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The History of a “Non-historical” Nation: Notes on the Nature and Current Problems of Ukrainian Historiography

Serhii M. Plokyh replies:

Mark von Hagen’s essay “Does Ukraine Have a History?” initiates a new discussion about Ukrainian history on the pages of the *Slavic Review*. A previous discussion was printed in *Slavic Review* in 1963, in which Omeljan Pritsak, John S. Reshetar, Jr. and Ivan L. Rudnytsky participated. All of them, according to von Hagen’s definition, were “professional ethnics,” and the discussion concerned the implications of Ukraine’s position between east and west and the problem of continuity in Ukrainian history.¹

Much has changed since then. Probably the most important change is the emergence of a Ukrainian state and the consequent disappearance of the article “the” in reference to Ukraine (this change becomes obvious when one compares the title of von Hagen’s essay with those of Pritsak, Reshetar and Rudnytsky). Another sign of change is evidenced by the fact that the new discussion of Ukrainian history has been initiated not by an “ethnic” but by a non-Ukrainian historian—a clear indication that Ukrainian studies are emerging from the “ethnic” ghetto. One more sign of change is the participation of scholars from Ukraine in the discussion.

So much for the good news about Ukrainian history. The title of Mark von Hagen’s essay (if not the essay itself) forthrightly challenges the very fact of the existence of a Ukrainian history. This is a clear setback from the previous discussion on the pages of *Slavic Review* as well as an ironic turn of events. While “professional ethnics,” long disappointed by the unattractiveness of their field to “non-ethnics,” finally achieved what they wanted, the long-awaited “Varangians” questioned the very existence of the field almost immediately upon their “arrival.” Mark von Hagen begins his essay with the statement that Ukraine certainly has a past but he questions whether it has a history, which he understands as “a written record . . . that commands some widespread acceptance and authority in the international scholarly and political communities”—an outrageously western approach to the problem.

History as National Myth

Ukraine belongs to the so-called non-historical nations of eastern Europe, whose nationalism and nation-states (much more than those

1. See Ivan L. Rudnytsky, “The Role of the Ukraine in Modern History,” *Slavic Review* 22 (1963): 199-216; Omeljan Pritsak and John S. Reshetar, Jr., “The Ukraine and the Dialectics of Nation-Building,” *Slavic Review* 22 (1963): 224-55.

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of the west European countries) can be viewed as direct products of a highly elaborated historical myth. Hans Kohn, the founding father of the contemporary study of nationalism, wrote in this connection that

Nationalism in the West arose in an effort to build a nation in the political reality and the struggles of the present without too much sentimental regard for the past; nationalists in Central and Eastern Europe created often, out of the myths of the past and the dreams of the future, an ideal fatherland, closely linked with the past, devoid of any immediate connection with the present, and expected to become sometime a political reality.²

One may consider it an irony of history that historians, more than representatives of any other profession, were the “founding fathers” of the “non-historical” nations of eastern Europe. Some of them headed national revolutions in the region and even became leaders of the newly established states. As for the role that history and historians played in the formation of east European nations, Ukraine was no exception; in that respect, one may even pose the question: what does Ukraine have except a history?

Mykhailo Hrushevsky, a renowned Ukrainian historian and the author of the Ukrainian historical myth, was elected the first head of an independent Ukrainian state in 1918. His ten-volume *History of Ukraine-Rus'* was published between 1898 and 1936, and his main achievement as a historian was that he managed to fill the numerous gaps in the Ukrainian past, transforming Ukraine from a young, emerging nation without a history of its own into a historical nation. Hrushevsky claimed the Kievan heritage for Ukraine alone and connected the Kievan period of Ukrainian history to the Cossack period: he presented the Halych-Volhynian Principality, not that of Vladimir-Suzdal (as generally accepted in Russian historiography), as the sole legitimate heir of Kievan Rus'. Although Hrushevsky's effort was considered revolutionary by his contemporaries, his thesis was not absolutely new. He merely followed the Halych-Volhynian chronicles, as opposed to the Muscovite chronicles that Russian historians followed.

During Hrushevsky's tenure as head of the Ukrainian government, the trident, an emblem of the Kievan princes, was adopted as the emblem of the newly emerged state. Now it serves as the official symbol of independent Ukraine. The anthem that was adopted by the Ukrainian state under Hrushevsky and now serves as the national anthem of Ukraine also contains direct references to Ukrainian history, particularly of the Cossack era. Its title, “Ukraine Is Not Yet Dead,” echoes the title of the Polish national anthem, “Poland Is Not Yet Dead.” Apart from evident Polish influences, the title of the Ukrainian anthem reflects the belief of Ukrainians in their own “historical” past. That past

2. Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism: A Study of Its Origins and Background* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), 330.

is reflected in numerous Ukrainian songs, poems and prayers. "Bring back the freedom, bring back the glory to our Ukraine," goes one of the prayers that can be heard today in Ukrainian churches all over the world.

This historical mythology, which could not exist without a highly developed historical consciousness and at least a partially developed historiography, contributed immensely to the emergence of an independent Ukraine in 1991. The victory of the pro-independence forces in the December 1991 Ukrainian referendum, which put an end to the existence of the Soviet Union, came about as a result of the victory of two principal myths. The first was historical: that of Ukraine as an old nation with a glorious past that was deprived of its statehood by tsars and commissars. The second myth was that of the economic greatness of Ukraine as the "breadbasket of Europe" and as an industrial colossus. It is quite interesting (and in many ways characteristic of contemporary Ukrainian nationalism) that none of the components of the historical myth contributing to the outcome of the 1991 independence referendum was anti-Russian (or anti-Jewish, anti-Polish, etc.). The highly developed Cossack mythology that was successfully revived in the pre-independence years had all the characteristics of an inclusive myth that allowed not only Ukrainians but also millions of Russians, many of whom have mixed ancestry, to associate themselves with the mythologized Cossack past.

The numerous writings on the man-made famine of 1933 in eastern Ukraine, along with commemorations of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster of 1986, have portrayed Ukraine as the principal victim of the communist system. Sporadic attempts to present that system and its crimes against Ukraine as the product of a Russian or Jewish anti-Ukrainian plot were effectively overshadowed by the inclusiveness of historical myths of both the famine and Chernobyl, in which all citizens of Ukraine, whatever their national, social or political affiliation, were viewed as innocent victims of the Soviet system.

Once independence was achieved, the integrity and inclusive character of Ukrainian historical mythology was severely challenged. The pre-independence Cossack and famine mythologies exhausted themselves in the face of the crumbling of the economic-greatness myth and deteriorating standards of living. Nationalistic, exclusive myths like that of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, which fought both nazis and Soviets during World War II, though vigorously accepted in western Ukraine, were violently rejected in the east. During his last months in power, the first president of Ukraine, Leonid Kravchuk, and later his successor, Leonid Kuchma, tried to reintroduce a modified version of the World War II myth into the all-Ukrainian historical consciousness and launched a campaign to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Ukraine's liberation from nazi occupation. But these initiatives were openly rejected in western Ukraine, owing to the simple fact that liberation from the nazis meant re-occupation by the Soviets.

Reintegrating the Past

Mark von Hagen is certainly correct when he writes that Ukraine needs a new history—and, I would add, a new historical myth. Throughout the nineteenth century, the period of the formation and growth of Ukrainian nationalism, Ukrainian lands were divided between two major European powers, the Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires. Ideas of a nationalist movement were mainly formulated in Russian (eastern) Ukraine and later adopted with only minor modifications by Galicians and Bukovynians in Austro-Hungary. It was another of Mykhailo Hrushevsky's major tasks to write the history of Ukraine in such a way as to offer a sense of common heritage to Ukrainian subjects of two empires who for centuries had been separated one from another culturally, politically and economically. He was a populist and accomplished that task by choosing as his subject of study the people and their ethnic territory instead of the state, and by stressing on every possible occasion elements of unity between the different parts of Ukraine. This approach to Ukrainian history is currently shared by historians both in Ukraine and in the diaspora.

Where Hrushevsky's concept does not seem to be working today is in regard to Ukrainian identity. By 1991 when Ukraine became independent, the territory that Hrushevsky had discussed was settled by millions of non-Ukrainians as well as Ukrainians. Moreover, urbanization, combined with powerful successive waves of Russian colonization, had brought about the linguistic and cultural Russification of millions of Ukrainians in central, southern and eastern Ukraine. There remains little doubt that contemporary Ukraine, which to a great extent is the product of one historical myth, now needs a new myth to make its way forward. The scheme of Ukrainian history that seems to be finding more and more acceptance in Ukraine is one that accepts the basics of the Hrushevsky approach to pre-Soviet Ukrainian history and then shifts to the study of the history of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic ("the second Soviet republic," as Yaroslav Bilinsky called it). The Ukrainian SSR is viewed both historically and legally as the predecessor of the independent Ukrainian state. Within its post-World War II boundaries it united the majority of the Ukrainian lands as they were defined by Hrushevsky with some non-Ukrainian territories in the south and west.

The problem for historians is how to deal with the Ukrainian revolution (1917-1920) and World War II when Ukraine was sharply divided, with pro-Russian communists fighting pro-independence Ukrainian patriots. Now, with the re-emergence of independent Ukraine, national patriots have apparently won, but the majority of the population who voted for independence clearly associate themselves not with the nationalist movement or the independent Ukrainian governments of 1917-1920, but with the heritage of Soviet Ukraine. To integrate these two histories, stories told by opposing sides, into

one "written record" appears to be a difficult but probably not an impossible task.

History and Historians in Ukraine

The historical profession in contemporary Ukraine is going through a difficult period. On the positive side of ongoing change one can list the end of Soviet-imposed restrictions on the use of the works of Ukrainian prerevolutionary, western Ukrainian and émigré historians, open access to archival materials and the fact that state support for national historiography, so desperately needed in the past, has finally been granted. The end of communism also means the end of the iron curtain and the appearance of new opportunities to become acquainted with western colleagues and western methodological approaches. These are positive changes but their effort has been diminished by negative factors influencing the state of historical scholarship in contemporary Ukraine. One of these factors, pointed out by von Hagen, is the impact of the recent past, including the dogmatism, provincialism and methodological backwardness of Soviet Ukrainian historiography. One should also note the severe economic crisis that is driving the younger generation of historians, especially those with a knowledge of foreign languages, out of the field. Since the average salary of a history professor is \$60 US per month, even a trip to the libraries of Kiev or Lviv (not to speak of those of Moscow, Warsaw or St. Petersburg) is a major financial problem. To the continuing lack of access to western books has been added lack of access to scholarly publications of Russia and other former Soviet republics, owing to the complete collapse of the book-trade network. That network has collapsed in Ukraine as well. In order to have a book published in Lviv, one must go to Lviv; to have one published in Dnipropetrovsk, one must go to Dnipropetrovsk, etc.

Another piece of bad news for Ukrainian historians is the ongoing decline of the social status of their profession. For generations, historians were viewed in Ukraine as important social and political figures, no matter what side they took, communist or nationalist. For the nationalistically oriented intelligentsia, historians were considered bearers of genuine national values and possessors of the truth about the history of a nation that had been deprived of its political state and natural rights. With the establishment of an independent Ukraine and the emergence of opportunities for any citizen to demonstrate his patriotism if he felt so inclined, the previous political significance and social status of historians were drastically reduced.

Major changes in the status of the profession have been caused by the collapse of the Soviet system and the subsequent movement toward a democratic society and market-oriented economy. The huge complement of historians of the Soviet Communist Party has become in many ways the principal victim of that change. It would probably not be far

wrong to consider the former Soviet Union a semi-secular society in which the role of priests was filled by historians, especially historians of the CPSU. They served as interpreters of “ever living” marxist-leninist teachings and were charged with the task of legitimizing the otherwise illegitimate rule of the CPSU. Historical education was considered political in the USSR; the historian was expected to be a member of the Communist Party and, if a schoolteacher, he or she was a prime candidate for the post of school principal. When that ideological society crumbled and the bankrupt state found itself without money to support schools and universities, the prestige of the profession drastically decreased. If in the 1970s and 1980s there were five to seven people competing in the entrance exams for every position, by the 1990s the number had decreased to two or three per position. The low salaries of schoolteachers and university professors have made the profession more and more one for women, while men compete for better paying jobs.

Those problems of the historical profession in many ways resemble the general problems of science and scholarship in Ukraine and the rest of the former Soviet Union. Sooner or later the historical profession will find its place in new societies’ “Tables of Ranks,” but this will take time and a great deal of pain, and eventually will have a profound impact on historians and the kind of history they write.

Ukrainian History in North America

Although the general situation of the Ukrainian historical profession in the west, especially in North America, is different from that in Ukraine, the fall of Soviet communism has deeply affected it as well. With the collapse of the USSR and the disappearance of the immediate Soviet military threat, the whole field of Soviet studies, of which Ukrainian history was a part, has disintegrated.

In his essay Mark von Hagen writes about the two competing imperial views on the history of eastern Europe, the German and the Russian. Although that approach is probably correct for eastern Europe as a whole, in the case of Ukraine it was Russian and Polish historiography that dominated the scene. And in North America only Russian historiography had the opportunity to present its view of the Ukrainian past. The views of Russian émigré historians were shared for decades by the American scholarly community and it took the entire lifetime of a generation of Ukrainian “professional ethnic” scholars, as well as the emergence of an independent Ukrainian state, to challenge those beliefs.

Ironically, the rise of an independent Ukraine also brought a major negative change in the status of “ethnic” Ukrainian historians in their diaspora communities in the US and Canada. If before independence they enjoyed the high prestige and full support of the communities that funded Ukrainian studies chairs in North American universities, including the most prestigious ones, after the achievement of inde-

pendence historians found themselves effectively overshadowed by other diaspora professionals. With the rise of new political and economic opportunities in Ukraine, it was not the historian Omeljan Pritsak, the founder of Ukrainian studies at Harvard, but the economist Bohdan Hawrylyshyn, a friend of George Soros and advisor to the Ukrainian government, who came to be considered a hero of the diaspora community. This list of negative changes in the status of "ethnic" historians within their community could be extended. There is little doubt that the emergence of an independent Ukraine has attracted the attention of the western political and scholarly community more than ever before to the field of Ukrainian studies but the status that this specialty enjoyed as part of the huge government-supported Sovietology establishment is probably gone forever. During the USSR's last years of existence the Ukrainian question was considered vital for the life or death of the Soviet empire. In the mid-1980s Alexander Motyl of Columbia University wrote an entire book, *Will the Non-Russians Rebel?*, exclusively on Ukrainian material. His major assumption was that the USSR would survive if the Ukrainians did not rebel. In retrospect, this assumption appears to have been justified: the USSR did not survive the 1991 Ukrainian referendum but the collapse of the USSR meant the end of Sovietology as a discipline and of the special place of Ukrainian studies in that field.

In a few years, when Ukraine rids itself of the third-largest nuclear arsenal in the world, it will become one of a number of east European countries located between Russia and Germany. Mark von Hagen tends to explain the absence of separate fields of study devoted to the "non-historical" nations of eastern Europe by the fact that, at the beginning of the nineteenth century—the formative years of European historiography—those nations did not exist on the political map of Europe. One can counter this suggestion with the argument that Sweden, along with other countries of northern Europe, existed on the map at that time but Swedish history has not become established as a discipline in North American universities. What counts in this respect, apart from historiographic tradition, is the economic and political importance of a given nation for the rest of the world. Just as the history of Finland is studied as part of northern European history, so the history of Ukraine will probably occupy a similar place among the histories of the east European lands.

Although chairs of east European history do exist in major North American universities, in most of them there is a growing tendency to replace the history of the former Soviet bloc with the history of Russia and eastern Europe. In such cases, a place should be reserved for the history of Ukraine. Given growing isolationist tendencies in the US, a diminution of America's role as a superpower and the disappearance of the Soviet threat, it is doubtful that any new chairs of Ukrainian history will be established in the US, except those endowed by Ukrainians. It is much more probable that such chairs will be established in Germany or Austria.

Mark von Hagen concludes his essay with the remark that “Ukrainian history can serve as a wonderful vehicle to challenge the national state’s conceptual hegemony and to explore some of the most contested issues of identity formation. . . .” I tend to agree with this statement, with only one caveat. Ukrainian history *will* be such a “wonderful vehicle” if the experiment that is now going on within the boundaries of Ukraine—the creation of a non-ethnic state surrounded by “normal,” ethnically based nation-states of eastern Europe—*actually* succeeds.