning their historic role in Europe: their job is to show others how *not* to do things. The sad thing about the present situation is that they may do this once again. The manner of the dismantling of the Russian Revolution may come to be seen as a disaster comparable only with the Revolution itself. (Gellner 1996: 45)

This article has tried to show that the dismantling of the Russian Revolution proved to be much less of a disaster than the Russian Revolution itself had been. The remarkably peaceful – by contemporary world standards – transition from the Soviet Union to independent states of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and a dozen other independent states, was carried out in the name of nationalism. Nationalism represents an element of continuity while so much else lies in ruin after communism; it links the present not only with the immediately preceding Soviet era but also with times long before communism. By studying nationalism in this way, historians join the economists, political scientists and sociologists as they try to understand the world after communism.

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