

# In Search for National Core in a Continental Empire – Russian Nation-Building Projects in Late Imperial Russia and the Ukrainian Challenge

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An overwhelmingly illiterate peasantry constituted over 90% of the East-Slavic population of the Russian Empire throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Most authors agree that even on the eve of the First World War these peasants had no clear-cut national identity.<sup>1</sup> The time between 1830's, when different projects of nation-building concerning Eastern Slavs were first formulated or «imagined», and the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when some form of national identity became established as a mass phenomenon, was the period open for alternatives in the process of nation-building. What is now called «The Russian-Ukrainian Encounter» was in fact not the interaction of two shaped nations but a rivalry between different projects of nation-building, promoted by the elitist groups of national activists and to some degree by the bureaucracy.<sup>2</sup>

The project of building the Ukrainian nation as a self-sufficient entity is well known – it was first articulated by the members of the Society of Cyril and Methodius in 1840's. T. Shevchenko, N. Kostomarov, P. Kulish and their colleagues reformulated the ideas and emotions of traditional

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regional separatism of the elites of the Hetmanate into a modern nationalist ideology. Its major, but not the only rival was the project of All-Russian nation, which deserves more explanation.

Many authors stressed the fact that such terms as *Russian nationalism* and *Russification* are used to designate very different ideological phenomena and practices.<sup>3</sup> Let us here attempt to systematize the different approaches to the problem of Empire and Nation in Russian thought of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. We shall operate with ideal types, but in fact it is possible to find examples for each of the positions mentioned.

It was possible to be a Russian imperialist without being Russian nationalist. The best example were the Romanovs, who reluctantly accepted the nationalization of the dynasty only at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. (All the ruling families of Europe faced the similar problem, but most of them accepted nationalist legitimation of their power earlier.) It was also possible to be a Russian nationalist and to opt for the dissolution of the Empire, believing that the interests of Russian nation suffered from the Empire no less than did the interests of other peoples under Romanov rule. Many other options were possible between these two extremes.

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

But many in the nineteenth century distinguished between the Russian core of the Empire, which had to be transformed into a nation, and the imperial borderlands, which were not considered to be an object for a wholesale Russification within this concept. Those who were ready to acknowl-

edge the fact that the Russian nation was less than the Empire inevitably had to answer the question of what is Russianness, and where are the territorial, ethnic and/or cultural borders of the Russian nation or nation in the making. There were two interpretations of Russian ethnic borders. Those who believed that Russian equaled Great-Russian (*velikorusskii*) were a minority. The majority interpreted Russian as a common name for Great-Russians (*velikorussy*), White Russians (*belorussy*) and Little Russians (*malorussy*), the latter being the most widespread name of what now is usually called Ukrainians. The differences between these «branches of the Russian people» were interpreted not as national, but as regional, developed as a result of the regrettable partition of the Russians after the collapse of Kievan Rus'. For this majority the Russian nation had to embrace all the Eastern Slavs, and the «national territory» had to include also the lands of contemporary Ukraine and Belorussia.

The roots of this concept can be traced back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when it was formulated in the «Synopsis» which had more than 30 editions and remained the only textbook on the history of Russia until the 1760s.<sup>4</sup> As means of legitimizing Russian claims to the eastern territories of the partitioned Polish Commonwealth, the concept of the All-Russian nation gained additional political importance at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

From that time on the conflict between All-Russian and Polish versions of the «ideal Motherland»,<sup>5</sup> the latter always claiming the «borders of 1772», remained a key issue in Russian political life and thought.<sup>6</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the territory of contemporary Ukraine became an object of a terminological war. Poles called the right bank of Dnieper *kresy wschodnie* (eastern borderlands) or *ziemie zabrane* (occupied lands). In St. Petersburg and Moscow these territories were called *jugo-zapadnyj kraj* (southwestern lands) or *vozvrashchennyje zemli* (restored lands). Poles called the Orthodox and Uniate population of contemporary Ukraine *rusiny*, while

*iny*, while Great-Russians were called *moskali*, stressing the ethnic difference between them, and sometimes, particularly in Galicia, insisting on the interpretation of *rusiny* as a branch of Polish people. In Russia the term *russiny* was always used with double «s» to stress they belonged to the All-Russian unity. More common was the term *malorossy* (Little Russians). Since 1840's Ukrainian nationalists also joined this terminological battle, introducing the terms *Ukraine* and *Ukrainians* in their contemporary meaning.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the meaning of the word *Russkij* (*Russian*) differed from contemporary usage. It embraced all the Eastern Slavs and designated the nation, which was expected to include Little Russians, Great Russians, and White Russians, as the German nation was supposed to include all Germans in some concepts of German unification. Russianness was an ethnic concept, stressing the difference between Eastern Slavic population and the rest, but Little and White Russians were included within this unity. Even at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the most xenophobic versions of Russian nationalism only Little Russians and White Russians were never designated as *inorodtsy* (ethnically alien).<sup>7</sup> On the personal level they were never discriminated against on the ethnic grounds.<sup>8</sup> But at the same time all claims for a collective identity separate from Russian were rejected and suppressed as the attempts to split the Russian body-national. The situation of other ethnic groups was exactly the opposite – being discriminated against on the personal level, Poles, Jews, etc. were always easily recognized in their separateness as ethnic groups. That meant that the perception of the Ukrainian and Belorussian national movements was fundamentally different than the perception of other national movements in the Empire. The latter were challenging (openly or potentially) the unity of the Empire, while the former – the unity of the nation as well. In addition, the politics of Russification towards other ethnic groups, particularly Poles, were often perceived in St. Petersburg and Moscow as a kind of punishment for dis-

loyalty and a subject for bargaining, while the Russification of Little and White Russians was not.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century the spontaneous Russification of the elite of the Hetmanate proceeded quite smoothly.<sup>9</sup> Catherine II justified her actions during the partitions of the Polish Commonwealth with the argument that «we were taking what belongs to us», but the problem of the Russification of newly acquired territories remained marginal until the Polish uprising of 1830–1831. Thereafter the Government refused to consider the local peasantry either as the economic, or as the cultural property of the Polish landlords.<sup>10</sup> The problem of «processing» of the bulk of East-Slavic peasantry of the Empire into Russians became urgent particularly after the abolition of serfdom and other reforms of Alexander II.

In 1856 the leaders of the first generation of Ukrainian nationalists, who were arrested and exiled for their connection to the Society of Cyril and Methodius in 1847, were allowed to return to the capitals and, four years later, to publish a journal «Osnova». *Questione de la lingua* became the focal point of their activities – they insisted on using Ukrainian in primary schools. While Ukrainian nationalists were trying to promote the standardization and development of the Ukrainian language, the proponents of the All-Russian project were referring to it as the Little-Russian vernacular, located in the hierarchy together with other local Great-Russian and White-Russian dialects below the literary Russian language, the common standard for all Russians. This debate had quite direct practical implications, because after the abolition of serfdom, millions of the former serfs had to be educated. The language of instruction became a key issue.

Due to the liberalization of censorship and other reforms, the beginning of 1860s was marked by the rapid development of a public sphere, with public opinion and the press as the main means of public communication. This was a necessary precondition for the reproduction of nationalist

discourses.<sup>11</sup> The challenge from Ukrainian nationalists together with the Polish uprising of 1863 served as the main catalysts for the development of a Russian nationalist discourse.

The frontline in this debate did not run along the ethnic lines. Some of the Great Russians were ready to recognize the claims for Ukrainian separateness. But the majority, together with numerous Little-Russian intellectuals, strongly opposed the Ukrainian project, insisting on a combination of All-Russian and Little-Russian identities.<sup>12</sup> All the participants in the debate tended to look at the problem in a comparative context. The proponents of the All-Russian project insisted on the analogy between «the Little-Russian vernacular» and Provençal, Celtic and other vernaculars, suppressed by French, Spanish and English. Their opponents mostly argued against this comparison. But one of the leaders of the Ukrainian movement of 1870s, M. Drahomanov, was ready to accept it when he came to the conclusion that French government was about to make some concessions to the Felibres and Celtic movements.<sup>13</sup> Until recently this comparative context, unfortunately, was not appreciated by historians who studied the nationalist encounter.

Why do I believe in the heuristic value of this comparison for a contemporary historian? Immanuel Wallerstein begins his essay, «Does India exist?», with the statement that he has no doubt that India exists as a state and nation today.<sup>14</sup> But what about books titled «The History of India in the 16<sup>th</sup> century», asks Wallerstein? As a result of the different scenarios of colonization and later decolonization of the sub-continent, instead of contemporary India we might have witnessed two separate states – say Dravidia and Hindustan. This would mean that now we would be reading books titled «The History of Dravidia (or Hindustan) in the 16<sup>th</sup> century». The past is determined by present and not vice versa. This observation is relevant also for European history, and particularly for the history of Eastern Europe.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century all the European and semi-European empires were dealing with the problem of consolidation of imperial core into a nation.<sup>15</sup> The continental cores of Spain and France and the island core of Britain were ethnically and culturally heterogeneous. The conditions were different, and the strategies also varied – from the French politics of wholesale administrative centralization and cultural homogenization to British policies aimed at partial, «hybrid assimilation»<sup>16</sup> to combine regional identities with concept of Britishness.<sup>17</sup>

Very different was the point of departure for Germany and Italy, which first had to solve the problem of state unification. The differences in vernaculars, in cultural and historic traditions certainly provided sufficient material for the formulation of a project of, for example, a Bavarian or a Prussian nation.<sup>18</sup> Most likely, however, the problem of unification so dominated the political agenda that such projects did not materialize. Or, perhaps we should say, did not occur at that time, having in mind the newly emerged separatist Lombard League?

Such continental Empires as Russia and the Ottoman state had more difficulties distinguishing between the imperial core which had to be processed into a nation and the periphery of the Empire. But they also faced the same problem, although later than the western Empires, where core (in other words the area of implementation of the nation-building project) was separated from the periphery by lots of water. In the Ottoman and Russian cases the ideological responses in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were rather similar. The Ottoman, Pan-Turkish, and Turkish ideologies had their analogies in Russia – dynastic loyalty, Pan-Slavism, and Russian nationalism.<sup>19</sup> In both cases nationalism emerged outside the imperial bureaucracy. In Russia it was gradually, partially, and reluctantly adopted by the ruling circles only in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, while in the Ottoman Empire even later, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

If we accept this comparative context as relevant and the interpretation of the situation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as indefinite and open for alternatives, it allows us to ask some previously overlooked questions and leads to some important implications.

First of all, the contemporary terms «Russians» and «Ukrainians» become irrelevant for the situation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In some cases we should accept the usage of these terms as an inevitable evil, but not in studies of identities and the nation-building process. Instead, we should use the terms actually used during the epoch, which, exactly due to their multiplicity and contradictory character, reflect the specific features of the situation.

Second, we should take as a unit of analysis not a nationalist movement, but a structure of interaction of different nationalist projects among themselves and with the state's structures. This would allow us to see the unique features of the Ukrainian and Belorussian national movements in the context of the Russian Empire, a perspective often overlooked by historians.<sup>20</sup>

All these problems were addressed in my recently published book «Ukrainian Question in the Policy of Imperial authorities and Russian Public Opinion, the Second Half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century». For the current project I would go into more detailed analysis of the transitional and multiple identities, as well as of different «imagies of ideal Motherland», which were constantly shaped and reshaped by different actors in the Western borderlands of the Russian Empire.

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1. See *Krawchenko, Bohdan*. Social Change and National Consciousness in Twentieth-Century Ukraine. – New York, 1985. P.3; *Weeks Theodore R*. Nation and State in Late Imperial Russia. Nationalism and Russification on the Western Frontier, 1863–1914. – DeKalb, 1996. P.125; *Velychenko Stephen*. Empire Loyalism and Minority Nationalism in Great Britain and Imperial Russia, 1707 to 1914: Institutions, Laws,

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and Nationality in Scotland and Ukraine // *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. 39 (1997). P.413-441, here 414.

2. I have suggested the interpretation of Russian–Ukrainian encounter as a competition of contradictory projects of nation-building in an article, published in 1997. (See *Miller Alexei*. *Rossija i russifikacija Ukrainy* // *Miller Alexei, Floria Boris, Reprintsev Vladimir* (eds.) *Rossija–Ukraina: istorija vzaimootnoshenij*. – Moscow, 1997. P.145-155. The same year Roman Szporluk wrote about competition of Russian and Ukrainian projects of nation-building, but he interprets Russian project as either imperial, or strictly ethnic, Great-Russian. See *Szporluk Roman*. *Ukraina: ot periferii imperii k suverennomu gosudarstvu* // *Dmitri Furman* (ed.) *Ukraina i Rossija: obshchestva i gosudarstva*. – Moscow, 1997. P.55-63.

3. *Thaden Edward C.* (ed.) *Russification in the Baltic Provinces and Finland*. Princeton. – N.J., 1981. P.8-9; *Idem*. *Russification in Tsarist Russia* // *Thaden Edward C. with collaboration of Thaden Marianna Forster*. *Interpreting History: Collective Essays on Russia's Relations with Europe*. – New York, Boulder, 1990. P.211-220; *Idem*. *Conservative Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Russia*. – Seattle, 1964; *Kappeler Andreas*. *Einleitung* // *A. Kappeler* (Hg.) *Die Russen. Ihr Nationalbewußtsein in Geschichte und Gegenwart*. – Köln, 1990. P.7-15, here P.9; *Idem*. *Bemerkungen zur Nationsbildung der Russen* // *A. Kappeler*. *Die Russen...* P.19-35, here P.21; *Geyer Dietrich*. *Funktionen des russischen Nationalismus* // *Heinrich August Winkler* (Hrsg.) *Nationalismus*. – Königstein, 1978. P.173-186.

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

5. The concept of what a national territory should be and who should inhabit it «by rights». Such «ideal Motherlands» usually overlap either partially (as did the Polish and Russian) or totally (as the Russian version of «ideal Motherland» included all of the Ukrainian one).

6. On the role of the Polish factor in Russian–Ukrainian encounter see: *Kappeler Andreas*. *Russland als Vielvölkerreich: Entstehung, Geschichte, Zerfall*. – München, 1992. P.179; *Szporluk Roman*. *Ukraina...* The Russian debate about to whom the eastern part of the Polish Commonwealth belonged during the late 18th – early 19th century, when the nationalist argument was used for the first time, was analyzed by Andrzej Nowak in his «*Jak rozbiæ Rosyjskie Imperium?*» 2nd ed. – Kraków, 1999. P.11-38.

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7. See: *Slocum John W.* Who and When, Were the *Inorodtsy*? The Evolution of the Category of «Aliens» in Imperial Russia //The Russian Review. 57 (1998). P.173-190.

8. *Kappeler Andreas.* Mazepincy, malorossy, khokhly: ukraintsy v etnicheskoi ierarkhii Rossijskoj imperii //Alexei Miller (ed.) Rossijska–Ukraina: istorija vzaimootnoshenij. – Moscow, 1997. P.125-144, here 134-135.

9. *Kohut Zenon E.* The Ukrainian Elite in the Eighteenth Century and Its Integration into the Russian Nobility //Ivo Banac, Paul Bushkovich (eds.). Nobility in Russia and Eastern Europe. – New Haven, 1983. P.65-98.

10. *Beauvois Daniel.* Polacy na Ukraine, 1831–1863. – Paryz, 1987.

11. *Renner Andreas.* Russischer Nationalismus und öffentlichkeit im Zarenreich. 1855-1875. – Köln u.a, 2000.

12. *Miller Alexei I.* Osvaivaja logiku nacionalizma. Vlasti imperii i obshchestvennoje mnenije stolic v ich otnoshenii k ukrainskomu nacionalnomu dvizheniju v pervyje gody carstvovanija Aleksandra II //Russkij istoricheskij Zhurnal. 1998. T.1. No.2. P.87-130.

13. *Dragomanov M.* Chudacki dumki pro ukrajsku nacionalnu spravu //M. Dragomanov. Vybrane. – Kyiv, 1991. P.533-534.

14. *Wallerstein Immanuel.* Does India Exist? //Wallerstein Immanuel. Unthinking Social Science. The Limits of Nineteenth-century Paradigms. – Cambridge, 1995. P.130-134.

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

16. On concept of «hybrid» assimilation see: *Chlebowczyk Józef.* On Small and Young Nations in Europe, Wrocław, etc., 1980; ders. O prawie do bytu małych i młodych narodyw. Kwestia narodowa i procesy narodotwórcze we wschodniej Europie Srydkowej w dobie kapitalizmu. Wyd.2. – Warszawa, 1983.

17. *Weber Eugene.* Peasants into Frenchmen. The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914. – Stanford Cal., 1976; *Salins Piter.* Boundaries. The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees. – Berkeley, 1989; *Colley Linda.* Britons. Forging a Nation. 1707–1837. – New Haven, 1992; *Llobera Joseph R.* The God of Modernity. The Development of Nationalism in Western Europe. – Berg, Oxford UK, Providence, USA, 1994, particularly P.214.

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18. *Zernack Klaus*. Germans and Poles: Two Cases of Nation-Building //Hagen Schulze (ed.) *Nation-Building in Central Europe*. – Leamington Spa–Hamburg–New York, 1994. P.159.

19. Orthodoxy failed to constitute a separate ideological trend, similar to pan-Islamism, being instead heavily represented in other major ideological options, particularly Pan-Slavism. See: *Lewis Bernard*. *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*. 2nd ed. – London–Oxford–New York, 1961. P.323-361; *Kushner David*. *The Rise of Turkish Nationalism. 1876–1908*. – London, 1977.

20. See, for example, *Rudolph Richard and Good David* (eds.) *Nationalism and Empire. The Habsburg Monarchy and the Soviet Union*. – New York, 1992; *Suny Ronald Grigor*. *The Revenge of the Past. Nationalism, Revolution and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*. – Stanford, California, 1993.