

# The History behind the Regional Conflict in Ukraine

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Different historical experiences in various regions of Ukraine have produced very different political cultures and identities.<sup>1</sup> Each region of Ukraine has a unique history: Transcarpathia was the only part of Ukraine to experience protracted Hungarian rule—nearly 1,000 years of it; Bukovina was the only part to experience both Moldavian and later modern Romanian rule; Bukovina and Galicia were the only regions to have experienced Austrian rule; large parts of the southern territories were carved out of the Crimean Khanate; significant portions of central Ukraine were once part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania; and much of Ukraine’s formative historical experiences unfolded within Poland and Russia/USSR. The border between the latter states has shifted over time, and some parts of Ukraine have lived much longer under Poland (Galicia: 1386–1772, 1918–39) and others much longer under Russia and its Soviet successor (the Hetmanate and Sloboda Ukraine: since the mid-17th century until independence in 1991, interrupted by the German occupation of 1941–43). Of course, Crimea was not included in the Ukrainian SSR until 1954 and had previously been in the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR).

All former regimes have left their traces in the regions, and not just in the spheres of art and architecture: Polish and Magyar are still widely understood and spoken in Galicia and Transcarpathia, respectively, while Russophones predominate over Ukrainophones in the eastern and southern regions; labor migration from Ukraine to Hungary, Poland, and Russia originates from regions with historical associations with those countries; the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church is strongest where Catholic powers once held

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<sup>1</sup> In the aftermath of the Orange Revolution of 2004, I wrote an extended analysis of how history shaped different identity formations in eastern and western Ukraine (John-Paul Himka, “The Basic Historical Identity Formations in Ukraine: A Typology,” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 28, 1–4 [2006]: 483–500).

sway (in formerly Polish and Austrian Galicia and in formerly Hungarian Transcarpathia), while Orthodoxy reigns where once there was Russia and Moldavia (central, eastern, and southern Ukraine, as well as Bukovina). A variegated past has produced a variegated Ukraine.

In the present crisis, the most salient regional division is between Galicia, on the one hand, and eastern and southern Ukraine, on the other. Galicia, as used here, comprises three western oblasts of Ukraine: Ivano-Frankivs'k, L'viv, and Ternopil'. (The Austrian crownland of Galicia was larger; its western territories were incorporated into Poland after World War II.) Often commentators and scholars operate with the term "western Ukraine," but as far as politics are concerned, the three Galician oblasts are quite different from the other western Ukrainian oblasts of Chernivtsi (comprising mainly the former Bukovina) and Transcarpathia. Galicians were overrepresented in the antigovernment demonstrations both in the Orange Revolution and what is often called the Euromaidan Revolution (the terminology for what happened in the winter of 2014 remains contested).<sup>2</sup> In both cases, the Galicians were protesting against governments headed by presidents and their networks based in the East (Leonid Kuchma in Dnipropetrovs'k and Viktor Yanukovych in Donetsk). Even though persons from all around Ukraine have adopted their viewpoint, it was the Galicians who articulated the vision of Ukrainian identity that informed the Euromaidan Revolution and inflamed heated resentment in the East and South. For example, the greeting popularized by the Euromaidan Revolution—"Glory to Ukraine! Glory to the heroes!"—originated in Galicia in the 1930s as the slogan of the radical right Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN). The other relevant political culture is that of eastern and southern Ukraine. These were the areas most resistant to the political changes introduced by the Euromaidan. In eastern and southern regions where the population was over 90 percent Russophone, the dissatisfaction contributed to the emergence of powerful secessionist movements (Crimea, eastern Donbas).

<sup>2</sup> In February 2014, according to the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, only 12 percent of the protesters camped on the Maidan in Kyiv were Kyivans. Of the 88 percent who arrived from elsewhere, 55 percent came from "the West," 24 percent from central Ukraine excluding Kyiv, and 21 percent from the eastern and southern regions combined. Western Ukraine here comprises the oblasts of Chernivtsi, Ivano-Frankivs'k, Khmel'nyts'ky, L'viv, Rivne, Ternopil', Transcarpathia, and Volhynia; these oblasts account for only 23.4 percent of the population of Ukraine. See "Vid Maidanu-taboru do Maidanu-sichi: Shcho zminylosia?" Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, press release of 6 February 2014 ([www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&cid=226](http://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&cid=226), accessed 10 October 2014). Population statistics from Derzhavna sluzhba statystyky Ukrainy, *Chysel'nist' naiavnoho naseleння Ukrainy, na 1 sichnia 2014 roku* (Kyiv: Derzhavna sluzhba statystyky Ukrainy, 2014 [<http://database.ukrcensus.gov.ua/PXWEB2007>, accessed 15 October 2014]).

Central Ukraine has been less a creator than a reflector of political cultures. Kyiv, a prosperous capital city, has drawn migrants from all over Ukraine. The top administration, as embodied by the successive presidents, has either striven to balance between West and South/East (Leonid Kravchuk, Kuchma) or has leaned to the West (Viktor Yushchenko) or to the South and East (Yanukovych). Some of the antigovernment activism in Kyiv has been generated by Kyivan rivalries with powerful political and economic “clans” based outside the capital, in Dnipropetrovs’k and Donetsk.

Galicia’s political culture was formed in Central Europe. Since the mid-19th century it had shared the Central European obsession with nationality politics. Galician Ukrainians (then called Ruthenians) advanced national desiderata during the revolutions of 1848. In Habsburg Austria, including the Galician crownland, nationality was the chief issue around which politics revolved: the monarchy had to make special deals with the Magyars and Poles to compensate them for lost independence, the Czechs struggled with the Germans for control of Bohemia, and a government could fall because of the establishment of a Slovenian-language school in Styria. The monarchy’s deal with the Poles gave the latter group decisive control over the Ruthenians/Ukrainians of Galicia and initiated a bitter struggle between nationalities. In the mid-19th century, it was still possible to have a layered Polish–Ukrainian identity, but the space for its existence had vanished by 1900. By then, Galician Ruthenians had a crystallized sense of themselves as Ukrainians, a nationality distinct from Poles and Russians and shared with the people who inhabited the Little Russian provinces of the Russian Empire. Like other Central Europeans, they had developed an exclusivist nationalism.<sup>3</sup>

When the Habsburg monarchy fell apart in November 1918, Poles and Ukrainians went to war over the eastern, largely Ukrainian-inhabited part of the former Austrian crownland. Outnumbered and underequipped, the Ukrainian Galicians were defeated in this struggle. The postwar settlement that saw the resurrection of Poland and Lithuania; the creation of new states for Finns, Estonians, and Latvians; and the invention of previously

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<sup>3</sup> The best introduction to the history of the Ruthenians/Ukrainians in Habsburg Galicia is Ivan L. Rudnytsky, “The Ukrainians in Galicia under Austrian Rule,” in Ivan L. Rudnytsky, *Essays in Modern Ukrainian History*, ed. Peter L. Rudnytsky (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, University of Alberta, 1987), 315–52. Other useful studies include Jan Kozik, *The Ukrainian National Movement in Galicia, 1815–1849*, ed. Lawrence D. Orton (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, University of Alberta, 1986); John-Paul Himka, *Religion and Nationality in Western Ukraine: The Greek Catholic Church and the Ruthenian National Movement in Galicia, 1867–1900* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1999); and Paul R. Magocsi, *The Roots of Ukrainian Nationalism: Galicia as Ukraine’s Piedmont* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

unheard-of politics like Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia left the Ukrainians of Galicia frustrated and embittered. The situation particularly radicalized veterans of the Polish–Ukrainian war and student youth. Ukrainian students were discriminated against in higher education in interwar Poland, and they had dim prospects for employment in the Polish national state. Although communism was an attractive force for some of the young Ukrainian intelligentsia in the 1920s, the purges and famine in Ukraine in the 1930s directed most of the discontented toward the political right. Veterans and students continued the struggle with Poland through acts of terror and sabotage, including spectacular murders of senior Polish government officials. Their most important organization was the OUN, founded in 1929. Starting out with a close ideological affinity to Italian fascism, this movement subsequently gravitated toward the more extreme German National Socialists. The first rule of conduct of the OUN was, “You will attain a Ukrainian state or perish in the struggle for it.”<sup>4</sup> The radical nationalism of the OUN during wartime led its members to participation in the Holocaust and to ethnic cleansing of the Polish population. When the Soviets returned to Galicia in 1944 (they had taken it first in 1939 as a consequence of their alliance with Hitler), the OUN and its armed force, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), conducted a desperate insurgency against Soviet rule, which was finally vanquished only in 1950. The political culture produced in Galicia by these historical experiences can be adequately summed up by an old OUN slogan that was revived in the Euromaidan: “Ukraine above all.”

The mindset that developed in southern and eastern Ukraine was quite different. The formation of its political culture took place first in the Russian Empire and then in the Soviet Union. Except for brief revolutionary periods (1905, 1917, 1989), there was little room for nationality politics. In the Russian Empire, Little Russian (i.e., Ukrainian) ethnographic peculiarities were tolerated but not cultural separatism, let alone political separatism. The use of the Ukrainian language in print and public was severely restricted by decrees in 1863 and 1876. When the Ukrainian language was allowed in print in 1905, it was still barred from government institutions and, more important, from schools. In the 1920s, the Soviets experimented with

<sup>4</sup> Oleksandr Zaitsev, *Ukrains'kyi integral'nyi natsionalizm (1920–1930-ti roky): Narysy intelektual'noi istorii* (Kyiv: Krytyka, 2013), 282. In English, the classic work on the OUN is John A. Armstrong, *Ukrainian Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (Littleton, CO: Ukrainian Academic Press, 1980). However, it is an apologetic work, uncritical of the nationalists and silent about their dark sides. It should be balanced with Per A. Rudling, *The OUN, the UPA, and the Holocaust: A Study in the Manufacturing of Historical Myths*, Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies, no. 2107 (Pittsburgh: Center for Russian and East European Studies, University Center for International Studies, University of Pittsburgh, 2011).

the development of national cultures—this was the program known as “indigenization” (*korenizatsiia*). The Soviet Ukrainian intelligentsia avidly promoted Ukrainianization, but its leading representatives were killed in the purges of the 1930s. From then until the late 1980s, any attempt to engage in national politics of any sort resulted in imprisonment or other forms of repression. In this context, the kind of nationality politics that infused the Galicians had no possibility to develop in southern and eastern Ukraine.<sup>5</sup>

Related to these points is the fact that the Galician historical experience fostered a significant degree of political mobilization among Ukrainians, while the repression of independent political activities in both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union produced a more passive political culture in the eastern and southern parts of the country.<sup>6</sup> It is very difficult to gauge to what extent the separatist movement in the Donbas today has been internally generated as opposed to being a function primarily of external instigation.<sup>7</sup> But my own impression is that Galicians threw themselves into the Euromaidan with great passion. Ukrainian citizens in the southern and eastern regions who disapproved of the Euromaidan had to be goaded into action with encouragement, advice, manpower, and weapons from outside.

History furthermore produced an odd linguistic situation in Ukraine. Practically speaking, everyone in Ukraine, even today, can speak and understand Russian, but many people cannot speak Ukrainian and even have trouble understanding it. Galicia is the only region where spoken Ukrainian incontestably dominates in the cities. In the South and East, in cities like

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<sup>5</sup> The best overall treatment of these issues is in Serhy Yekelchuk, *Ukraine: Birth of a Modern Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). See also Alexei Miller, *The Ukrainian Question: The Russian Empire and Nationalism in the Nineteenth Century* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2003); and Bohdan Krawchenko, *Social Change and National Consciousness in Twentieth-Century Ukraine* (London: Macmillan, 1985).

<sup>6</sup> The Center for Society Research has been monitoring protests in Ukraine. In 2013, before the emergence of the Euromaidan protests, and in August 2014, the region of the country with the largest percentage of protests was the West, with 22 percent and 27 percent, respectively. The Donbas accounted for 10 percent and 4 percent; the East for 10 percent and 14 percent; the South for 18 percent and 17 percent; and central Ukraine for 19 percent and 23 percent (“Chy nazryvaie novyi Maidan? Rezul'taty monitorynhu protestiv, represii ta postupok za serpen' 2014 roku,” *Tsentr sotsial'nykh i trudovykh doslidzhen'* [www.cedos.org.ua/system/attachments/files/000/000/056/original/CSR\_-\_August\_-\_11\_Sep\_2014.pdf?1410775900, accessed 15 October 2014]).

<sup>7</sup> See Serhiy Kudelia, “New Policy Memo: Domestic Sources of the Donbas Insurgency,” *PONARS Eurasia*, 29 September 2014 (www.ponarseurasia.org/article/new-policy-memo-domestic-sources-donbas-insurgency, accessed 15 October 2014); and Andreas Umland, “In Defense of Conspirology: A Rejoinder to Serhiy Kudelia’s Anti-Political Analysis of the Hybrid War in Eastern Ukraine,” *PONARS Eurasia*, 30 September 2014 (www.ponarseurasia.org/node/7274, accessed 15 October 2014).

Simferopol', Odessa, Kharkiv, and Donetsk, the preferred language for communication is Russian, and knowledge of Ukrainian is shaky. There are several historical causes for this linguistic situation. One is simply the long immersion of these territories within polities that were Russophone and that promoted the use of Russian. Moreover, the modernization of society here took place mainly through the medium of the Russian language. Migration also played a role. When Russia took the southern territories from the Crimean Khanate and many Tatars left these lands, "New Russia" [Novorossiiia] was populated by migrants from the Balkans and German-speaking Europe, all of whom eventually adopted Russian as their lingua franca; migrants were also brought from Russia proper.<sup>8</sup> The kind of enserfment that predominated in ethnic Ukrainian regions tied peasants to the land, so fewer of them moved to the new territories than might have been expected based on proximity. From the second half of the 19th century until the middle of the 20th, laborers migrated from ethnic Russia to the mining and metallurgical centers of Kharkiv and the Donbas. Many Ukrainians were still attached to the land, voluntarily until the early 1930s and then by compulsion for decades thereafter. Crimea—with its orchards, vineyards, and beaches—became the home of many retired members of the Soviet elite, mostly Russian and Russophone. Moreover, the East, unlike the West, is highly urbanized. Ninety-one percent of Donetsk oblast lives in cities, as does 87 percent of Luhans'k oblast and 80 percent of Kharkiv oblast; by contrast, Ivano-Frankivs'k and Ternopil' oblasts are under 45 percent urban and L'viv oblast 61 percent.<sup>9</sup> One effect of urbanization in eastern Ukraine has been assimilation to the Russian language.<sup>10</sup> (A specificity of Galicia is that Ukrainians had been a small minority in the cities until the Polish and Jewish populations were expelled or murdered during and just after World War II; the cities were repopulated from Ukrainian small towns and villages.)

The biggest memory divide relevant to the Euromaidan and the separatist movement in eastern and southern Ukraine is the memory of World War II and its immediate aftermath. For the cohort in its late 20s and 30s, the issue is about what their grandfathers did during the war. In most of Ukraine, the grandfathers served in the Red Army. Galician grandfathers also served in

<sup>8</sup> New Russia Province (*guberniia*) was established in 1764. The borders of New Russia shifted over the course of the 18th century, but in general they encompassed what we now think of as eastern and southern Ukraine. Russian President Vladimir Putin resurrected the term in April 2014, suggesting vague territorial aspirations in the region from Kharkiv south through the Donbas and westward across the south to link with Transnistria.

<sup>9</sup> Derzhavna sluzhba statystyky Ukrainy, *Chysel'nist'*.

<sup>10</sup> On this point, see Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 99, 120, 122–23.

the Red Army, but many also fought *against* the Red Army, either in military or police formations in German service (notably the Waffen-SS division Galizien) or in the UPA. Galicians largely remember the Russians and eastern Ukrainians who came to their land in the aftermath of World War II as occupiers rather than liberators. The UPA and the OUN underground killed Russian and easterner schoolteachers, priests, and political officials.<sup>11</sup> Most people in the South and East have little sympathy for this kind of Ukrainian nationalism, and the presence on the Maidan of a large portrait of OUN leader Stepan Bandera and of numerous black and red flags, the Blut und Boden standards of the OUN, profoundly alienated many.

Of course, the Maidan's love affair with the heroes of wartime Ukrainian nationalism has been a gift for Russian propaganda, which likes to equate the Maidan activists with their heroes. A Russian talk show broadcast in May 2014 on Rossiia 1, for example, showed horrifying pictures from the L'viv pogrom of July 1941, in which the OUN militia played a major role, and then cut immediately to scenes of the burning building in which 42 pro-Russian activists died in Odessa earlier that month.<sup>12</sup> This equation is, naturally, problematic. Each historical moment is unique, as Democritus pointed out long ago. For one thing, the Ukrainian nationalists sought their ally in 1941 in Nazi Germany; in 2014, their allies were the United States and the European Union. The character of the allies influenced how Ukrainian nationalists behaved in these different eras. Also, however much the activists of the Maidan drew inspiration from the OUN and the UPA, they were not, for the most part, attracted by the nationalists' ethnic cleansing projects, the existence of which in any case they denied.

There can be no doubt, however, that the Maidan has done much to shore up the hegemony of the nationalist viewpoint. Aside from the OUN optics during the demonstrations, the victorious Maidan delivered all the state's instruments of memory socialization into pro-OUN hands. The current minister of education, Serhiy Kvit, is an admirer of the Ukrainian nationalist ideologue Dmytro Dontsov, has been a member of the right nationalist group Tryzub im. Stepana Bandery, and quite recently intervened to save a plaque in Munich honoring OUN leader Yaroslav Stetsko, a rabid antisemite.<sup>13</sup> The current head of the Security Service of Ukraine, Valentyn Nalyvaichenko,

<sup>11</sup> The archival resources for this topic have barely been tapped, but the general outline can be found in Alexander Statiev, *The Soviet Counterinsurgency in the Western Borderlands* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), esp. 124–26, 269.

<sup>12</sup> A. Mamontov, "Banderovtsy" ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=nx\\_do7IE2IY-t=529](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nx_do7IE2IY-t=529)). I would like to thank Bohdan Oryshkevich for bringing this broadcast to my attention.

<sup>13</sup> Stetsko was head of an OUN-proclaimed government in Lviv when his militia spearheaded the pogrom in that city. The information about Kvit's intervention in Munich comes from

had occupied the same position under former president Viktor Yushchenko. Back then, he lionized the OUN and denied its involvement in pogroms. (He also was responsible for the notorious list of 19 perpetrators of the Holodomor, 40 percent of whom just happened to be Jewish.) Volodymyr Viatrovych, a youngish historian who has made his career by glorifying the OUN and denying its crimes against Jews and Poles, has been appointed head of the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory. Perhaps they will be able to promote their vision of Ukraine's past throughout the country, phasing out the regional identity conflicts that have dogged Ukraine over the decades of independence.

It is difficult to assess the meaning and potential consequences of the postrevolutionary hegemony of the slogans and heroes of the wartime nationalists. Before the Euromaidan, some admirers of the nationalists went back to the sources—that is, to nationalist publications of the 1930s and 1940s—and ended up organizing torchlight parades in L'viv, complete with neo-Nazi insignia. But now, a broad coalition of Euromaidan supporters, including gay rights activists and democrats as well as radical right nationalists, greet each other with a slogan that may have a completely reinvented meaning. This past summer, I read reports from OUN security units, listing people they had killed in 1943 as politically suspicious. Most of the reports ended with the obligatory "Glory to Ukraine." Does the slogan now mean "Let us unite behind our country and resist invasion"? When people now answer with "Glory to the heroes," do they understand as the heroes primarily their compatriots who died on the Maidan? When they look for inspiration to Bandera, the OUN, and the UPA, do they mean that they must fight on regardless of whether they have any rational hope of winning? Is it possible to adopt the nationalist legacy as the national legacy and just forget about its dark side? Sometimes clichés have it right: only time will tell.

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