Peoples, Nations, and Identities: The Russian-Ukrainian Encounter[1]

Mark von Hagen
The Harriman Institute, Columbia University

As Director of the Harriman Institute, I am delighted to present to the readers of our *Review* this special issue devoted to the Russian-Ukrainian encounter since the end of the Soviet Union. The proceedings chronicle the final conference of a four-part series that was convened alternately in Cologne and New York City and traced the encounter of these two contemporary states and nations from the early modern period to the present day. The meetings were made possible by an important collaborative effort between the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation in Germany, the University of Cologne, Columbia University's Harriman Institute, the Center for Russian and East European Studies at Yale University, the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies in Edmonton, Alberta, and the Chopivsky Family Foundation. The colleagues who have played the most prominent roles in the organization of these meetings are: Andreas Kappeler (Cologne), Zenon Kohut and Frank Sysyn (CIUS, Edmonton).

The aim of the collaborative project has been to encourage interpretive research on the history of Russian and Ukrainian identities from the premodern period to the present. In the context of the transformation of the Soviet Union into a system of successor states, the volatile issues of national, transnational, and imperial identities have once again come to the fore. It has become apparent, for example, that any prospects of future collaboration among the successor states hinge largely on the politics of Russian-Ukrainian relations across a whole range of issues. It was primarily Ukraine's objections to key features of the proposed military and political arrangements—perhaps symbolized most dramatically by the struggle over control of the armed forces and Black Sea Fleet—that blocked any substantial progress toward Russia's plan for a more comprehensive Commonwealth of Independent States. Ukraine remains the largest and wealthiest successor state after the Russian Republic itself; but Ukraine's

[1] Reprinted with permission. Originally published in special issue *Peoples, Nations, Identities: The Russian-Ukrainian Encounter* of *The Harriman Review,* vol. 9, nos. 1-2, Spring 1996, pp. 3-6.

Volume VII, No. 2 (2020) DOI: https://doi.org/10.21226/ewjus619

economy has been especially vulnerable to decisions made in Moscow about economic reform.

Shaping the responses to these several contentious issues is the contemporary context marked by the reclaiming and reformation of Ukrainian nationality in the era of sovereign statehood, but also the reclaiming of a Russian nationality unburdened of its imperial aspects. The Russian-Ukrainian encounter takes on special significance not only because Ukrainians have been the most numerous people after Russians in the Russian Empire and the USSR and because of Ukraine's geopolitical and economic importance in the empires; but the Russian annexation of Ukraine beginning in the seventeenth century has also been crucial to Russia's rise as a European power. Moreover, Ukrainians also figured prominently in the Europeanization of Russia (primarily in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but even after). Unlike many other nationality issues in the Russian Empire and Soviet Union, the Ukrainian identity (and to a lesser extent the Belarusian and Jewish identities) has been central to Russians' attempts to define themselves and to the relationship between Russian nation and state.

For Ukrainians, the Russian question, together with the attitudes toward Poland, has been of paramount importance in the shaping of Ukrainian identity. For example, the role of Russian high culture, which Ukrainians helped to formulate in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the function of Russian imperial capitals in "Europeanizing" the Ukrainians have made more complex the tasks of Ukrainian intellectuals in distinguishing a Ukrainian cultural tradition. The presence of large numbers of Ukrainians outside the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union (at least until 1944) has complicated the tasks both of those who have sought to forge Ukrainian identities and of those who have tried to submerge them in a Russian or Soviet state and an "all-Russian" identity.

From the seventeenth century, the Russian-Ukrainian encounter permeated the political, economic, cultural, and intellectual affairs of Eastern Europe. All too often that encounter has been reduced to a discussion of the Ukrainian national movement in the nineteenth-century Russian Empire, without examining the early modern legacy or the meaning of Ukraine and Ukrainians for the Empire. The question of how the Russian-Ukrainian dynamic shaped the establishment of the Soviet Union and the evolution of that state's elites, institutions, and ideology has hardly been touched.

Perhaps the most convincing testimony to the centrality of the Ukrainian-Russian relationship to the Russian Imperial and Soviet states was the response to the all-Union referendum on the Commonwealth and to the subsequent Ukrainian vote for sovereignty in 1991. Russian and Ukrainian elites and publics are making so diametrically opposed

evaluations and inferences from the centuries-old Russian-Ukrainian encounter that virtually no dialogue exists today. In short, not only because Ukrainians were traditionally the largest non-Russian minority in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union but also because Russian and Ukrainian identities—at least in the modern period—have been so inextricably intertwined and mutually shaping, a focus on the Russian-Ukrainian dynamic has the potential to explain many of the fundamental processes that allowed the multiethnic states to endure, as well as those forces that ultimately tore them apart.

In the past several years, a quiet change of generations has occurred in many of the social science and humanities fields, including in the field of Russian history, which has made possible a rethinking of the Imperial relationships and a placing of those relationships at the centre of the research agenda. At least in North America and Western Europe, the emergence of new nation-states from the Soviet Union and the important roles being played by historians in the homelands have given our own Baltic, Ukrainian, and Transcaucasian specialists new legitimacy and the intellectual freedom to cease being protagonists for silenced causes. And even if the transformation of the political landscape in the former Soviet Union had not raised these matters to a higher place on our intellectual agenda, new influences from the social sciences and cultural studies have focused our attention on the construction and reconstruction of identities, primarily class, gender and ethnic ones. Especially new work in historical and political sociology, in historical and cultural anthropology, in women's studies, and in the broad field of cultural studies has challenged us to rethink the writing of social, cultural *and* political history with more attention to the encounters of various peoples mediated by various state and non-state agencies.

The object of the meetings in New York and Germany was to bring together social scientists and humanists from the several traditions that impinge on the questions of imperial and national identities by focusing on the encounter between Russians and Ukrainians over a long historical period. For Russianists as traditionally understood, we hoped that this encounter would focus their attention on the ways in which not just the Russian people itself but the very concept of Russianness evolved and operated in the Russian Empire and its successor Soviet Union. What were the contexts in which Russian identities were shaped and in contradistinction to whom? For the Ukrainianists, we hoped that the encounter would encourage those who have expanded their professional concerns beyond martyrology and repression to a more multifaceted account of the interactions of not just the Russian majority and the non-Russian minority populations, but even the ways in which the minority populations themselves might have influenced one another. Here, the

Ukrainian-Jewish and Ukrainian-Polish dynamics are especially key. Of course, the emergence and transformation of identities is not an autonomous process. It is rather embedded in a complicated web of political, economic, social and cultural structures that themselves are in a constant state of transformation.

The Empire and its successor USSR operated and evolved in a complex environment of not only national developments, but subnational, transnational and occasionally supranational trends. The history of the Russian Empire and USSR highlights key aspects of contemporary concerns in the social sciences and humanities that caution us to keep in mind the permeability of national boundaries, even in so self-consciously autarkic a system as was high Stalinism. No comprehensive investigation of the empire and its current and future successors can be seriously planned without serious and constant attention to multiple factors. Here foreign and military policies will of course be prominent. But among the important factors that do not recognize strictly national boundaries are economic ones. We need to consider the historical geography of the Imperial and Soviet economies, the trends toward centralization, regional and geographic specializations, the impact of foreign trade and interregional trade, the bargaining and mediating techniques evolved by Imperial and Soviet economic administrators, as well as demographic patterns, especially migrations within and outside of the region.

Wherever possible, we have asked participants in the project to bring to bear insights from the histories of other multinational empires and the successor states to those empires, especially those most similar and contiguous to the Russian Empire, the Habsburg and Ottoman states. Those particular empires are also key for understanding the Russian-Ukrainian encounter given the extended rivalry between Russian, Habsburg, and Ottoman empires for the territory and populations of contemporary Ukraine. Although the study of comparative empires has had primarily antiquarian interest until now, the problems of "deimperialization," or the transformation of the domestic political economy in the metropolitan nation after the loss of Empire, should present some new grounds for comparative thinking. In short, the exercise we proposed was at once comparative, transnational, and international. As a minimum, we have tried to take advantage of some of the exciting work done in comparative politics and by comparative historians (if not comparative political sociologists).

In order to do justice to this immense and rich topic, we need to keep always in mind both the evolution of imperial identities *and* the anti- or nonimperial national and ethnic identities of all the constituent peoples (including, incidentally, the Russians themselves). Ethnicity was but one of many identities that were being generated and contested during these centuries of social, economic, political, and cultural change. How conceptions

and images of monarchy and empire emerged, evolved, and left an impact on their post-imperial successor state are key to any such rethinking of the Soviet empire and the evolution of political organization and attitudes toward sovereignty.

Perhaps less obviously important and certainly less researched is the place of the various national groups in the imperial and Soviet hegemonic societies, whether that be in the intellectual elites or in the officer corps. Nationalist and émigré historians have traditionally eschewed any serious treatment of these groups or any similar groups that might have advocated varying forms of assimilation while remaining rooted in their indigenous cultures. Another unfortunate trend among the marginalized "minority" historians has been their failure to communicate even among themselves, i.e., Ukrainianists with Jewish and Baltic historians, for example. As a consequence, very little comparative history has been attempted, nor any attempt to bridge the histories of the "ignored" nations. Equally absent in most treatments of these ethnic, national, and imperialist attitudes and identities (and often for similar reasons) has been their interaction with transnational ideologies and movements. Beginning in the nineteenth century a variety of regionalist movements with strong federalist programs based explicitly on foreign models emerged in the Russian Empire. Also in competition for the loyalties of the subject peoples were pan- movements of varying provenance: not just pan-Slavism, but pan-Turkism, Islam, and Zionism. In the interwar years Polish President Piłsudski nurtured the idea of an East European federalist project under Polish hegemony, of course. Russian and Ukrainian émigré publicists responded to these phenomena, whose impact on contemporary and later developments has also been largely ignored.

Finally, we can resurface to face other important intellectual issues which have reemerged in the wake of the bloodletting in Yugoslavia and certain peripheral areas of the former Soviet Union, such as the alleged difference between nationalism and national identity in western Europe and eastern and southeastern Europe. Not only in popular accounts has there been an overly simplified characterization of western nationalism as good and healthy and eastern nationalisms as destructive and evil. Much of this has to do with highly idealized images of western European state- and nation-formation, on the one hand, and on ignorance about processes in eastern Europe, on the other. One of the contributions this project will most likely make is to refine the terms of that debate by examining the applicability of the extant literature on state- and nation-formation to the nations and empires under study. Although there is clearly much we can learn from the rich literature, our hope is that there is also much light that specialists in our geohistorical region can shed on these fundamental questions of ethnicity and nationalism in the social sciences and humanities.

Similarly, the literature on state-building, which has yet not been adequately tested on the Imperial-Soviet transition, now has another laboratory in the Soviet-post-Soviet transition. Here we need to make significant changes in the existing models (say, of Charles Tilly, Perry Anderson, and others), because what we are talking about in both cases is less state-building than state-rebuilding. We need to consider the ways in which both the Imperial state and the Soviet state prepared the institutions and political cultures (even if in mirror visions) of their successors. Ironically, the various national front movements of the perestroika period were able to operate within the quasi- or pseudo-federalist institutions that were setup as early as the 1920s in the Soviet Union.

It is with this ambitious agenda that we offer you the selected proceedings of the final conference of the series, convened at Columbia University September 21-23, 1995. We are very encouraged to report that the Open Society Institute, in conjunction with the Central European University, will convene an analogous international conference in Moscow (May 17-19) titled "Russian-Ukrainian Relations. The Dialog of Historians," to my knowledge the first of its kind in Russia. One of our hopes as organizers of this project was that our colleagues in Russia and Ukraine would respond with precisely this sort of proposal, namely to begin to address these issues in the countries most concerned and implicated in the issues. We feel vindicated with the announcement of the Moscow conference and hope that this volume too will contribute to better understanding between the Russian and Ukrainian elites and academic communities, as well as the societies of the two sovereign states.