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Ukraine: the Formation of a Nationality from 1654-1921

Modern Ukrainian political and social life is in many ways characterized by a lack of consensus on the national identity of the country as a whole. With large populations of ethnic Ukrainians, Russians, Tatars, and Jews, and with its location on a geographical cross roads, Ukraine has been unable to define its national identity. This issue has come to a head in recent years with the Orange Revolution of 2004 and the subsequent Euro Maidan protests which started in the fall of 2013 and has yet to be fully resolved. This geoschizophrenic mentality, I would argue, stems from the fact that Ukraine as we know it today was artificially created as a result of political upheaval in Eastern Europe following the end of World War I, strictly on the basis of a shared language, religion, and geographic territory. Intuitively, one may assume that these commonalities would be a logical place to start in the formation of a nation, but as Eley and Suny point out, the emergence of a nation is not the “natural or logical development from a series of objective and empirically readily observable characteristics of human populations, like a common territory, language, or religion.”¹ In addition to a common language and territory, a people group must share a collective consciousness, a common political ideology, and a shared history; all of these were characteristics that the newly formed post-World War I Ukraine lacked to some extent.

After seizing power in the Russian Empire in the 1917 October revolution, the Bolshevik party tried to establish Soviet power in Ukraine. By the winter of 1918 they seized, and briefly

¹ Eley, Geoff and Suny, Ronald Grigor. “Introduction: From the Moment of Social History to the Works of Cultural Representation,” in Eley and Suny, eds., *Becoming a National: A Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. pp. 7.

occupied Kiev only to return the city to German control as a condition of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. The Central Powers then agreed to support Ukrainian independence; thus Ukraine as we know it today became, for the first time, an independent nation in its own right.² Though the geopolitical upheaval of Post-War Europe had created a nation, it did not help to define what sort of nation it would be. As a result of this lack of clarity the government in the newly created Ukraine was unstable to say the least, with every manner of political factions struggling for control. Some early Ukrainian leaders like Symon Petliura, saw the Ukrainian people as separate and distinct from Russia, and were staunch proponents of Ukrainian nationalism. Other more conservative leaders like T.V. Lokot and Sikorskii Storozhenko allied themselves with the White (anti-Bolshevik) army in an attempt to defeat both the nationalist movements and the Bolsheviks.³ Also thrown into this geopolitical whirlwind were non-Ukrainian ethnic minorities such as the Poles and the Jews, who were also attempting to secure a place for themselves in the new government. To complicate the situation further, this struggle between political factions within the supposedly “independent” Ukraine, took place against the backdrop of the Russian Civil War between the White and Red Armies, both of whom were also vying for control of the newly created nation and attempting to restore the boundaries of the Russian Empire. In order for the Ukrainian nation to remain autonomous, not only did the Nationalist factions need to stave off Russian influence in the form of the Bolsheviks and Whites (monarchists), they also to convince their antinationalist counterparts that a Ukrainian nation identity did and should exist.

For Ukrainian Nationalists, the first step in creating this functional national identity would have been to establish the concept of a Ukrainian ethnicity as independent from the

² Hillis, Faith. *Children of Rus' Right-Bank Ukraine and the Invention of a Russian Nation*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013. pp 278-279.

³ Hillis, 279.

Russian identity. This would prove an incredibly difficult task for the Nationalists to achieve, because there was very little historical precedent which suggested that such an ethnicity existed. Throughout the nineteenth century, the territory of Ukraine as we know it today was ruled by the Hapsburgs in the West and the Romanovs in the East. Though the nobility of Eastern Ukraine descended predominately from the native Ukrainian Cossack elite, “after a century and a half of Russian rule” the upper class had for the most part “assimilated into Russian culture,” and thus would have thought little about their Ukrainian descent. Some Eastern Ukrainians may have called themselves “Little Russians,” but regardless “Russian” would have been the operative word. Meanwhile in the Western half of Ukraine most of the nobility was of Polish descent, and those who were Ukrainian did not call themselves as such, but rather identified as “Ruthenian.” Though the majority of the peasant class in both regions would have been Ukrainian (in the sense that they spoke Ukrainian, and shared a common culture distinct from their Polish and Russian neighbors) this did little for the development of a distinct national identity because, as Yekelchuk points out, they played no part whatsoever in political life.⁴

Furthermore, the word “Ukrainian” was not used as an ethnic identity until the 1890’s, and even then the use of the term was for the most part isolated to the high culture of the intelligentsia in the region west of the Dnipro (Russian Dnieper).⁵ If there existed anything resembling a national movement in Ukraine prior to World War I, it could be described at best as reaching what Hroch described as “the first stratum” which is comprised exclusively of the intelligentsia associated with the ruling class and excluded the lower classes.⁶ With this as their

⁴ Yekelchuk, Serhy. *Ukraine: Birth of a Modern Nation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. 35-36.

⁵ Yekelchuk, 49.

⁶ Hroch, Miroslav. *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe: A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups among Smaller European Nations*. Trans. Ben Fowks. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985. pp 15-16.

only basis, it is difficult to imagine that the Ukrainian-or more appropriately, the Little Russians and Ruthenians-nationalists could have developed the collective national consciousness necessary to establish a united Ukrainian nation independent of foreign influence.

In addition to a lack of agreement upon the existence of an independent Ukrainian ethnicity, Ukrainian nationalists were further challenged in their attempt at molding a unified national identity by a lack of a common history among the Ukrainian people. Though Right-Bank (West of the Dnipro) and Left-Bank Ukraine (East of the Dnipro) both trace their respective origins back to the early Kievan Russ city-states, their histories diverged from one another in 1654 when the Cossacks of Eastern Ukraine came under the protection of the Tsar as a result of the Pereiaslav Treaty. This arrangement was further solidified in 1667, when Poland and Russia officially divided Ukraine (Poland taking the Right Bank, Russia taking the Left Bank plus Kiev) at the end of Russo Polish war.⁷ This division would play a major role in the development of a persistent schism in the political and social experiences of the East and West in the Ukrainian nation.

With this division, those Ukrainians living in the western half of the country fell under the rule of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth; one of the most progressive states in Europe at the time. Following the passage of the Nihil Novi Act in 1505, the Kingdom of Poland (which in 1569 merged with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, forming the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth) became, for all intents and purposes

⁷ Yekelchuk, 29.

, a mixed monarchy; the first of its kind.^{8 9} The Commonwealth featured a legislative body similar to a modern parliament which, unlike other contemporary legislative bodies in Europe, served as more than a mere advisory body for the monarch; it had true power, which enabled it to pass laws.¹⁰ Additionally, the Monarch was subject to the same laws as any commoner, and the popular political ideology came to be characterized by an understanding that the state was to serve “the common good of its citizens, who have the right to determine its affairs to a degree no lesser than the monarch himself (and as time passed, even to a greater degree).”¹¹ According to Hillis, “Proud citizens of the Commonwealth... prided themselves on having brought European civilization to a region that had been... isolated since the Tartar invasion...”¹² Ukrainian citizens would not have been immune to this sense of national pride, which would have influenced the collective consciousness of Western Ukrainians even up to the 1918 creation of Ukraine. Western Ukrainians enjoyed this liberal political atmosphere for almost one hundred and fifty years, until the Commonwealth finally collapsed and was divided amongst Austria, Prussia, and Russia in 1795.¹³ Though relatively short lived, this exposure to the democratic ideology Commonwealth had a lasting influence on political thought in Right Bank Ukraine, and stood in sharp contrast to the political atmosphere of those living simultaneously in the Left Bank.

In Eastern Ukraine, the political culture of the “Little Russians” could not have been further removed from that of their Western counterparts. As stated above, Left Bank Ukraine

⁸ Hillis, 25.

⁹ Grześkowiak-Krwawicz, Anna. 2012. *Queen Liberty: The Concept of Freedom in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth*. Leiden: Brill, 2012. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), EBSCOhost (accessed November 8, 2015)

¹⁰ Grześkowiak-Krwawicz, 5.

¹¹ Grześkowiak-Krwawicz, 5.

¹² Hillis, 24

¹³ Yekelchik, 34.

officially came under the protection of the Russian Tsar in 1654. The exact nature of the treaty has been disputed since its signing. Some historians see it as simply a military alliance between the Cossacks and the Tsar in which Cossack autonomy would be respected; others see it as a full-fledged “reunification” of the Left Bank with Russia. Regardless of the intentions of either the Tsar, or the Cossack leaders, there can be little doubt that the Cossacks maintained little to none of their former autonomy. Tsarist Russia was an autocratic absolute monarchy; thus the Tsar’s power was not to be limited by the granting of additional rights to any of his subjects regardless of their prior political positions.

Here we see yet again a stark disconnect between the various traditions of the Ukrainian people. With a lack of consensus on the nature of their ethnicity, and the presence of such a deep divorce in historical and political traditions, it comes as little surprise that eastern and western Ukrainians were unable to come to consensus on the nature of their new nation following World War One. It is not coincidental that the majority of Ukrainian Nationalist movements took place in the Western city of Lviv, from which the Western Ukrainian Peoples Republic was born on 1 November 1918, or that the young republic’s first goal was to reunite western and eastern Ukraine.¹⁴ It is also not coincidental that in 1917 forty nine percent of Kiev’s population self-identified as Russian while only four percent identified as Little Russian, or that the Central Rada (the central ruling body of Ukraine at the time), which controlled most of Eastern Ukraine (Kyiv, Podolia, Volhynia, Chernihiv, Poltava, Kharkiv, Katerynoslav, Kherson, and Taurida), maintained loyalty to the provisional government after the October Revolution in 1917.¹⁵ ¹⁶ Even

¹⁴ Yekelchuk, 76-77.

¹⁵ Hillis, 277

¹⁶ Yekelchuk, 71.

after the Central Rada gained full independence in 1918, the Ukrainian government “remained reluctant to sever all ties with Russia.”¹⁷

Ultimately, a unified Ukrainian Republic which could survive on its own for longer than a few months did not exist until, as indicated in the introduction, it was artificially created by the Soviet Union in 1920-1921. During this period the Ukrainian Bolshevik party (supported by their Russian counterparts) was able to defeat most of the remaining Whites, isolate the Western Ukrainian nationalists, and “create a Ukrainian Republic within the Soviet Union.”¹⁸ Though a unified (but not independent) Ukraine did exist after the Bolshevik victory, it only existed by the geopolitical power of the Soviet Union rather than as a result of a shared national identity. Because of this, when the Soviet Union collapsed, Ukraine lost the thing that kept it politically stable, and its government divided. This is observable in the fact that Ukraine has seen two revolutions in a period of only twenty one years (the Orange and Euro Maiden Revolutions).

With all of this in mind, one can clearly see that the Ukrainian Republic which arose in 1921 was not one based upon national pride or a shared consciousness, and it did not exist for the purpose of providing a Ukrainian government for the Ukrainian people. It arose rather based upon the assumption that Ukraine was to exist in a geoschizophrenic state; stuck between autonomy and subservience to its more powerful neighbor, Russia. Between the enlightened thought of the West, and the traditional thought of the East. This was the nature of the Ukrainian Republic by 1921, and arguably remained as such for much of the twentieth century.

¹⁷ Yekelchuk, 71.

¹⁸ Yekelchuk, 83-84.

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