

The “Ukrainian Crisis” and Its Multiple Histories

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History in no way predetermined the way in which events in and around Ukraine would develop in the 21st century. It offered political leaders many possible scenarios from which to choose, and no appeals to the past can serve as a justification for those politicians who brought that country to the lamentable condition in which it finds itself today. Here I have in mind senior officials in Ukraine itself, those of Russia, and those of the West. All had room for maneuver, and all took decisions for which they are culpable. None can say, “There is no blood on my hands”; none of them can even claim to have put the interests of Ukraine’s population first.

At the same time, it is entirely appropriate to ask about the influence of history on the “Ukrainian crisis” and vice versa. A historian certainly has the right to speculate as to how the contemporary crisis in Ukraine should be situated within the broader march of history. Which broader historical processes serve to frame the contemporary Ukrainian crisis? Which particular aspect or tendency of those processes does it highlight?

As I see it, the current crisis represents part of a long history of struggle for control of a territory in Eastern Europe that constituted a borderland between several empires for centuries.¹ Much has changed, concerning not only the specific players in question but also the distribution of power, as well as the particular forms of struggle. One thing, however, has not changed: *Realpolitik* continues to hold its place in the 21st century, and any politician or political commentator who claims the contrary is either a sincere but doctrinaire liberal or a hypocrite or cynic who makes declarations without actually believing them.

I see the contemporary crisis as a particular stage in a broader struggle over borderland space, and though one may argue with my thesis, it is

¹ Alfred J. Rieber, *The Struggle for the Eurasian Borderlands: From the Rise of Early Modern Empires to the End of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

incontrovertible that Russia's governing class looks at the crisis precisely through the prism of *Realpolitik*. For that group, the question of control over Ukraine is heavily imbued by the experience of world wars—especially the events of 1812, 1915, and 1941—when powerful enemy forces invaded from the west. In each instance, control over this space was precisely the thing that gave Russia the strategic depth necessary for its salvation. Another important consideration that shapes the mentality of Russia's governing class is that, among European countries over the course of the last four centuries, only Russia and Britain—and the Europeanness of both is, of course, a matter of doubt—did not lose their sovereignty at any point. Hence, aside from a limited period at the start of the 1990s—a period on which Moscow generally looks back with shame and rue—Russia's governing class has continued to regard the defense of the country's great-power status as an unconditional priority. And that group is accustomed to seeing the main threat to that status as coming from the west.

It remains to be seen whether the events of 2013–14 constitute just one in a series of futile rear-guard battles of a contracting post-Soviet empire that stubbornly refuses to acknowledge its defeat in the struggle for influence in Eastern Europe, or whether those events constitute merely another stage in a long and drawn-out battle. Today, the first variant looks more likely, which would mean that the current Ukrainian crisis represents the terminal point of a distinct history extending across many centuries. Still, we all know the value of previous declarations about the “end of history.”

Yet to recognize the continued relevance of *Realpolitik* in the 21st century does not mean that we are in any way compelled to regard the future pessimistically. *Realpolitik* does not exclude the possibility of attaining stable and reasonable compromises. Such aims fall out of reach only when participants in a given conflict cannot achieve a consensus about the very nature of the game they are playing.

Another historical framework for understanding the present crisis concerns a struggle over the national identity of contemporary Ukraine. In recent years, I have spent a considerable time researching how, before World War I, the “struggle between the Little Russian and the Ukrainian” developed. In doing so, I have sought to explain how a Russian/Little Russian nationalist perspective, according to which local cultural specificity represented merely a regional variation of a larger Russian nation, came to stand in opposition to a Ukrainian nationalism, whose proponents saw in that territory and its people a distinct Ukrainian nation.² That conflict was in full flame on the eve of World War I; and “Little Russians,” relying on the support of the tsarist

² A. I. Miller, *Ukrainskii vopros v Rossiiskoi imperii* (Kiev: Laurus, 2013); Anton Kotenko, Olha Martyniuk, and Aleksei Miller, “Maloross,” in “*Poniatiia o Rossii*”: *K istoricheskoi*

imperial administration, were on the offensive. Over the course of the war, however, Germany, Austria-Hungary, and—in 1918—the Bolsheviks actively inserted themselves into this conflict. All these new actors took the side of the “Ukrainians” against the “Little Russians.” As a result, the “Little Russian” orientation was definitively routed, driven underground, and marginalized by the Bolsheviks in the 1920s.³ In interwar Poland and the USSR, two greatly different versions of Ukrainian identity took shape, and independent Ukraine inherited this dualism in 1991. Soviet Ukrainians were effectively compelled to forget the “Little Russian” variant, even though hostility toward Russia and alienation from Russian culture was not integral to their Ukrainian identity, while in western Ukraine precisely the opposite was the case: Ukrainianness there presupposed a rejection of Russian culture.⁴

The politics of history in independent Ukraine have focused on those issues that defined the differences between western and eastern versions of Ukrainian identity, on their irreconcilable visions of the past: their attitude toward Russia; their differing conceptions of which was “the right side” in World War II; their distinct views on the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) and on the famine of 1932–33.⁵ During the latest Maidan gatherings in the winter of 2013–14, two symbolic acts of memory politics marked a change in the nature of that movement. I have in mind, first, the destruction of the monument to Lenin in Kyiv on 8 December 2013 by activists of the Svoboda Party and, second, the torchlight procession on Stepan Bandera’s birthday on 1 January 2014, which engaged more than 15,000 participants. After that, old slogans of the UPA became legitimate and even obligatory on the Maidan, while the boundary between civil protesters and neo-Nazi groups became blurred.

Those Ukrainian citizens who are usually referred to as “Russian-speaking Ukrainians” and who used to perceive themselves as part of both Ukrainian and Russian cultural spaces, were now torn apart by the growing radicalization in the society. This forced some people “to go Russian” and thus to become hostile to Ukrainianness, while others became “anti-Russian Ukrainians.” Some claim that the war in eastern Ukraine is shaping a new Ukrainian nation—by sacrificing lives, by sacrificing the cultural ambivalence of previous times,

semantike imperskogo perioda, ed. Miller, Denis Sdvizhkov, and Ingrid Shirle [Schierle], 2 vols. (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2012), 2:392–443.

³ Wolfram Dornik, Georgiy Kasianov, Hannes Leidinger, Peter Lieb, Aleksei Miller, Bogdan Musial, and Vasyl’ Rasevyč, *Die Ukraine zwischen Selbstbestimmung und Fremdherrschaft 1917–22* (Graz: Leykam, 2011).

⁴ Aleksei Miller, “Dualizm identichnosti na Ukraine,” *Otechestvennye zapiski*, no. 1 (2007) (www.strana-oz.ru/2007/1/dualizm-identichnostey-na-ukraine, accessed 7 November 2014).

⁵ G. V. Kas’ianov, *Danse macabre: Golod 1932–1933 rr. u polititsi, masovii svidomosti ta istoriografii (1980-ti–pochatok 2000-kh rokiv)* (Kyiv: Nash chas, 2010).

by confirming beyond any doubt what was only asserted earlier: that “Ukraine is not Russia.” For historians, this should all sound quite familiar, and it resonates with the interwar period, with all the characteristic features of nationalism in that time and that place.

We may also ask ourselves what other issues of the past—ones not having received the appropriate level of attention from historians—does the present crisis reveal? The history of the Donbas as a particular region that, in the conditions of World War I and the revolution, demonstrated its capacity to create its own political subjectivity—initially in the form of a union of its industrialists and then, after the revolution, in the form of the Republic of Donetsk and Krivoi Rog—is a topic that has so far not received the scholarly analysis that it merits. Particularly important is proper research on the late Soviet and post-Soviet history of the Ukrainian East, perhaps deploying the perspective of subaltern studies. The population of this area was always maltreated in Ukrainian discourse as “dregs” (*sovki*), the primitive product of Soviet indoctrination. These people were compelled to delegate their voice to corrupt elites of the East in exchange for protection from Ukrainian nationalism. Now they find themselves in a desperate situation, when none of the sides in the struggle really cares about their well-being, preferring instead to manipulate their voices in a propaganda war, be it on Ukrainian or Russian television.

Finally, we have to ask: how has the crisis influenced visions of history and the situation of historians, particularly in Ukraine and Russia? Presently, history has become politically instrumentalized more than ever in Ukraine, and in Eastern Europe in general, and this has brought memory wars to a new, even more intensive stage. In both Russia and Ukraine, the idea that the war is spreading into the study and interpretation of the past has acquired a fully official and “legitimate” character. The space for dialogue within both Ukraine and Russia is shrinking, as it is for dialogue between scholars of the two countries. In this context, it is important to preserve normal forms of interaction between scholars in Russia and those in Ukraine, at least within a few common projects. But doing that will prove more difficult than it has ever been, and it will be necessary to do so in defiance of the official structures of both countries.

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