



Stephen VELychENKO

**NATIONALIZING  
AND DENATIONALIZING THE PAST:  
UKRAINE AND RUSSIA IN COMPARATIVE CONTEXT**

Serhii Plokyh, *Unmaking Imperial Russia: Mykhailo Hrushevsky and the Writing of Ukrainian History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005). xvi+614 pp. ISBN-10: 0-80-20393-75; ISBN-13: 978-0802-0393-78 (hardcover edition);

Serhii Plokyh, *The Origins of the Slavic Nations: Premodern Identities in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). xix+379 pp. ISBN-10: 0-52-18640-38; ISBN-13: 978-0521-8640-39 (hardcover edition).

In an old Soviet joke a peasant comes to town after the revolution and goes to the local barber shop where he sees pictures of Marx and Lenin in the window. He sits down and asks who they are. "That's Marx and Lenin,"

says the barber. "So that's how they look. I thought you were advertising," the peasant replies. "You know, before cutting and after cutting." Ploky's two books, like this anonymous pearl of wisdom, make us think about how perspective and context influence perception of phenomena and their interrelationships.

Specifically, Ploky examines changing perceptions of relations between territories, populations and political borders, and how today we might study the past of, and national identities in, modern national states whose territories were once parts, or centers of, imperial multi-national states. The two reviewed books remind those interested in grand narratives of national history defined by state borders that the interaction between the national, the local, and the linear/genealogical, cannot be explained without reference to the imperial or to the times. When dealing with the pre-industrial world this means remembering that a change of ruling elites was not tantamount to ethnic subjugation, that loyalties and identities were multiple, and that rule did not always mean control. For those interested in more narrowly defined subjects during periods when today's national states did not exist, and who do not wish to read borders into the past, Ploky's second work is an example of what some prominent scholars have called a "situationalist" approach.<sup>1</sup> This involves looking at pre-national/multi-national polities as polyethnic structures, defining a specific subject within that structure, identifying its actors, the logic of their behavior, and then reconstructing the interrelationships.

Ukraine, like Belgium, Estonia, Greece, Poland, Italy and Germany did not exist in 1800 as a nationally defined political unit. Only in the 1840s did intellectuals living in imperial Russian provinces north of the Black Sea begin thinking of the territory situated between the Bug, Prypriet and Donets rivers as "Ukraine." A few years later, during the Crimean War, politicians in London passingly considered incorporating four of those provinces into the British empire. Had they done so, the British would have exploited the local population as they did in India or Hong Kong. They would have also brought to those provinces, however, the English language, parliament, elections, and the rule of law. What might have then happened to the new-born idea of "Ukraine" is anyone's guess. Perhaps someone might have invoked the presence of Celtic monks in medieval Kyivan-Rus, the fact that Harold Hardrada was Volodymyr's father-in-law, and that Scots

---

<sup>1</sup> See: A. Miller, M. Dolbilov (Eds.). *Zapadnye okrainy Rossiiskoi imperii*. Moscow, 2006; A. Miller. *Imperiia Romanovykh i natsionalizm*. Moscow, 2006.

fought in Khmelnytsky's army, as proof of "British-Ukrainian brotherhood." Perhaps someone might have argued that a rump "Ukraine" had to have the same status as Ireland or Scotland, and might have written an appropriate "national history" for it.

As it happened, after 1854 all of Russia's Ukrainians remained within its empire and the Russian-language communications sphere – with Russian-style serfdom, the Siberian penal system (*katorga*), no rule of law, no parliament, and no elections. During the second half of the nineteenth century, meanwhile, politically loyal "Little Russian" and "Ukrainian" intellectuals argued that "Ukraine's" past had to be studied exhaustively and in detail because it was a part of "Rossiia" and, as such, had to be incorporated into, rather than excluded from, the established Imperial Russian grand narrative of national history. By the beginning of the next century, on the other hand, historians sympathetic to or active in the Ukrainian national movement were no longer claiming their regional past was part of a larger whole, but that it was a separate national history in its own right that should be excluded from Russian national history. Like their counterparts in the rest of Europe, albeit later, these intellectuals were "nationalizing" what until then had been a regional history of a larger unit. One consequence of this intellectual development was the idea that the principality of Kyiv/Kiev-Rus was "Ukrainian" rather than "Russian," and that "Russian history" did not begin on the northern Black-Sea littoral, or banks of the Dnipro river, but in the Volga-Oka basin. This initially was a minority view. But by the 1930s most of the educated Ukrainians saw the past of the territory then called the Ukrainian SSR as a national history separate from Russia's national history. The key person behind this development was Mykhailo Hrushevsky, and he is the subject of the first reviewed book which focuses on the years 1890–1934.

The first three chapters of the first book summarize Hrushevsky's biography, his overall interpretation of Ukraine's past and its major events. Attention is given to periodization, terminology and ethnogenesis. Chapter four examines Hrushevsky's work in Soviet Ukraine and includes useful extended summaries of his critics' arguments. Chapter five is devoted to his account of Bohdan Khmelnytsky and Ukraine's early-modern revolution. The final chapter examines the relationship between Hrushevsky's treatment of Ukrainian history and official Soviet interpretations. The book also includes discussions of Pavel Miliukov's (*Unmaking Imperial Russia*, P. 108) and Mikhail Pokrovsky's role in what might be seen as an incipient "nationalizing" of the grand narrative of Russian history – duly noting that

the latter, by 1929, had sided with Stalin and began advocating a Russocentric version of Soviet history (Pp. 348-354, 383-394). Throughout, Plokhy balances his treatment of Hrushevsky the historian, with an analysis of his place in the domestic politics of the day. Plokhy's underlying theme is the relationship between evidence and interpretation in historical writing. After closely examining the interaction between evidence and paradigm he concludes that while prevailing paradigms shaped his interpretations, Hrushevsky strived to be as intellectually honest as he possibly could (Pp. 311, 340-343). This supports my earlier claim that Russian Polish and Ukrainian historians who wrote grand narratives were all more influenced in the final analysis by the prevailing intellectual and political climate than research.<sup>2</sup>

Plokhy's account of Hrushevsky's role in nationalizing the past of a part of eastern Europe into "Ukrainian history" and thereby "unmaking Imperial Russia" is a fine piece of scholarship. A nuanced, complex analysis, his book is detailed and intended primarily for specialists. Yet, it is free of trendy jargon, focuses rigorously on its theme, and will be understood by anyone interested. Shortcomings such as Plokhy's questionable use of "intelligentsia" for "the educated," and "deconstruct" for "reject" or "criticize," are trivial – like his failure to clearly indicate whether official attacks on Hrushevsky began in January or May 1929 (Pp. 264, 369). Given his repetition of the old canard that Hrushevsky influenced Aleksandr Presniakov (P. 150; and *The Origins of the Slavic Nations*, P. 127), readers should note that Presniakov never presented Kyiv Rus as the exclusive legacy of Ukrainians and denied the significance of early Slavic tribal/ linguistic/ cultural differences. Just because he wrote a book on the origins of Muscovy without mentioning a "Kyivan period" does not mean Presniakov regarded Kyiv-Rus as the first period of Ukrainian history.<sup>3</sup> While agreeing that "Little" and "Great Russian" history could be studied separately, he nonetheless considered both necessary components of the larger "All-Russian nation" and "All Russian history." Presniakov considered Muscovy the organic continuation of the common "All Rus" state of Kyiv, criticized Miliukov for denying it, and during the revolution opposed Ukrainian independence. In his opinion the three eastern Slavic nations throughout their existence comprised a "*edinyi russkii narod*." In the historiographical in-

---

<sup>2</sup> S. Velychenko. *National History as Cultural Process. The Interpretation of Ukraine's Past in Russian Polish and Ukrainian History Writing. From Earliest Times to 1914.* Edmonton, 1992.

<sup>3</sup> A. Presniakov. *Obrazovanie velikoruskago gosudarstva.* Petrograd, 1918.

roduction to his book, it should be added, Presniakov omitted the critical dismissal of Hrushevsky found in his 1907 lectures, which served as the basis of the book, and which were not published until 1938. This was likely one reason why one of Hrushevsky's students labeled the book as "pro-Hrushevsky" in a 1930 review that subsequently became the basis of the Presniakov myth among Ukrainian historians.<sup>4</sup> However, in 1930 Hrushevsky was no longer in favor, and one might ask why the Presniakov review was written as it was.

A discussion of how throughout Europe professionalization did not necessarily make scholarship less political might have been worthwhile. Moreover, it would also be useful consider how the internal politics of Imperial Russia and the USSR, as well as their foreign policies affected both Hrushevsky's fate and the dissemination of historical interpretations. In 1904, for instance, during the Russo-Japanese War, the new Interior Minister, Petr Sviatopolk-Mirsky, allowed Hrushevsky to publish his work in the empire. Faced with massive reservist riots along with Col. Matoir Akashi's plotting with and funding oppositionists, he hoped his gesture would placate moderate Ukrainian national leaders and separate them from their more radical compatriots, and from pro-Japanese Russian liberals, Russian SRs and Finnish, Georgian and Polish nationalists. Foreign events played a role in Hrushevsky's fate after the revolution again. During the 1920s Moscow sought to mobilize Ukrainians living in Poland and Czechoslovakia as a revolutionary national force to destabilize France's Little Entente, and to that end, "Ukrainization" (in which Hrushevsky played an important role) presented Soviet Ukraine abroad as a model. After his 1927 coup, however, Pilsudski mitigated the worst anti-Ukrainian aspects of Polish domestic policy and began supporting Ukrainian émigrés in Warsaw who sought to overthrow the Soviet regime with Polish assistance. This external threat became more serious when in January 1928 Moscow ordered the dissolution of the Western Ukrainian Communist Party for its opposition to the slow pace of "Ukrainization" in Ukraine. Concluding it was no longer realistic to try and mobilize Ukrainian nationalism abroad as a revolutionary force, Stalin no longer had a reason to support those party members trying to turn Soviet Ukraine into a model national republic against other party members who feared for the continued dominance of Russian and Russians in Ukraine. Thus, the beginning of the attack on the national paradigm of

---

<sup>4</sup> N. Iusova. *Genesys kontseptsii davn'orus'koi narodnosti v istorychnii nausti SRSR*. Kyiv, 2005.

Ukrainian history that began in December 1928, and the personal attacks on Hrushevsky that began the following month, were not simply an outcome of domestic politics. Analogously, Hrushevsky's arrest, and deportation to Moscow in early 1931, when the first scurrilous condemnations of his interpretations also began appearing, might be seen in the context of Stalin's decision to ally with, rather than try to overthrow his western neighbors. Requiring stability on his western borders in face of the Japanese threat on his eastern borders, Stalin no longer needed Soviet Ukraine as a model national republic for a revolutionary foreign policy. Nor was there any longer a need to tolerate the presence of Hrushevsky.

If, as Plokhyy and I have argued, research had a minimal impact on interpretive shifts in grand narratives of national history, then no one should be surprised that, regardless of Hrushevsky's scholarship, Russia's historians do not think that he "unmade Imperial Russia," and that grand narratives of Russian national history written at the beginning of this century are much the same as those written at the beginning of the last century. Some histories of Russia published since 1991 in Russia no longer refer to the Pereiaslav Treaty of 1654 as a "reunion." But, to my knowledge, no historical survey of the country has yet been published that begins with the first human settlement in the Volga-Oka basin. Nicholas Riasanovsky's survey is probably the most influential and widely read English-language academic history of Russia. The first four parts of its seventh edition, which appeared fourteen years after Ukrainian independence, are the same as they were in the first edition that appeared forty-five years earlier. In both editions, the chapter "Russia before the Russians" includes the claim: "As an introduction to Russian history proper, we must turn to the northern shore of the Black Sea [sic]...."<sup>5</sup> The Volga-Oka basin does not appear until chapter 11, and we are told nothing about what happened there before 1147.

Surveys of Russian history, in short, did not and still do not limit their treatment of events that occurred on what is today Ukrainian territory to sections on foreign policy and influences. Survey authors still treat those events as integral parts of "Russian history," thereby perpetuating the idea that eastern Slavic "unity" was something that existed in Kyiv Rus, rather than invented centuries later in the Russian Empire. Post-imperial Russia, consequently, still has a "national history" that begins in a territory that was not directly politically incorporated into Russia until the 1780s, and then

---

<sup>5</sup> N. Riasanovsky. *A History of Russia*. Oxford, 1963 (1<sup>st</sup> edition). P. 11; (7<sup>th</sup> edition, 2005). P. 10.

was separated from it two-hundred years later. Just because Kyiv once ruled principalities in what is now Russia, is no reason to trace the beginning of “Russian history” to the banks of the Dnipro. Analogous logic would lead Americans to claim that because what today is America was once ruled from London, American “national history” should begin on the banks of the Thames. British, German or French historians do not claim that because what are now Britain, France and Germany were once ruled by Rome, their respective “national histories” should begin on the banks of the Tiber – although that is where Geoffrey of Monmouth, and many after him, began his history of Britain/Albia (*Historia regum Britanniae* [c.1136]).

Modern “national history” is a category of analysis that disaggregated earlier dynastic/imperial histories, which conflated metropolis and dependency into discrete elements, and presented metropolitan and dependency pasts as fully coherent in isolation. As a rule, it was part of the response of local elites to centralized imperial domination – a reaction to universalism centered on the “nation” and its territory as a place of resistance that, as Vico put it, replaced gods and heroes with peoples as subjects of history. As the “loco-centric” perspective of a dependency, it can provide a better explanation of the lands and peoples concerned than an imperial “metro-centric” account, in so far as it can be more detailed and comprehensive. If a territory and population is looked at from a center as part of a whole, it will appear as a marginal dependency with only transitory importance to a center that, by definition, is the major influence on the part. Since what was significant in the region’s past will be determined by what was important in the domestic experience of the center, any historical description of the region written from such a perspective must be partial and therefore unsatisfactory. If, on the other hand, a territory and population is treated as a center in its own right, it will appear as a unit within which events had their own logic and patterns influenced by many forces among which external political centers were merely one.

As a category of analysis, “national history” has its faults and problems. There are no mono-ethnic national states and disagreements over the location of cultural borders. Besides serving as a base for emancipation and liberation, national history can also be a partisan construction that either forcibly excludes some, or includes others who would prefer to be excluded. In the case of Russia, what most consider to be Russian “national history,” former subjects of the tsarist empire and USSR consider a Russian “imperial narrative.” In modern Turkey, historians have difficulties explaining the relationship between central Asian, Moslem Turks, and Anatolia’s non-

Turkic pagan/Christian inhabitants. Neither Byzantium, nor the Arabs after 1517, have a place in the grand narrative of national history; which cannot explain why Muslim Arabs were anti-Turkish. Nor does it depict the Ottoman occupation of the Balkans in terms of conquest and oppression. It explains their later secession in terms of foreign ideas and outside agitators.<sup>6</sup> Some histories of Italy exclude Rome, in keeping with Benedetto Croce's view that "Italy" was historically new, and today historians still debate how to relate the history of the peninsula to the empire when beginning "Italian history." Similarly, historians question whether "Greek history" should begin with pagan Minoan culture, and question how far north its borders reach; and for much of the nineteenth century national leaders refused to link the Kingdom of Greece with Byzantium.<sup>7</sup>

Decades of criticism, however, have changed the category from what it was before 1914. First, after 1918, nationally defined grand narratives were criticized for justifying aggressive nationalism, imposing later ethnic-political borders into a past when they either did not exist or were inchoate, and for ignoring sub-national groups. In North America and Western Europe, international commissions were established to eliminate nationalist bias from school history texts, and dissociate national history from exclusivist nationalist loyalties, thus making it an unlikely agent of extremism or chauvinism. Since 1991 this revision has been extended to the former Soviet Bloc countries with the Polish-German Commission serving as a model. Simultaneously, methodological diversification eventually led to studying the past of human activity, and today historians using supra-, sub-, intra-, and/or non- national categories of analysis pay closer attention to the lines separating nation, state, and groups, and try not to omit, minimize or exaggerate interaction. Critical European historians now recognize national states contain minorities, anomalies and mixed areas; and during the last decades of the twentieth century, they began "denationalizing" their national histories. They no longer treat "the people" and rulers as culturally defined collectives, and consider migration and connections. They look at kings as administrators rather than conquerors; treat identity and loyalty as something changing, inclusive and multiple rather than unchanging, exclusive and singular; and attach more significance to nonviolent resistance, chance and diversity, than to rebellion, destiny and unity. American historians now

---

<sup>6</sup> E. Copeaux. *Espaces et temps de la nation torquée*. Paris, 1997.

<sup>7</sup> G. Galasso. *L'Italia come problema storiografico*. Turin, 1981; A. Karakasidou. *Fields of Wheat, Hills of Blood. Passages to Nationhood in Greek Macedonia 1870 – 1990*. Chicago, 1997.



write “multi-cultural” accounts – national history that no longer focuses only on literate elites with power, but also includes previously ignored subjects such as women, collective and individual identity-formation and consciousness, and the history of daily life. Exported like hamburgers and neo-liberalism, the “multi-cultural” approach now influences European historians. In countries that once fell within the borders of empires, accounts of that past no longer consider the old imperial central and eternal, but peripheral and transitory. Alien political rule was merely one force influencing events, like supra-territorial capitalism, and not necessarily the decisive one. Not only has national history changed significantly from its nineteenth century variant, today is it no longer the dominant form of historical discourse in Europe or North America, but simply one alongside others on the continuum between the global and the local.

In addition, the fragmentation that has resulted from the sheer volume of publications and the innumerable subdivisions of modern historical study has cast doubt on the possibility of writing national history, or for that matter any kind of comprehensive synthesis. This leads some to argue that events cannot have any order or progression, and therefore grand narratives, national or otherwise, are not only ontologically, but epistemologically unacceptable, because by categorizing they must distort and marginalize. Historians can write only about “moments.” An extremist-relativist position claims there is no such thing as an “event” about which historians can know through the use of rules of evidence and then relate in jargon-free prose to others; there are only indeterminate metaphoric “texts” that are either imposed by force or freely interpreted by all as they will – a position that gives intellectual respectability to today’s tribalist New Right.

Yet books written as grand narratives still top non-fiction best seller lists, which shows educated people still have a primal intellectual need to organize and structure knowledge – a need to have a context in order to understand specific events which grand narratives satisfy. Despite the arguments of the extremist-relativist minority, most historians accept that striving for some sense is better than nonsense, and that we can be skeptical without sinking into isolationist anomie. In this spirit, most approach “national history” in its revised form as one category of analysis among others, and look at established grand narratives critically rather than as received truth. One might wish, however, that authors of surveys made greater effort to distinguish between states and people. Logically, the histories of Poland, Russia, or Ukraine, should not be the same as histories of the Poles, Russians or Ukrainians.

What also remains unchanged in “national history” is the idea that the study of any country lies within the modern borders of that country, and starts with the earliest available evidence about it. Since the national state with its territorially defined bureaucracy that is the subject of national history is still with us despite the corrosive effect of global telecommunications, McDonald’s restaurants, homogenized mass culture, and supranational corporations, it remains as a legitimate object of study and intellectual category. Accordingly, if good historians do not write good national histories, they will leave the field open for bad historians to write bad ones. National history remains important for countries with sizable minorities as well, because historically defined private identities persist in the public sphere. Power cannot be administered nor resources distributed without reference to culture, nation, and history; which, because they define civic/legal arrangements, cannot be reduced to aesthetic symbols chosen and discarded at will. Few care about who manages the sewers, but many care about what is taught in schools. National identity is not merely a chosen social fiction. If it were, people would not struggle and die for justice in its name. Diaspora, meanwhile, cannot exist without institutions, which imply a “home” with a history.

As noted a generation ago in volume IV of the *New Cambridge Modern History*, ideally political events like national independence should not influence historians. But in reality they do. English and Irish views on their histories, to pick but one example, were modified considerably during the last century primarily due to the successful establishment of the Irish Republic. Accordingly, when Hrushevsky’s works attaching the Kyivan legacy to “Ukrainian history” first appeared at the beginning of the last century when Ukraine did not exist as a territorial entity, Russian historians ignored them. Indeed, his vociferous critics were bilingual Ukrainian-born “empire-loyalists” (Pp. 111-113, 149-150). Presniakov, as noted, was uninfluenced. Nor did Mikhail Pokrovsky consistently distinguish between Russia and its empire. When, during the 1920s, Dmytro Bahalyi in a letter specifically asked if he thought that Ukraine’s past was a national history in its own right, Pokrovsky never replied. He also later regretted his one-volume history of Russia, which focused on ethnic Russia and was written in 1919-1920 when Russia did not control Ukraine. Nonetheless, it remains as evidence that Pokrovsky at the time had intellectually accepted the political reality of those years – which arguable influenced him more than Hrushevsky’s ideas. His contemporary, the Moscow-born historian of Europe Robert Vipper, was drawing similar distinctions between Russia as national

state and Russia as empire in the wake of Ukrainian independence. A supporter of the short-lived moderate-left “Velikorusskii soiuz,” whose leaders sought to establish a non-Bolshevik Republic within Russian ethnic territory as defined by the de facto 1918 Ukrainian-Russian border, Vipper explained that its leaders could not use the empire as the basis of their political work because it was not a national unit. The previous year’s attempt to turn the tsarist empire into a republic had been wrong, he argued, and Russia had to become a nation before it could be a republic – an opinion similar to Atatürk’s, who realized that a democratic Turkish republic had to purge itself of the Ottoman empire.<sup>8</sup> The “Velikorusskii soiuz” collapsed within a few months of its founding, however, and Vipper never created a grand narrative of Russian national history reflecting its political program. Nonetheless, the logic of “unmaking imperial Russia” was implicit in his perceptive insight.

Today, as in 1918-1919, a political border once again exists between Russia and Ukraine, and expectedly, the existence of a state that controls the territory Russians claim should be part of their national history has again led some Russian historians and archaeologists (e.g., Kseniia Mialo, Valentin Ianin, Alexei Miller, Lev Pushkarev) to think about Russia’s non-Kyivan roots, its relationship to empire, and about “de-imperializing” and “nationalizing” Russia’s past.<sup>9</sup> Abroad, Geoffrey Hosking has written on these subjects.<sup>10</sup> Plokhy’s timely first book reminds us that in light of what Hrushevsky wrote, Kiev-Rus would figure in any new “non-imperial” grand narrative of Russian national history not as the “beginning” of Russia, but as an influence on it – like the Mongols, the Swedes and the Prussians.

In his second book, Plokhy turns from an examination of how Ukrainians “nationalized” their past, and how this affects the established interpretation of Russian national history, to how we might now “denationalize” our understanding of the relationship between the Rus past and the Ukrainian, Russian, Lithuanian and Belarus present. He reviews how the educated who lived between the Bug and Volga before the “age of nationalism” imagined their peoples. Without reading present borders or identities into the past, he seeks to identify pre-national forms of group identity, and look at

<sup>8</sup> R. Vipper. *O natsional’nom vozrozhdenii Rossii* // *Utro Rossii*, 1918. February 17 / March 2.

<sup>9</sup> V. Tolz. *Russia: Inventing the Nation*. London, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> See, f.i.: G. Hosking. *Russia: People and Empire, 1552 – 1917*. Cambridge, Mass., 1997; idem. *Russia and the Russians: A History*. London, 2001.

how accounts of those identities were rewritten as defining terms were re-defined. He observes that whatever weak political sense of Rus community did exist among the Kyivan elite, it quickly faded after 1240; that there was no single pan-Russian or three primordial East Slavic identities at the time; and that the medieval Rus community is only indirectly related to the later East Slavic nations. Similarity of names never meant similarity of identity. "Rus" meant different things at different times to different people, and no attempt to monopolize and disseminate a single meaning for it ever succeeded. His review of the literature shows how the longer various parts of what was the Rus tribal confederation, lived under different rulers and social-legal orders, primarily due to the influence of political, social, and legal circumstances. Throughout, Plokhy duly notes that nationality/ethnicity/cultural identity as we understand them today were less significant before 1800; and that they were secondary to dynastic, familial, and legal identities, and cannot be treated in isolation from them (Pp. 108, 142, 153, 247, 359). This interrelationship was particularly important in the case of premodern Ukrainian/Ruthenian/Little Russian elites. Belonging to larger states and without a native ruling dynasty, they defended their particularities within those states by arguing that the various "unions" that had marked their accessions to one or another country were based on treaties between equals, and not on conquest or re-absorption of wayward vassals into renewed *imperiums*. Even the Orthodox opposed to the church union of 1596 rejected it less because of religious reasons than because they regarded it as conspiratorially imposed and not voluntarily agreed upon. In today's terminology, the ethnonational was marginal in discourse at the time (Pp. 202, 355, 357).

Valuable insight is provided by Plokhy's use of recent scholarship illustrating that within the multinational *Rzeczpospolita* and tsarist empires, dominated elites had two levels of identity/loyalty (Pp. 172, 201). While English and Scots, for example, knew they were different from each other, foreigners did not and called both British. Yet, Scots also called themselves British when abroad. Analogously, Poles, Russians and Ukrainians (Ruthenians/Little Russians) within their respective countries also knew they were different from each other. Yet, that difference was likewise often lost on outside observers who would call Ukrainians Poles or Russians, as Ukrainians themselves did when abroad. Plokhy reminds us that in the 1590s, anti-Uniate Orthodox Ukrainians /Ruthenians begging money from the tsar in Lviv/Lwow were the first to use modern national/cultural terminology to claim that an alleged affinity and unity existed between their people and

Muscovites/Russians; and duly notes that, nonetheless, Muscovites considered themselves different from their western Orthodox neighbors.

Plokhy's account of the significance of Ivan IV's death upon his subjects is unconvincing, although he does use the conditional tense when conjecturing how it perhaps led Muscovite literati to associate the newly emerged notions of *zemlia* and *gosudarstvo* with "all Rus," and separate the ruler from the realm. His claim that Muscovites saw Ukrainians/Ruthenians in dynastic rather than ethnic terms during the mid seventeenth century is questionable as well (Pp. 212-222, 247). With the end of the Moscow branch of the Rurik line in 1591, Muscovites could no longer claim Polish-controlled Rus lands on the basis of dynastic right. In addition, Russians had elected Wladyslaw IV tsar in 1610. Faced with a conundrum, the literati stuck with dynastic-based chronography and made a Riurykovich link for Michael Romanov after 1613. Yet, despite this constructed Romanov-Riurykovich link, none of the major chronicles written after 1654 depicted that year's treaty as a "return" of patrimonial lands. They presented the subsequent attaching of Cossack-Ukraine to Muscovy as a "conquest" or "takeover," while the word "reunion" appeared only sporadically in documents associated with the negotiations. In 1654 the tsar did use "Little Rus" for the first time in his title, but alongside the "grand duchies" of Kyiv, Chernihiv, Zaporizhzhia, Volynia and Podillia. Are the terms exclusive or inclusive?<sup>11</sup> In short, the entire issue still needs examination in the context of the rivalry between factions opposed to and supportive of intervention in the Polish-Ukrainian/Cossack wars. If pro-Muscovite Ruthenians/Ukrainians, for their part, formally ignored the change of dynasty in Muscovy, as Plokhy claims they did, it seems significant nonetheless that they apparently began using ethnonational-cultural terminology when writing about their eastern neighbors only after 1591 (Pp. 230-231).

Plokhy also does not examine how representative early seventeenth century pro-Muscovite Ukrainians were. How many of them knew of the differences that separated their own church from their pre-Nikon Russian church across the border; and how did those who did know, reconcile their pro-Russian rhetoric with that knowledge (Pp. 230-233)? Analogously, while duly examining how educated Ukrainians/Ruthenians/Little Russians confused the national and the imperial in the Russian mind during the late seventeenth and the early eighteenth centuries, Plokhy does not elaborate upon how they dealt with the relationships between the national-cultural-

---

<sup>11</sup> S. Velychenko. *National History*. Pp. 80, 86-87.

genealogical and the legal-political. Much like Scots after the Battle of Culloden (1745) helped England make its empire, clerics like Prokopovych after the Battle of Poltava (1709) reduced distinctions between Muscovy and Little Russia in written literature and thereby helped Muscovy create its empire. This activity involved shifting loyalty (and identity) from the Hetmanate and its ecclesiastical and civic institutions, to the Russian tsar and his state (Pp. 273, 275), and blurred lines within Peter's multiethnic multireligious empire to facilitate the emergence of a Russian version of Britishness (P. 297). Yet, from a comparative perspective, the new imperial identity, both at the time and in hindsight, arguably left Ukrainians/Little Russians under Peter and Catherine worse off than Scots under Anne and George. No Russian minister responded to Ukrainian demands for autonomy after 1905 with anything comparable to Churchill's 1911 statement on Scottish Home Rule: "There is nothing which conflicts with the integration of the United Kingdom in the setting-up of a Scottish parliament for the discharge of Scottish business."<sup>12</sup>

In the pre-1800 Christian world, national/ethnic pride included membership in a church. Pride and identity were religious not only because they were defined by dogma, but also because they were defined by sacred history and biblical theology; specifically, the Mosaic account of the peopling of the world as given in Genesis 10. Indeed, until the late eighteenth century in English, "ethnic" meant pagan or heathen. Renaissance and Reformation humanists, for all their critical scholarship, did not reject this theological understanding of national/cultural identity. To "prove" Italian or French, or any other language was "the best," for instance, patriotic humanists attempted to demonstrate that it had been spoken by Adam. Churchmen argued their respective churches were the only "true" churches because they were linked to Christ via one apostle rather than another. Likes, dislikes, hates, loves, and traits were all traced to the sons and grandsons of Noah; and in long opening pages, writers "proved" their respective peoples were descended from Japheth or Shem rather than Ham. Within this context, differences were explained as departures from a common root or lineage caused by institutions and laws. Customs and culture were important in this "ethnic theology," but less so than rank, pedigree, and dynasties. Legal, ecclesiastical, political institutions, and laws distinguished peoples that otherwise were "the same," in so far as they were "descended" from the same

---

<sup>12</sup> S. Velychenko. *Empire Loyalty and Minority Nationalism in Great Britain and Imperial Russia 1707 – 1914* // *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. 1997. Vol. 39. No. 3. Pp. 413-441.

ancestor. Thus, the importance of issues like *translatio imperii*, dynastic continuity, legitimacy, precedence, provenance, and contract/conquest theory, reveals not only in accounts of the past, but in definitions of group identity in premodern times. As I argued in *National History* (1992), Ruthenian/Little Russian elites before 1800, writing about their past according to these institutional and legal criteria, and without romantic nationalist categories of analysis, produced interpretations that claimed historical continuity between Kyivan Rus, the Rus provinces of the Commonwealth, the “lands on both sides of the Dnipro,” and Malorossiiia, despite the fact that they had no native ruling dynasty. Accordingly, what was new about “Ukrainian history” after 1840 was not that its proponents traced their people’s past back to Kyivan times, but that they did so in exclusively national-ethnic terms.

Plokyh underlines this primacy of the secular/institutional in pre-Romantic thought, and his detailed study indirectly supports my conclusion. Nonetheless, had he elaborated upon the biblical ethnological context of premodern thought about identity in his review of “Rus,” “Rossiia” and their various derivatives, he would have placed Ukraine more successfully in an international and comparative context.<sup>13</sup> Plokyh would have given a better account of how contemporaries understood themselves had he examined the influence of this imagined consanguinity in general, and Slavs in particular, and on the explanation of observable differences between Rus people subject to different monarchs. What, if any, were the political implications of designating a group descendants of Magog, Mosoch or Joseph, rather than Gomer? Was descent from a common ancestor reason for living together under a common monarch? If so, under what terms?

Also missing from Plokyh’s book is a consideration of the impact of the idea of the crusade against the Ottomans, of restoration of Kyivan Rus in its original core-area and of the Byzantine empire, upon elite understanding of relationships between national parts and supra-national wholes. Involving the Ruthenian clerical supporters of the False Demetrius, people like Ostrozky as a prospective ruler of a restored Rus, and Paleologues, Habsburgs, Michael the Brave, Gustavus Adolphus and Basil Lupul as candidates for *basileus*, did this “Pan-European” or “global/imperial” thinking impede or

---

<sup>13</sup> Those interested in comparison might consult: C. Kidd. *British Identities before Nationalism*. Cambridge, 1999, who provides a model examination of the interrelationship between the ethnic and the institutional in premodern British writing. D. Goldberg. *Curse of Ham*. Princeton, 2006, looks at how biblical ethnology was related to thinking on race and slavery.

inadvertently hasten the crystallization of proto-national identity? Zakharyi Kopystensky in his *Palinodea*, for instance, mentions Muscovy in a broader context of crusade projects to restore Byzantium, graecophilism, and apocalyptic thought, which saw Jerusalem, not Moscow, as the centre of the world after the coming of the Antichrist. Clearly, despite their pro-Russia cultural-religious rhetoric, Ruthenian/Ukrainian muscophiles did not share the image their Muscovite counterparts had of Muscovy as another Israel, Rome, or Jerusalem. As Kopystensky noted, for him and his compatriots, the only kingdom that really mattered “was not of this world.” In short, Plokyh gives us a fine analysis using the established source-base. But we cannot reconstruct early seventeenth century Ukrainian/Ruthenian thought about identity, territory and Muscovy, or correctly interpret pro-Muscovite statements by clerics on the basis of that alone. We must also uncover what they were writing during those same years to Mikolaj Radziwill of Lithuania, the Patriarch of Constantinople, and the rulers of Wallachia, Transylvania, and Sweden.<sup>14</sup>

Those Ukrainian/Little Russian writers after Nikon who came to office did give the tsar and the Moscow “of this world” a primary political role, and did identify Moscow, as well as Kyiv, as a “second Jerusalem.” But, in this instance, we do know they did not imagine that political association with Muscovy on the basis of descent, religion, and/or subordination to the tsar as the new *basileus*, implied administrative centralization and Muscovite domination of Cossack Little-Russia. At the time, the discourse of religious-ethnic similarity was used to justify claims for equal status under the tsar for “Little and Great Russia.” That is, those authors were making a case to the anti-Ukrainian court faction by arguing that Little Russians/Ukrainians and Muscovites/Russians were similar peoples, that Muscovites could not subordinate Ruthenians to themselves as they might foreigners. Plokyh clearly explains this in his account of the 1674 Kyivan *Sinopsis*, as a book justifying a special place in the empire for Cossack-Ukrainian lands. The *Sinopsis* introduced the term “*slavenorossiyskiy narod*” as a supranational composite for the Rus peoples. But only in the nineteenth century was the notion that Muscovites/Russians and Ruthenians/Ukrainians were one nation used to justify the subordination and incorporation of tsarist Ukraine into the centralized Russian autocracy. To reinforce his argument, Plokyh might have added that the *Sinopsis* includes an account of a “contract” that supposedly defined relations at the founding of Rus between the

---

<sup>14</sup> S. Velychenko. The Ukrainian-Rus Lands in Eastern European Politics 1572 – 1632. Some Preliminary Observations // East European Quarterly. 1985. No. 3. Pp. 201-208.



Kyivan Slavs and their first ruler Riuryk, and a claim that primacy in Rus remained in Kyiv until 1320 – not 1169, 1157 or 1240. These assertions, strangely ignored by most historians, deserve attention because they indicate that regardless of the ethnic neologism, the authors of the *Synopsis* and their Muscovite allies shared two different understandings of what that “nation” was, and what the political-legal implications were of belonging to the tsar’s realm.

Insofar as nineteenth and twentieth century historians “nationalized” the past of part of eastern Europe into “Ukrainian history,” today historians can “denationalize” that past. But now as then, “nationalizing” and “denationalizing” the past is fraught with political implications. In Ireland, historical “revisionists” appeared sixteen years after independence; “revisionism” became a serious historiographical trend in the 1960s; and only in the 1980s did the first new grand narratives of national history appear. Nonetheless, sixty years of independence was not long enough to prevent a long, loud, public debate in which defenders of the established triumphalist-exclusivist grand narrative denounced revisionists for undermining Irish national consciousness and pride.<sup>15</sup> Historiographical debate today in Turkey is tied to EU relations, to take another example. The presentation of Anatolia as a “Mediterranean” region that includes Ionia, implies Turkey is historically “European” rather than “Asian,” celebrates its classical past, and claims all “Anatolians” are “Turks.” This is an interpretation pro-EU groups favor. An interpretation of national history that focuses on the central Asian and Moslem identity of the Turks, and basically ignores graeco-latin, Christian/Byzantine Anatolia, is favored by pan-Turkic Moslem groups. In Ukraine, some oppose revision of the national grand narrative because after sixty years of Soviet-style “denationalization,” they claim the Ukrainian sense of identity, community, and social cohesion, as in most newly independent countries, is still too weak for its historians to allow themselves the luxury of dispensing with the national history that must underlie that cohesion – as it does in other states. From this perspective, they accuse “revisionists” of imperial apologetics insofar as there is a lingering threat of restoration of Russian rule. Ukraine is not Greece, where the political implications of debate about “national history” do not threaten independence. There is no Ottoman minority actively demanding restoration of the Peloponnesus to the empire. Similarly, in Italy, debate about what “Italian history” should include or exclude was not and is not overshadowed by Austrian revanchism.

---

<sup>15</sup> D. Boyce, A. O’Day (Eds.). *The Making of Modern Irish History: Revisionism and the Revisionist Controversy*. London, 1996.

Although arguably undesirable at present, it is logically possible to revise and “denationalize” the established grand narrative of Ukrainian national history. Plokhy himself, it should be noted, does not think his second book undermines Ukrainian nation-building and state-building. He draws attention to how the expression of ethnonational identity changed – he does not deny the existence or importance of that identity (Pp. 4-5, 355, 361). It is not yet logically possible to “denationalize” Russia’s past, because Russia’s historians are only beginning to disentangle and separate it from its imperial dimension, and thus “nationalize” it. We must first grow hair before we can cut it; or “Unmake Imperial Russia,” as Plokhy put it in his first book – only then can it be “denationalized.” Towards that end, Plokhy might have elaborated upon the differences between “imperialize,” “nationalize,” and “denationalize” (Pp. 283, 297) – although, admittedly, this a subject worthy of a book in itself. As it is, we are left without definitions of terminology, and a confusing assertion that Muscovy, an empire as of 1552 (or 1721), was also a “nation-state” (P. 289) that was “nationalizing” its empire – but not all of it (P. 297). In any case, as Plokhy informs us, those interested in rethinking the grand narrative of Russian national history should read Hrushevsky. In addition, for a comparative context they should also consider the work of British historians. Dispensing with Monmouth’s Albion Legend by the end of the seventeenth century,<sup>16</sup> during the last decades they have been “unmaking” British history by disentangling England from its imperial/ British dimension – thus “nationalizing” England’s past.<sup>17</sup>

## SUMMARY

В фокусе статьи Стэфена Вельченко, являющейся расширенной полемической рецензией на две недавние книги канадского историка Сергея Плохия, – проблемы деконструкции “имперского гранд-нарратива” и “денационализации” видения истории. Вельченко указывает на преимущества и недостатки т.н. *локо-центричного* и *метро-центричного* подходов, рассматривающих исторические процессы с позиций периферии (национального региона) и центра (имперской метрополии) соответственно. Вельченко обращает внимание на последовательность этапов “деимпериализации” и “денационализации” исторического анализа, подчеркивая, что последний в представлении Плохия не отрицает в целом значение этнонациональной идентичности, а лишь фиксирует ее трансформации.

---

<sup>16</sup> J. Westwood. *The Albion Legend*. London, 1986.

<sup>17</sup> K. Kumar. *The Making of English National Identity*. Cambridge, 2003.