Olga Bertelsen (ed.)

REVOLUTION AND WAR IN CONTEMPORARY UKRAINE

The Challenge of Change

ibidem-Verlag
Stuttgart
Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at http://dnb.d-nb.de.

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Gedruckt auf alterungsbeständigem, säurefreien Papier
Printed on acid-free paper

ISSN: 1614-3515

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Stuttgart 2016

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Printed in the EU
Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society (SPPS)
ISSN 1614-3515

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3

Ukraine and Russia: Entangled Histories, Contested Identities, and a War of Narratives

Igor Torbakov

How much do words matter in power politics? A historian’s answer to this question is: a great deal. After all, words form narratives, narratives shape identities and other forms of political imagination, and the latter act as drivers of policies that might lead to, or even purposefully provoke, hostilities. Furthermore, a “war of words” or information warfare usually accompanies any hot conflict and is meant to rally the allies, disorient the rivals, and undermine the enemy. Thus, the characterization of the smoldering conflict in the Donbas as a “war of narratives and arms”¹ is an apt one. Remarkably, as early as the fifth century B.C., Thucydides, a political thinker and a general, articulated a crucial link between arms and narratives.² In his celebrated *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides famously distinguished the real reasons (prophasis) and the stated reasons (proschemata) for waging war. There are three primary real reasons for waging war, he argued: fear, honor, and interest, while the stated reasons involve appeals to nationalism and fear mongering (which is not the same as “reasonable” causes for fear).³

Over the last two years, Moscow’s explanations of its conduct vis-à-vis Ukraine resemble a page out of the ancient Greek philosopher’s writings. Seeking to justify its direct aggression and the land grab in Crimea, as well as its open and covert support for the Donbas separatist insur-

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2 I am grateful to my Uppsala University colleague Dr. Martin Kragh for valuable insights which he shared with me during our discussion of Thucydides’ political theory.

gents, the Kremlin deploys historical myths, such as the myths of perennial “Russo-Ukrainian unity” and of the artificial nature of Ukrainian statehood, geopolitical imagination grounded in the notion of the Russkii Mir (Russian World), and scare tactics which are caricatured by an image of “Ukrainian fascism” blown out of proportion. Simultaneously, the Kremlin has been boosting patriotic feelings, and has been crushing the opposition movement domestically. Yet, the real reasons behind Russia’s “hybrid war” against Ukraine appear to be consistent with Thucydides’s thesis: fear, honor, and interest. The Russian leadership is seriously concerned about the prospect of losing geopolitical competition with the West in what it regards as its key strategic neighborhood; it resents the fact that its Western “partners” do not accord it all due respect; and it holds that keeping post-revolutionary Ukraine off balance is crucial for consolidating the authoritarian political regime in Russia.

There looms, however, a larger and trickier question: why do Russia’s governing elites see things as they do? The answer to this question should be analyzed through the prism of the Russian leadership’s perspective on the Russo-Ukrainian conflict which has been shaped by its understandings of complex processes associated with histories and geopolitics of the two countries. These processes include: protracted and painful imperial disintegration and postimperial readjustment; immature national/political identity in post-Soviet Russia and Ukraine; and alternating expansion and contraction of the “spheres of identity” in what is usually designated as “historical borderlands” between “Russia” and “Europe.” This essay thus investigates how Russia’s and Ukraine’s entangled histories gave rise to various historical interpretations, focusing in particular on two conflicting narratives: one highlights a distinct Ukrainian national identity as a basis for the independent and sovereign Ukrainian state; the other blurs national distinctions and emphasizes “pan-Russian” unity. The reasons behind the Russian ruling elites’ perception of a distinct Ukrainian identity and of a sovereign Ukrainian state as inimical to what are designated as Russia’s “national” interests will also be discussed.

Some insights offered by scholars of colonial and postcolonial studies might enhance understandings of Ukrainian-Russian multifaceted entanglements. In (re)directing attention toward cultural aspects of subordination, “postcolonial” scholars have highlighted the complexity of identity formation in imperial/colonial politics. By introducing the notions of “hybridity” and “subalternity,” they have prompted other scholars to examine
more closely the discontinuity and ambivalence in the relationship between the rulers and the ruled within empires. This thought-provoking (but admittedly also controversial) approach was first adopted by literary scholars, anthropologists, and specialists in cultural studies, but later also emerged in the works of historians who explored the complexities of the postcolonial paradigm. Analyses of Ukrainian-Russian relations that employed this paradigm appeared immediately after Ukraine attained independence in 1991.

The 2014 revolution and war gave new impetus to this discourse. Some scholars have boldly proclaimed the Euromaidan as the first truly “postcolonial revolution” in post-Soviet space. They have argued that the Kyiv uprising allowed the subaltern—Ukraine—to regain its subjectivity and to begin speaking with its own voice. However, other scholars have retorted, correctly, that “[i]f Ukraine is to be considered postcolonial, then so should Russia, and indeed the whole post-communist region would share in this condition.” An insightful concept of Russia as a “subaltern empire,” “a space which is both imperial and postcolonial,” has recently been advanced. Not surprisingly, both Ukraine and Russia find themselves in a kind of postcolonial condition, because their histories had been closely entangled throughout the imperial and Soviet eras, and both have been struggling to adapt to the post-imperial realities after 1991.

But what is similar and what is different in the ways Ukraine and Russia are affected by the postcolonial condition? It would seem that both

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Ukraine and Russia exhibit extreme “hybridity” and ambivalence in several spheres, including social, cultural and political. For instance, Ukraine is desperately striving to break out of Soviet legacies. Many Ukrainians bemoan the ruinous effect of “Soviet imperialism” on the nation as a whole. It was Soviet modernity, however, that shaped the Ukrainian nation which for the first time became fully literate and predominantly urban under Soviet rule. Moreover, its elites were mostly formed by ethnic Ukrainians rather than by representatives of other ethnicities. In foreign policy, Ukraine’s hybridity and uncertain identities were on full display for the past twenty-five years as it was searching for a new format of relations with Russia, and maneuvering between its former “master” and its potential “hegemon,” the European Union.

Remarkably, the postcolonial condition in Russia also assumes a double hybridity. First, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, post-Soviet Russia was formally reconstituted as a civic nation of rossiiane—an ethnically diverse community of the Russian Federation’s citizens. Yet, in the Russian elites’ political imagination, the Russian Federation is viewed as being co-equal to the entire “historic Russia,” thus endowing its self-image with an imperial dimension. Second, for the last three centuries in its relations with Europe, Russia has been a subaltern simply because it did not generate its own vision of modernity but adopted a European one. An alternative communist modernity that had been constructed during the Soviet era was also European both in its philosophical roots and in aspirations but it failed miserably. However, while today objectively being a subaltern in the sense of economic, social, and political developments, Russia, driven by its subjective self-understanding, challenges these realities by claiming the status of a great power whose voice, unlike that of a subaltern, must be heard. The pattern of Ukraine’s and Russia’s hybridities and ambivalent behaviors during the postimperial period seem to be similar, but one might also observe a crucial difference: “Ukraine is only a subaltern, whereas Russia is both subaltern and an empire.”

It is also important to keep in mind that history is not a teleological process, and “[t]he past is not a single path leading to a predetermined

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future."\textsuperscript{12} Soviet legacies, embedded in Ukraine’s and Russia’s realities, condition multiple alternatives for historical development. Significantly, politicians, ideologues, and intellectuals shaped the histories of these countries in the past and continue to fashion their present and future. Their imaginations and beliefs about the intertwined historical paths of Ukraine and Russia contribute to an uneasy relationship between the two countries, characterized by some historians as an unstable combination of “intimacy and antipathy.”\textsuperscript{13} But most importantly, the particular historical views held by people who wield power in both states, as well as their concrete political decisions, created a precondition for the current conflict that led to bloodshed.

I.

Ukraine’s and Russia’s histories have been symbiotically linked together since the dawn of the history of Eastern Slavdom. Both Ukraine and Russia claim the primacy of their origins from the Kylivan Rus, a loose confederation of early medieval East Slavic principalities. This alleged early beginning of Ukrainian and Russian historical trajectories has long been the subject of highly divergent interpretations.\textsuperscript{14} One recent commemorative event illustrates the depth of this long-standing Ukrainian-Russian controversy which has arguably grown even more acrimonious under war conditions. On July 28, 2015, the thousandth anniversary since the death of Vladimir (Volodymyr) the Great, “a saint equal to the apostles” who is revered for having introduced Christianity to Kyivan Rus, was celebrated both in Russia and in Ukraine. Interestingly, while at the center of festivities in both countries was one and the same historical figure, Moscow and Kyiv advanced divergent narratives concerning what it was that the ancient Slavic prince ruled over. In his address at a posh reception in the Grand Kremlin Palace, Russian President Vladimir Putin defined Vladimir

\begin{itemize}
\item Jaroslaw Pelenski, \textit{The Contest for the Legacy of Kievan Rus’} (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 1998); Aleksei Tolochko, \textit{Kievskaya Rus i Malorossiia v XIX veke} (Kyiv: Laurus, 2012).
\end{itemize}
as the Prince who "laid the foundation for the formation of a united Russian (russkaia) nation," having "baptized the people of Rus' into Christianity." "In fact," Putin added, "he cleared the way for establishing a strong, centralized Russian state." In contrast, the Ukrainian president's administration referred to Vladimir as the "Prince of Kyiv" who Christianized "Kyivan Rus"—Ukraine. Furthermore, the Ukrainian lawmaker Oksana Korchynska has contended that the terms Russia and Rus are historical names of contemporary Ukraine, and proposed a draft law to ban the use of these terms in reference to the present-day Russia in official documents, media, school textbooks, and road maps.

The rhetoric deployed by Moscow and Kyiv in this most recent altercation over their shared history neatly reflects the two countries' antithetical strategies. As noted elsewhere,

[while the Russian historical myth seeks to question Ukraine's distinctiveness (and thus to undermine its right to sovereignty), the Ukrainian nationalist narrative responds by reasserting Ukraine's distinctiveness and championing its efforts to forge a separate historical path. This is the crux of the matter: whereas Russia's grand story emphasizes togetherness, the Ukrainian one stresses separation.]

But what exactly is distinctive about the Ukrainian story? How legitimate is Leonid Kuchma's claim that "Ukraine is not Russia" which became the title for his 2004 book? Kyiv's celebrations of the aforementioned anniversary suggest that the Ukrainian leadership, following the venerable Hrushevskian historiographic tradition, struggles to uphold the narrative

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18 Igor Torbakov, "'This Is a Strife of Slavs among Themselves': Understanding Russian-Ukrainian Relations as the Conflict of Contested Identities," in The Maidan Uprising, Separatism and Foreign Intervention: Ukraine's Complex Transition, eds. Klaus Bachmann and Igor Lyubashenko (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2014), 197.
19 Leonid Kuchma, Ukraina—ne Rossia (Moscow: Vremia, 2004).
that would date the split between Ukrainians’ and Russians’ historical paths all the way to the early Middle Ages. Some commentators have noted that Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko’s speechwriters crafted a storyline which mirrored Putin’s narrative. The essential difference between Poroshenko’s and Putin’s narratives was in their protagonists: Poroshenko spoke of the “Ukrainian nation,” while Putin discussed the history of the “unified Russian people.”

Most professional historians observe problems with both interpretations: Kyivian Rus was of course neither a Ukrainian nor a Russian state, and some scholars even doubt whether it was a full-fledged state at all. More importantly, the Ukrainian leaders’ desperate attempts at finding solid historical evidence for the Ukrainian nation’s glorious antiquity and at identifying the ethno-cultural factors that distinguish Ukrainians from Russians appear to be a failing strategy. Focusing on ethnicity and culture, and comparing and contrasting a thousand year-long history of the “Ukrainian nation” with the supposedly shorter history of Russia plays straight into the hands of Kremlin-run propaganda that cast the ongoing conflict as the one resulting from the clash between two well defined and clearly bounded ethnic groups: the “Ukrainian ultra-nationalists” who seized power in Kyiv in the February 2014 “coup d’état” and the inhabitants of Ukraine’s eastern provinces. The latter have been characterized by Putin as peaceful “coal miners” and “tractor drivers” who took up arms to protect their cultural affinity with Russia that allegedly was gravely endangered by the “Kyiv fascists.”

There is, however, a more promising way of looking at Ukraine’s historical uniqueness based on a different kind of historiographic tradition.

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21 Ironically, the first scholar who bluntly stated that Kyivian Rus was neither Russia nor Ukraine, and that it was not a state but rather a loose federation of principalities, appeared to be the nineteenth-century Russian historian and journalist Nikolai Polevoy. See Volodymyr Kravchenko, Ukraina, Imperia, Rosiia (Kyiv: Krytyka, 2011), 359.

This tradition focuses on practices of governance and the relations between the state and society in the territories that constitute contemporary Ukraine. These territories include those Ukrainian lands that either enjoyed a short-lived autonomy (e.g. the Cossack Hetmanate) or were at different times incorporated into polities, such as the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and the Habsburg Empire. Back in the 1860s, the prominent historian Nikolai (Mykola) Kostomarov appeared to be the first among the students of Ukrainian and Russian history who argued that “the basic differences between Ukrainians and Russians rested more on socio-political factors than on ethnicity, language or religion.” In the 1920s, continuing this line of argument, the conservative political thinker Viacheslav Lypynskyi, who, in Ivan L. Rudnytsky's words, "was the antithesis of Hrushevsky," formulated his seminal concept of a socially and politically differentiated Ukraine. Lypynskyi contended that

[the basic difference between Ukraine and Muscovy does not consist in language, race or religion...but in a different, age-old political structure, a different method of organization of the elite, in a different relationship between the upper and the lower social classes, between the state and society.]

When applied to the analyses of the current situation, such a perspective helps one observe more clearly that it is not the supposedly intractable ethnic contradictions that lie at the heart of the present-day conflict. Rather, it is grounded in the intrinsic societal differences that conditioned Ukraine’s and Russia’s diverging post-Soviet political trajectories. These differences mostly concern the degree of Ukraine’s and Russia’s sociocultural homogeneity, the role that regionalism plays in both countries, and Ukrainians’ and Russians’ attitudes towards the state and revolution.

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23 Arguably, the very possibility of this approach is rooted in the definition of “nation” that can be found in Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary of 1755: nation is “a people distinguished from another people; generally by their language, origin, or government.” See also Adrian Hastings, The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 14.

24 Pelenski, The Contest, 222.


26 Viacheslav Lypynskyi, Lysty do bratıv-khliborobiı́ (Vienna, 1926), xcv; quoted in Rudnytsky, Essays, 18.
II.

What is striking about Russia is that for a country of such a gigantic size it enjoys a paradoxically high level of cultural homogeneity. With the exception of some non-Russian Muslim enclaves (in the Middle Volga and in the North Caucasus), the Russian people—although not an "imperial race" by any means but definitely an ethnic backbone of the Romanov Empire and the Soviet Union—developed a relatively uniform culture in the process of the colonization of the vast Eurasian expanses. Across nine time zones stretching from Kaliningrad in the far west to Vladivostok in the Far East, one would not discern significant regional cultural differences or pronounced regional identities.27 In part, this can be explained by the fact that, as in the other post-Soviet states, contemporary Russia remains institutionally underdeveloped and administratively centralized. The state's domination over individual, and societal atomization exacerbates Russia's cultural homogeneity. As the late Russian political thinker Dmitrii Furman has aptly noted, in Russia "there is an individual and there is the state, and there is nothing in between."28

Ukraine presents a starkly different picture. Despite all the cataclysms that the Ukrainians suffered in the twentieth century, the cataclysms that turned the ethno-cultural patchwork of most of Central European societies into neatly homogenized nation-states, Ukraine remains boisterously diverse, displaying regional, political, social, and religious pluralism. There are strong regional differences and highly developed regional identities; there are four Eastern Christian denominations (three Orthodox and one Uniate) and two widely spoken languages—Ukrainian and Russian. This remarkable diversity of Ukrainian society partially compensates for a lack of civil society institutions, serving at the same time as a basis for their formation.29 Establishing autocratic rule in such a diverse

27 Siberian regionalism (obiastnichestvo), which was very pronounced at the turn of the twentieth century, lost its significance after the Bolshevik victory in the civil war. See Mark von Hagen, "Federalisms and Pan-Movements: Re-imagining Empire," in Russian Empire: Space, People, Power, 1700–1930, eds. Jane Burbank, Mark von Hagen, and Anatolyi Remnev (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 494–510.
29 Dmitrii Furman, "Dialektyka bratnihо viddaliannia," Krytyka 10, no. 6 (2006), http://krytyka.com.ua/journal/frik-x-chyyslo-6-104. Likewise, the Ukrainian historian Andrii Portnov has suggested that in their analyses of Ukraine's complexity,
society is extremely difficult, unless it is suppressed by force. This factor has always been a consideration for Ukraine’s powers that be, and it continues to play a role in the state’s decisions regarding domestic and foreign policies.

Furthermore, Russians and Ukrainians seem to differ in their attitudes toward state authority, in their acceptance of trade-offs between unchecked power and social stability, and in their attitudes toward revolutionary upheavals. Rooted in the past experiences of both peoples, these differences have arguably become more pronounced over the last twenty-five years of post-Soviet development.

Since its early years as the Tsardom of Muscovy, Russia has been building a strong autocratic imperial state that could also act as a great power in the international arena. Russian autocratic rule was closely associated with the state’s imperial nature because no land empire, where the distinction between the “center” and the “colonial peripheries” is blurred, can embark on even the most moderate democratization in the central provinces (the empire’s putative “national core”) without running a risk of destabilizing the entire imperial polity across the board. There were only two periods in Russia’s history when its autocratic rule completely collapsed: the Time of Troubles (Smuta) in the early seventeenth century and the 1917 Revolution followed by civil war. Both upheavals have been etched in Russian collective memory as sheer catastrophes replete with chaos, social dislocation, and massive human losses. The turbulent early 1990s ushered in by the Soviet Union’s breakup were generally viewed in Russia as the advent of the third smuta: the times of lawlessness, mass poverty, and increasing secessionist movements in the outlying regions—all due to the extreme weakening of the central government. It should come as no great surprise that under Putin, Russia’s memory politics sought to contrast the chaos brought about by the revolutionary upheaval (be it in 1917 or in 1991) with the “order” and “stability” secured and protected by the strong and centralized state. In Putin’s words, “For us, the state and its institutions and structures have always played an exceptionally important role in the life of the country and the people.
Kremlin propaganda machine portrayed them in negative connotations: to discredit revolutionary ideals, it would make use of long quotations from works written by the philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev and the writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Russian luminaries and intellectual and moral authorities who were no great champions of any revolution. It would appear that the Kremlin’s efforts to mold public attitudes have proven to be successful. “This politics of memory resonates with today’s Russians,” the prominent Russian historian Boris Kolonitsky has noted. He has maintained that “stability has become a core political value” in Russia.31

The situation in Ukraine seems to be very different. The political system and state-like entities that the Ukrainians had been trying to build before 1991 differed markedly from the Russian Empire’s autocratic structure and traditions, which have been mostly state-centered throughout Russia’s history. This factor has been stressed in Lypynskyi’s and Kostomarov’s writings.32 For significant numbers of the national-minded Ukrainians, the glory of the (national) state and the authoritarian system of government were not necessarily interdependent notions, as they were for most Russians. In other words, unlike the Russians, the Ukrainians did not develop what some political scientists call “nondemocratic hegemonic national identity.”33 Importantly, the Ukrainians also have a different attitude toward revolutions. This is of course not to say that they hold dear the myth of the Bolshevik revolution any more than the Russians do. Yet, the Ukrainian national narrative is all about the struggle for national liberation. Therefore, the heroics and romantic aura of a national revolution (a

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valiant popular revolt against foreign oppression), driven by a historically conditioned combination of social and national factors, clearly strikes a chord with millions of Ukrainians. Some commentators have even suggested that it would not hurt if the Ukrainians’ rebelliousness was counterbalanced by a healthy dose of conservatism. As Lypynskyi once sadly remarked in a letter to a friend, “The trouble is not that we have revolutionaries. The trouble is that we have only revolutionaries.”

Moreover, the Ukrainian political culture has recently been enriched by a new revolutionary impetus—the 2004 Orange Revolution—which in turn served as a powerful symbolic resource for the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution. Viktor Ianukovich’s win in the 2010 presidential election that almost immediately prompted him to grab more power in an attempt at establishing a Putinesque authoritarian regime reignited the question of revolution and placed it on the list of people’s priorities. Notably, some more astute analysts clearly saw it coming. For instance, Yitzhak Brudny and Evgeny Finkel presciently wrote in 2011 that Yanukovych’s attempts to turn Ukraine into a softer version of Putin’s Russia . . . would encounter a much stiffer opposition than Putin ever faced. Moreover, we believe the fierce opposition from a significant section of the political and intellectual elite and especially from the majority of the population in Western Ukraine would ultimately either force Yanukovych to abandon his authoritarian agenda or bring another Orange style uprising.36

This rebellious spirit, the capacity for societal self-organization, and the readiness to rise up against oppressive power seem to substantiate the main contention of Kuchma’s otherwise lackluster memoir Ukraina—ne Rossiiia.

Ukraine’s most fundamental distinction, however, lies in the character and ambitions of the latest Ukrainian revolutionary movement. As some observers have argued, “[t]rue revolutions do not just change the political regime or the composition of the government; they transform the people and their political culture.”36 In its attempt at establishing societal

35 Brudny and Finkel, 828.
control over the state, the Euromaidan was striving to do just that. In his erudite book *The Construction of Nationhood*, Adrian Hastings has insightfully noted that a nation “is not a [true] nation until it senses its primacy over and against the state.” Indeed, the implications of the Euromaidan have been tremendously important: the world observed dramatic changes in Ukraine in 2013–2014—the dismissal of the authoritarian political regime and the emergence of a new Ukrainian civic nation.

III.

Although the ousting of the kleptocratic Ianukovych cabal was essentially Ukraine’s domestic affair, Russia remained a key player throughout the conflict, attempting to manipulate the outcome of the revolution. The main thrust of the Euromaidan (which came to be known also as the Revolution of Values or the Revolution of Dignity) was the struggle, led by broad segments of the Ukrainian society, against corruption and lawlessness, and for transparent governance and the rule of law. Importantly, seeking to expand the repertoire of explanatory paradigms, the historian Ilya Gerasimov has suggested considering the notion of “postcolonial revolution.”

“The Ukrainian revolution,” Gerasimov argues, “is a postcolonial revolution because it is all about the people acquiring their own voice, and in the process of this self-assertive act they forge a new Ukrainian nation as a community of negotiated solidary action by self-conscious individuals.” Gerasimov is convinced that in 2013–2014 a new Ukrainian collective subjectivity was forged. For the Russian governing elite, this phenomenon seemed threatening, as throughout the entire post-1991 period Russia has been asserting, with varying degrees of aggressiveness, its entitlement to determine how Ukraine should be governed. The belief in such entitlement is grounded in Moscow ruling circles’ (mis)understanding of what kind of Russia and what kind of Ukraine emerged after the Soviet Union’s disintegration. The Kremlin’s idiosyncratic views of “post-imperial” relations between Russia and Ukraine had been in gestation for quite some time, germinating in the process of the Euromaidan and presented

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in more clear contours in the official pronouncements of Russia’s top leaders, above all of President Putin. These views have become Russia’s official master narrative which was designed to promote a new political imagination and to guide policy. The main problem with this narrative, of course, is that it is fundamentally flawed and, when used as a political blueprint, leads to disastrous results.

Let us take a closer look at how present-day Moscow elites imagine historical links and interconnections among contemporary Russia, the defunct Soviet Union, and the Romanov Empire. All three state entities seem to represent for them various incarnations of “historic Russia.” According to Putin, “the Soviet Union has traditionally been called Russia, Soviet Russia, and it was indeed the greater Russia,”\textsuperscript{39} while the post-Soviet Russian Federation is viewed as a “truncated Russia,” a “rump empire” that lost fourteen of its borderland dependencies. It is worth noting that the 1993 Constitution rechristened the former Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) into the Russian Federation commonly known as Russia (Rossiiia), with both names being used interchangeably.

Again, words matter. This particular choice of the state’s name is paramount to what can be considered as the forging of a false identity. In the Soviet Union, all union republics (with a notable exception of the largest one—the RSFSR) were constructed as quasi-states of particular titular nationalities/nations—the Georgians, the Uzbeks, the Ukrainians, and others. These nations had their national homelands and were encouraged (de-jure) to foster their individual national identities and cultures within the framework of the well-known Soviet formula: “national in form, socialist in content.” Throughout the entire Soviet period, the RSFSR was the only republic where this formula was purposefully not adopted. The Soviet nationalities policy’s main goal was to keep Russian and Soviet identities blurred so that the majority of Russians would view the entire Soviet Union as their own state, rather than the RSFSR. The Russians played the role of the “imperial glue” in the Soviet empire which was becoming increasingly Russocentric. As a result, the imperial character of Russian national identity and the imperial consciousness of the Russians were strengthened.\textsuperscript{40}


\textsuperscript{40} Brudny and Finkel, 816–19.
This hegemonic national identity manifested itself in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet breakup. Although the political leadership of the RSFSR was instrumental in bringing down the USSR, it claimed for “new Russia” the status of the successor of the Soviet Union, reincarnated “historic Russia” or the Russian Empire. Such a line of succession has been solidly embedded in the political imagination of several generations of Russians, sustaining a geopolitical fantasy to rejuvenate “historic Russia” at some point during the post-Soviet period. Already in the early 1990s some astute observers maintained that the new Russian governing elites were indulging in such pipe dreams. For instance, in 1992 Gasan Guselnov noted that those politicians who had chosen to identify the former RSFSR as Russia demonstrated a perfect example of wishful thinking because they believed that the old “all-Union” status of the Russian Federation would remain in force even after the Soviet Union’s disappearance. This same mistake was repeated by the majority of international organizations where the Russian Federation almost automatically inherited positions of the USSR.\(^4^1\)

The immediate political implications of this move for Ukraine were outlined by Daniel Beauvois, a leading French historian specializing in East European history. In the introduction to the Ukrainian-language edition of his magisterial work *La bataille de la terre en Ukraine* Beauvois has written:

> On February 7, 1992, France signed a Friendship Treaty with Russia, “proceeding from the fact that Russia is the successor state of the USSR...and also from [France’s] recognition of the Commonwealth of Independent States.” Our diplomats did not notice in this *contraditio in adiecto*. What kind of independence [and what type of sovereignty] then does Ukraine possess if France, while opening its embassy in Kyiv, recognizes Russia as the *exclusive inheritor of the entire imperial legacy*?\(^4^2\)

The result of this notorious case of mistaken identity is twofold. In the political imagination of Moscow elites, post-Soviet Russia’s status as the sole successor to both the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire, as well as its historic inheritance, have been artificially inflated. By contrast, in

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Ukraine's case, its post-Soviet status, as well as its share in imperial inheritance, was artificially diminished, not least because in a fit of strategic shortsightedness, the governing elites in Kyiv in the early 1990s themselves chose to pursue policies of nationalizing the state, viewing Russia's "closeness" as intrinsically harmful to Ukraine's state and nation building. In other words, Guseinov's suggestion is that the contemporary Russian Federation is "smaller" than its elites imagine it to be (the Russian Federation does not equal "Russia"), while Ukraine is "larger" than the Moscow (and Kyiv) leadership imagined in the early 1990s.43

This optical aberration prevents both the Russian *derzhavniki* (champions of imperial great power) and narrow-minded Ukrainian ethnic nationalists from seeing post-Soviet Ukraine as an equal inheritor of Russia's historical imperial legacies. Seen through a different kind of lens, the one that produces a much less distorted social picture, the multiethnic Crimea with its presently dominant Russian cultural component, as well as Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Odesa with their vibrant urban Russian-language culture and millions of Russian-speaking Ukrainians, would appear as parts of the social landscape produced by the imperial and Soviet periods of *Ukrainian* history. These phenomena that can be interpreted as clear manifestations of the country's postcolonial hybridity contribute to the richness and diversity of present-day Ukrainian social life and relate to today's Russian Federation only in a historical sense: both post-Soviet nations' histories indeed have been closely entwined for several centuries.

Crucially, the imperial epoch and the Soviet era differ markedly as far as the development of a distinct Ukrainian identity is concerned. Until the end of the Russian Empire, the struggle between the two national projects—the Ukrainian nationalist project and the project of a "larger Russian nation" pursued by imperial bureaucracy—remained an open ended process. The establishment of the Ukrainian socialist (quasi) state by the Bolsheviks has arguably made the process of Ukrainian-Russian disentanglement irreversible. The Romanov Empire did not distinguish between "Ukraine" and "Russia," or for that matter, among other *ethnically* marked territorial units.44 In a broad political sense, the vast multiethnic imperial

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43 Guseinov, "Istoricheskii smysl."
44 For instance, the Kingdom of Poland was renamed to Prvivsinsky Krai following the 1863 Uprising, thus leaving the Grand Duchy of Finland the only exception to the rule.
polity in its entirety was considered to be “Russia” autocratically ruled by the “Russian” Romanov dynasty. Besides being used as a polity in this very broad sense, from the 1850s the word Russian was also used as a fuzzy polity in a narrower sense—specifically, in the notion of the “larger Russian nation” that was imagined as comprising three Eastern Slavic peoples—Russians (Great Russians), Ukrainians (Little Russians), and Belarusians.45 In the beginning of the twentieth century, a number of top imperial bureaucrats argued that confusing “Russia” with the “Russian Empire” was a flawed intellectual premise for pursuing practical policies. Sergei Witte has noted that

[If 35 per cent of the population are ethnic minorities, and if the Russians are divided into Great Russians, Little Russians, and Belarusians, then in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it is impossible to conduct a policy that disregards this historical fact of capital importance, that disregards the national traits of the other nationalities composing the Russian Empire, their religion, language, and so on.46

The “historical fact of capital importance” that Witte stressed so forcefully had remained largely ignored until the First World War and the 1917 Revolution which brought the story of the Russian Empire to an end and simultaneously launched Ukraine onto the world stage.47 According to the interwar Ukrainian historian Vasyl Kuchabsky, political upheavals in Eastern Europe in 1917–1920 resulted in three extremely important geopolitical developments—the victory of Bolshevism, the reestablishment of Poland, and the reemergence of Ukraine as the third key East European actor alongside Velikorossija (Great Russia) and the reconstituted Polish state.48 This critical geopolitical factor—the “reemergence of Ukraine”—ultimately led to the establishment of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic which, according to Ivan L. Rudnytsky, had become “the embodi-

47 See Eric Lohr et al., eds., The Empire and Nationalism at War (Bloomington, IN.: Slavica Publishers, 2014).
48 Vasyl Kuchabsky, Western Ukraine in Conflict with Poland and Bolshevism, 1918–1923 (Toronto: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 2009).
ment of a compromise between Ukrainian nationalism and Russian [Soviet] centralism."\(^49\) This compromise, whose formal expression was the creation of the USSR and the whole system of Soviet federalism based on the principle of the territorialization of ethnicity, was an inherently shaky affair. This formation's instability was perceptively analyzed by Arnold Toynbee back in the 1950s, at a time when the Soviet Union, one of the principal victors in the Second World War and the emerging world superpower, seemed to be at the peak of its geopolitical might. Toynbee wrote that

> [it would] be seen that Stalin's administrative map of the Soviet Union was not to be taken at its face value; but a moral commitment cannot be wiped out through being dishonored by its makers; and, in a world that had emerged from the Second World War, Stalin's map might live to be translated, after all, from the limbo of camouflage into the realm of reality. . . .\(^50\)

The dissolution of the USSR in December 1991 appeared to be exactly what Toynbee outlined as a possible geopolitical result of a "politto-cartographic transformation": what once were administrative borders within the highly centralized Soviet "federation" were converted by national-minded republican elites into real state borders dividing sovereign nations, and the union state fell apart at the seams. The leaders of both republics, the Ukrainian SSR and the RSFSR, Leonid Kravchuk and Boris Yeltsin played leading roles in the Soviet Union's demise. More precisely, it was the nationalist stance taken by Yeltsin that delivered a coup de grâce to the ailing communist empire.\(^51\) If the Russian Republic were to rush to the exit, George Kennan asked rhetorically, "what, beyond the name, would be left of the Soviet Union? It would have become an empty shell, without people, without territory, and with no more than a theoretical identity."\(^52\)

\(^{49}\) Rudnytsky, *Essays*, 464.


IV.

Both Ukraine and the Russian Federation have emerged from the imperial debris as independent states that had liberated themselves from what their political leadership characterized as a centralizing, oppressive, and supranational union metropole. Each state's sovereignty was rooted in a distinct identity of, respectively, the Ukrainian and the Russian peoples. This distinction, however, was not a completely novel affair. As mentioned above, the recognition of separate Ukrainian and Russian identities lay at the heart of the formation of the Ukrainian SSR and the subsequent establishment of the Soviet Union. It was also one of the key arguments in Vladimir Lenin's seminal 1914 article "On the National Pride of the Great Russians."

More remarkably, the narrative that President Putin is currently advancing seeks to undo the long-standing political principle underpinning the Ukrainian-Russian relations throughout the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, namely conceiving Russians and Ukrainians as culturally and linguistically close but still separate peoples. In early September 2013, soon before the Euromaidan protest erupted in the center of Kyiv, Putin informed the Russian and international audiences that whatever the Ukrainians might do or whichever direction they might travel, their path is destined to cross with that of the Russians. He then explained why:

Because we are one people. Although nationalists on both sides (and there are nationalists among us and in Ukraine) may be offended by what I have just said, that is the actual fact of the matter. Because we have the same Kyivan baptismal font in the Dnieper; we certainly have common historical roots and common fates; we have a common religion, a common faith; we have a very similar culture, languages, traditions, and mentality. . . .

Putin's embrace of the archaic notion of the "larger (or triune) Russian nation" which subsumes the Ukrainians and the Belarusians with the Great Russians into a single ethno-political entity is significant in more than one sense. Politically, the claim that the Russians and the Ukrainians are "one people" destabilizes a distinct Ukrainian identity and questions the legitimacy and the very raison d'être of the independent Ukrainian

state. Similarly, such statements also destabilize and delegitimize a post-
Soviet Russian identity that underpins the existence of the contemporary Russian Federation. Putin’s rhetorical persistence, however, should be explained by the tenacity of a hegemonic imperial identity among Russia’s ruling elites and the way they understand the reasons behind the Soviet Union’s disintegration and its implications.

In the 2005 State of the nation address, Putin invited his audience to take a closer look at what he termed as the “genesis of contemporary Russian history.” This was the speech in which Putin famously characterized the collapse of the Soviet Union as the “major geopolitical catastrophe of the [twentieth] century.”55 Most significantly, he deciphered the meaning of this catastrophe for the Russian people. According to Putin, the demise of the Soviet Union became “a true drama” for them: “Tens of millions of our fellow citizens and compatriots found themselves beyond the borders of Russia.”56 As previously mentioned, in the Moscow ruling elites’ political imagination, the distinction between the images of the Russian Federation and of “historic Russia” are blurred, which prompts them to employ the notions of “citizens” and “compatriots” interchangeably. At the same time, these notions seemed to be subtly juxtaposed in their public speeches. According to the message inserted in them, the Russian Federation might well be a formal homeland for the body of Russian citizens but not a “genuine” Russia that is destined to embrace all “compatriots” stranded in various postimperial “formations” and to bring all other “people of Russian culture” into its fold.

This view is “premised on the incompleteness of the Russian Federation and its incongruence with the idea of a ‘genuine Russia,’ which


supposedly should be extended beyond its current borders." Such a political outlook is unmistakably imperial precisely because at its core lies the idea of the fluidity of Russia's borders. Most students of empire agree that empire as a polity is characterized by unstable, movable boundaries, a feature that derives from the imperial ideal of universalism. Alfred Rieber has argued that

[empires differ most strikingly from nation states in their way of imagining and fixing their boundaries. The contrast stems from diverse conceptions of universalism and power. Imperial ideologies are inspired by the ideal of universal domination but accept limitations imposed by their own cultural traditions and the constraints of power politics.]

Similarly, Toshiteru Matsuura has posited that empires are "another name for ceaseless struggles to expand their frontiers." Empires' territorial frontiers are

constantly obscure and never fixed, because they are the fluid spheres of conflict between two momentums that expand and push back. When an empire gains demarcated, visible fringes, it is even possible to say that this 'empire' is already dead.

In all its historical guises, Russia has been an empire for almost half a millennium. Quite naturally, the Russian Federation, "as the largest portion of the empire that collapsed less than a quarter century ago has inherited one of the most important features of imperial spatial arrangement: the uncertain and dynamic nature of borders." Due to imperial inertia, Russia seems more inclined to "define its borders from within, marking the limits of its sovereignty by its own action," instead of relying on mutual

recognition of boundaries based on international law.\(^{61}\) Notably, all prominent ideologues championing the Russian empire (russkie imperty) equate their imaginary Russkaia imperiia with expansion. Iegor Kholmogorov, a leading nationalist thinker who promotes an image of Russia as a "national empire," has recently written that "Russian psyche is immersed in geography," adding that "our Sacred History is the history of Russian spatial expansion."\(^{62}\) For numerous champions of Russia’s "imperial mission," the notion of Russianness has been forever blended with the notion of empire: there can be no genuine Russia without the Russian-led Eurasian empire.\(^{63}\)

To be sure, imperty are not the only ones whose anger has been aroused by the violation in Russia of Gellner’s main principle of nationalism. Russian ethnic nationalists are also concerned that the present-day Russian Federation’s political and cultural unit, "ethnie and nation," do not coincide.\(^{64}\) To repair this unfortunate situation, they suggest three ways in which Russian nationhood can be defined today. Depending on a particular ethnnonationalist school of thought, Russia is conceived as a community of ethnic Russians, or as a community of Eastern Slavic peoples, or as a community of Russian speakers.\(^{65}\) However, analyses of the Russian leadership’s nation building practices, as well as its neighborhood policy over the past twenty-five years, demonstrate that the Kremlin’s policies until very recently have been extremely ambiguous, vacillating at different times between statist/imperial and ethno-cultural options.\(^{66}\) The concep-
tual toolkit that official Moscow has deployed with considerable skill included elastic notions such as sootechestvenniki (compatriots), Russkii Mir, and various permutations of evraziistvo (Eurasianism). Vaguely defined and broadly interpreted, these notions helped Russia’s governing elites pursue policies of their choice, perpetuating the ambiguity of their approaches to nation building and extracting maximum benefit from this ambiguity. At their core, however, these operative notions have strong imperial connotations and are ultimately designed to redefine the established state borders. Moreover, as Andrey Makarychev has persuasively argued, the war in Ukraine has also shown that these doctrines are prone to radicalization and militarization. Geopolitical reasoning [Eurasianism] easily evolves from calculating Russian resources and advantages in the “near abroad” to militarily conquering parts of neighboring states, while biopolitics [the Russian World] shifts from protecting the linguistic rights of Russian speakers to enforcing a family-type of union with post-Soviet nations.67

The “pan-Russian” idea advocated by Putin which cast the Russians and the Ukrainians as one people effectively extends the notion of the Russkii Mir, including the space of contemporary Ukraine, and thus reducing Ukraine’s independence to an obsolete phenomenon. Ultimately, the concept of Russkii Mir and the “unity paradigm” cast serious doubts on Ukraine’s political subjectivity and sovereignty.

The roots of this outlook go deep into seventeenth-century Kyiv where the learned bookmen from the community of monks of the Kyivan Cave Monastery produced the first major historical work, Sinopsis (1674), which explicitly advanced the “unity paradigm.” It tells a story of the unified Orthodox Slavo-Russian people (pravoslavny slaveno-rossiiskii narod) and treats “Ukrainian” territories of the old Kyivan Rus (which later came to be known as Little Russia) within a larger pan-Russian context. These ideas were then developed by Russian imperial scholars in the course of the nineteenth century, particularly by the St. Petersburg historian Nikolai Ustrialov (1805–1870), into a Russian grand narrative that

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became an assertion of historical priority, a claim to privileged possession of territory and statehood, and a justification of a Great Russian ethnolinguistic definition of ‘Russianness’ and Russian identity.  

Piotr Struve deployed this grand narrative to prop up his arguments in the famous polemic with Ukrainian intellectuals on the pages of Ukrainian Life and Russian Thought journals in the early 1910s. Struve dreamed about Russia as a great power. A key precondition for attaining such status, he believed, was the existence and further development of the great pan-Russian culture within a unified Russian state which he held was in the process of becoming a “national empire.” Because Struve defined Russian unity in cultural rather than ethnic terms, the emergence of the Ukrainian movement upholding a distinct Ukrainian cultural and political identity was an intolerable notion for him. He rejected the Ukrainians’ right to self-determination as well as their cultural distinctiveness.  

By 1917, the Russian grand narrative championing the “one and indivisible Russian state” and a “single, indissoluble Russian nation” became so pervasive that the upsurge of Ukrainian nationalism triggered by the First World War and revolutionary upheavals caught the Russian educated public off guard. Their lack of awareness is probably best epitomized by General Anton Denikin wondering, “Where did all those Ukrainians come from?” (Otkuda zhe pojavilos stolko ukrainsev?) Truth be told though, the Russian public should blame itself for being so unprepared for the emergence of a strong Ukrainian movement, argued Bogdan Kistiakovskii, one of Struve’s main intellectual opponents in the earlier Russo-Ukrainian debates. Having blind faith in the “pan-Russian idea” with its main contention that Little Russians (malorosy) are part of a larger “Russian tribe,” “educated Russians had no interest in those petty Ukrainians,”

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wrote Kistiakovskii in 1917. “They regarded their [Ukrainians] existence as a little matter pertaining to provincial life.”

Not all Russians, though, thought along those lines. As noted above, the Bolsheviks, seeking to reestablish control over the rebellious borderland, unequivocally discarded the concept of the larger Russian nation and recognized Ukrainian identity as the principal one on the territory of the Ukrainian republic that they established as part of the Soviet socialist “federation.” The Soviets replaced the “pan-Russian” idea with the “friendship of peoples” concept. Yet, the old “unity paradigm” and the Russian grand narrative that was built on it did not vanish into thin air. They shaped a number of deep-seated perceptions that survived throughout the Soviet period and into the post-Soviet era. These perceptions powerfully affect the political imagination of significant segments of Russia’s population and political elites and can be summed up as follows:

*an almost mystical attachment to the territory “from where Rus had originated,” which is seen as the cradle of “Russian” history, statehood, religion, and “national spirit.”

**a strong sense of Ukraine’s central role in Russia’s historical destiny. It is broadly held that incorporating a substantial portion of Ukraine into Muscovy in the seventeenth century laid the foundation for the powerful Russian Empire, and the “loss” of Ukraine would likewise lead to the demise of “historic Russia.” The upshot of such a development, many Russians believe, would be an “incomplete Russia.”

***a belief that most of the Russians and Russian-speakers who reside in Ukraine have a strong desire to reunite with their “historic homeland.”

****a sense that Ukraine’s independence weakens Russia strategically as it allows other centers of power (such as the European Union and/or the United States) to broaden their sphere of influence in the region


that Russia considers vitally important for its own security and for its status as a great (European) power.

V.

To justify the Russian Empire’s participation in the partitions of the Polish Commonwealth, Catherine the Great famously stated: “We took only what was rightfully ours.” The empress’s remark appears to have neatly encapsulated Russian strategic thinking in which the issues of geopolitics and of identity are tightly intertwined. The three successive eighteenth-century land grabs that greatly expanded Russia’s borders westwards at the expense of “historic Poland” brought under St. Petersburg’s rule largely “Ukrainian” lands which, it was claimed, were previously ruled by the Ruthenian princes whose lawful successors were the tsars of the Romanov dynasty. Another important storyline interpreting Catherine’s involvement in “Polish affairs,” however, was that the lands absorbed by the Russian Empire were populated mostly by eastern Slavs, all of whom were viewed, according to the mainstream perception of the age, as “ours,” that is the “Russians.” This territorial expansion, adding the Right Bank Ukraine to the Left Bank lands that were included in the Tsardom of Muscovy in the middle of the seventeenth century, was instrumental in shaping two crucial facets of Russian self-understanding. First, it was these new imperial possessions that firmly anchored Russia in “Europe” as one of the continent’s great powers. Second, by turning millions of “our” eastern Slavs into new imperial subjects, Russia’s governing elites came to view the “Ukrainian question” as a key aspect of forging a “pan-Russian” nation. From the Russian rulers’ standpoint, in the “historical borderlands” between Europe and Russia, the latter’s “sphere of identity” was a handy geopolitical instrument that would be repeatedly used to expand Russia’s sphere of influence.

Roughly the same vision seems to be widespread both among politicians and broader publics in the present-day Russian Federation. As noted above, Moscow political elites see Russia’s sphere of identity extending far beyond the Russian Federation’s borders, with Ukraine playing a central role within it—by virtue of perceived historical, cultural, and affective ties. All the key aspects of Russian “neighborhood policy”—Russkii Mir, sootechestvennik, and efforts to preserve a unified mnemonic community based on shared historical memories—were designed to portray
Ukraine, albeit formally an independent state, as an inalienable part of the imagined "historic Russia," and thus to keep it within the Russian Federation’s sphere of influence.

Unlike in the eighteenth century, however, today the East European “borderlands” constitute a neighborhood shared by Russia and the European Union. The latter also has a “sphere of identity” but its modus operandi is diametrically opposite to that of Russia. Being a norms- and values-based entity, the EU cultivates identity that essentially is not territory-bound. “To the extent that European identity is connected to the European space, identity is as flexible as the interpretation of what Europe means geographically in a given moment.”

This incompatibility of principles makes the EU-Russia accommodation in the sense of the delimitation of their respective “spheres” extremely difficult if not altogether impossible. Whereas Russia’s sphere of identity is limited to the “Russian World” (although broadly understood), for the EU, figuratively speaking, the sky is a limit as, technically, it can expand as far as where its norms and values are accepted and interiorized. Quite naturally, Ukraine became a battle-field where Russia’s and the EU’s principles clashed. So long as Moscow managed to keep Kyiv within its orbit and Brussels at bay by manipulating identity as a soft power tool, it largely remained a status quo power. When the Kremlin leadership sensed that Ukraine was about to “defect” to the West (as the “European values” upheld by Euromaidan protesters seemed to have triumphed over the Moscow-sponsored ideal of “Slavic unity”), Russia turned revisionist. Russia seized Crimea and claimed that it took what was rightfully hers, and in Ukraine’s East the “pan-Russian” idea was deployed with a vengeance. But we would be well advised to follow Thucydides’s insight and see this as proschemata—Russia’s narrative aimed to justify its aggression. Lying deeper are the true reasons behind Russia’s conduct—ones that reveal its nature as a “subaltern empire.” Unable to advance a viable alternative to the Western social model, Russia’s leaders resent Western hegemony, crave equal status within the “concert” of great powers, and seek to perpetuate their political regime.

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Meanwhile, Ukraine remains a “mere” subaltern, to which a crueler Thucydides maxim applies: “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.”

Bibliography


UKRAINE AND RUSSIA


