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978-0-521-86403-9 - The Origins of the Slavic Nations: Premodern Identities in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus

Serhii Plokhy

Excerpt

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Introduction

The disintegration of the USSR in 1991 and the emergence of fifteen independent nation-states on its ruins demonstrated to the outside world that the Soviet Union was not Russia, despite the best efforts of the Western media to convince its readers to the contrary by using the two terms interchangeably for decades. Political developments in the post-Soviet space indicated that the definition of the USSR as Russia was wrong not only in relation to the non-Slavic republics of the former Soviet Union but also with regard to the Ukrainians and Belarusians, the East Slavic cousins of the Russians. Each of the three newly independent states manifested its own character and chose its own path in the turbulent transition from communism. After a lengthy period of political uncertainty and economic chaos, Russia opted for the construction of a strong state with clear authoritarian tendencies and assumed the role of a regional superpower. Belarus, after a brief period of democratic development, refused to reform its political and economic system and took refuge in Soviet-style ideology and Stalin-era authoritarianism. Ukraine, on the other hand, after long hesitation between East and West, underwent a popular revolution in defense of democratic principles and embarked on a pro-Western course with the goal of joining the European Union. For all the salient differences between these three post-Soviet nations, they have much in common when it comes to their culture and history, which goes back to Kyivan (Kievan) Rus', the medieval East Slavic state based in the capital of present-day Ukraine.

Soviet historians often portrayed Kyivan Rus' as the common cradle of the three East Slavic nations. According to that logic, not unlike the builders of the Tower of Babel, the Eastern Slavs originally constituted one Old Rus' nationality or ethnicity that spoke a common language. It was only the Mongol invasion that divided the people of Rus' and set them on separate paths of development, which eventually led to the formation of three modern nations. The competing view, advanced by imperial Russian historians and shared by some authors in present-day Russia, claims Kyivan Rus' history for one indivisible Russian nation, of which

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Ukrainians and Belarusians are considered mere subgroups, distinguished not by separate cultures and languages but by variants of Russian culture and dialects of the Russian language. Ukrainian national historiography, on the contrary, treats Kyivan Rus' as an essentially Ukrainian state and claims that the differences between Russians and Ukrainians were apparent and quite profound even then. That viewpoint finds some support among Belarusian historians, who seek the roots of their nation in the history of the Polatsk principality of Kyivan times. Who is right and who is wrong? What are the origins of the three modern East Slavic nations? These are the questions that informed my research and discussion of the origins of modern Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus.¹

There is little doubt in my mind that the Kyivan-era project involving the construction of a single identity had a profound impact on the subsequent identities of all the ethnic groups that constituted the Kyivan state. That project defined the parameters of the Rus' legacy, which still forms the basis of the cultural commonalities between the three East Slavic nations. I regard the post-Kyivan Eastern Slavs as a group of distinct communities that possessed and developed their own identities. The number of my premodern East Slavic communities that emerged on the ruins of the Kyivan state is smaller than seventy-two – the number of peoples into which God divided humankind by assigning different languages to the audacious constructors of the Tower of Babel. But it is certainly greater than the number of nationalities or ethnicities suggested either by the proponents of one Old Rus' (alternatively, Russian) nationality or by those who claim that there were three separate East Slavic nations from the very beginning. The approach that I have taken in studying the historical roots of the modern Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians is based on the identification and reconstruction of lost structures of group identity among the Eastern Slavs. I am particularly interested in those types of identity that can be interpreted as more or less distant precursors of modern national identity. My point of departure is the assumption that there can be no ethnicity or nation without a distinct identity, and finding the roots of that identity is in many ways tantamount to uncovering the roots of the nation itself.

This book covers the period from the tenth-century Christianization of Kyivan Rus' to the mid-eighteenth century, when the idea of nationalism

¹ On the competing interpretations of Kyivan Rus' history in modern Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian historiography, see Andrew Wilson, *The Ukrainians: Unexpected Nation* (New Haven and London, 2000), pp. 1–11; Taras Kuzio, "Historiography and National Identity among the Eastern Slavs: Towards a New Framework," *National Identities* 3, no. 2 (2001): 109–32. A detailed discussion of these interpretations appears in the historiographic sections of each of the eight chapters of this book.

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had begun to influence the thinking of East Slavic elites. As noted in the preface, the idea of writing this book came out of my dissatisfaction with the treatment of the premodern history of the Eastern Slavs in current historical literature. University textbooks and popular literature on the subject are still dominated by concepts formed at the turn of the twentieth century and rooted in “primordialist” efforts to read the modern nation back into the past. My book challenges attempts to “nationalize” the East Slavic past on behalf of existing modern nations by focusing on the development of premodern identities.

History as a scholarly discipline took shape in the era of nationalism. That factor alone burdened all the major narratives of the era with the task of nationalizing the pre-1800 past and thereby legitimizing the rise and continuing existence of modern nations and nation-states. This approach met with serious criticism in the second half of the twentieth century, primarily on the part of “modernists” – historians and social scientists who argued that there were no nations prior to the modern era.² In the ongoing debate between modernists and “primordialists” I take the side of the former, subscribing at the same time to the critique of the “modernists” by the “revisionists,” who seek the origins of nationhood in premodern times or point out the ethnic origins of modern nations. Following in the footsteps of John A. Armstrong, Anthony D. Smith, Adrian Hastings, and other “revisionists,” I claim that the origins of modern nations are to be found in premodern national communities, or ethnicities, which I often call “nationalities” (in the tradition of East Slavic historiography) and to which Smith refers as *ethnies*.³ I adopt Adrian Hastings’s definition of ethnicity as a “group of people with a shared cultural identity and spoken language.” I also subscribe to his broad definition of the nation as “a far more self-conscious community” that, being “[f]ormed from one or more ethnicities, and normally identified by a literature of its own . . . possesses or claims the right to political identity and autonomy as a people, together with the control of specific territory . . . in a world thought of as one of nation states.”⁴

² Among the most influential “modernist” works of the last few decades are Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford, 1983); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1983); and Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (Cambridge, 1990).

³ See Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford, 1986). For other attempts to extend the life of nations to premodern times, see John A. Armstrong, *Nations before Nationalism* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1982) and Anthony W. Marx, *Faith in Nation: Exclusionary Origins of Nationalism* (New York, 2003).

⁴ Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 1–4.

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Although premodern ethnicities were of course different from nations of the modern era, I argue that the identities associated with both types of community were products of very similar identity-building projects. In that sense I agree with Anthony D. Smith's assertion that constituent elements of premodern "identities and cultures – the myths, memories, symbols, and values – can often be adapted to new circumstances by being accorded new meanings and new functions" within the framework of nation-building projects.⁵ The essentials of premodern ethnicity, which, according to Smith, include a collective name, a common myth of origins, a shared history, a distinctive culture, association with a particular territory, and a sense of solidarity, are very similar to the constituent elements of nations,⁶ and so, I would argue, are the two types of identity. Not only does national identity develop out of the constituent elements of ethnic identity, but the latter is often defined by loyalty to common culture and mythology, as well as to common political institutions, which some students of the subject reserve for modern national identity alone. It was the realization of this close connection between ethnic (proto-national) and national types of identity that led me to study them in tandem. That connection also prompted me to use the term "ethnonational" as the basic category of my analysis, since it is applicable to premodern and modern identity-building projects alike.

In my research on the history of Eastern Slavic identities, I have drawn on methods developed both by "modernists" and by "revisionists." The idea that the national narratives whereby modern societies define themselves are products of the "nationalization" of the past by historians of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries comes directly from the modernist arsenal. I also accept the definition of nations as "imagined communities" proposed by the "modernist" Benedict Anderson and subscribe to his maxim that national identities are formulated and sustained in cultural texts. Unlike the "modernists," however, I extend this approach to the study of premodern communities, stressing the medieval and early modern origins of nations and national ideologies. In that sense, this book is a contribution to the growing "revisionist" literature that posits the existence of nations before nationalism. It renationalizes the past by stressing the importance of the ethnonational factor in premodern history. At the same time, it declines to read modern nationalism back into the past and rejects "primordialist" assumptions about the millennial history of present-day nations. Instead, I delve into the construction of medieval and early modern identities and track changes in their structures and meanings. In the process, I attempt to show how the

⁵ Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, p. 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 22–31.

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imagined communities of the premodern era differed from their modern-day successors.

My approach to “identity,” a concept central to the book, is “soft” in the sense defined by Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper. It is influenced by poststructuralist and postmodernist thought and generally conforms to the definition of the term adopted in recent studies on ethnicity and nationalism. Thus I understand identity as a phenomenon that manifests itself in collective and individual consciousness and action. I also regard it as a “situationalist” phenomenon, a constantly changing construct produced by the interaction of a number of discourses. Crucial to my approach, as noted above, is the assumption that every ethnic or national community must have a concept of common identity to qualify for the status of either ethnicity or nation.⁷

The terms “ethnicity” and “nationality,” like most terms used in present-day social analysis, are inventions of modern times. In studying the Eastern Slavs, nineteenth-century linguists and ethnologists identified three major ethnic groups or, in their terminology, nationalities: Great Russian, Little Russian (Ukrainian), and Belarusian. But they also admitted major linguistic and cultural differences within those nationalities, and often the lack of clearly defined borders between them. The conclusion that emerges from an examination of the linguistic and ethnographic material is quite simple. The ethnic classifications themselves were the result of outside interference – in other words, they were constructed – while the borders of those ethnicities were created by stressing the differences between nationalities and downplaying the fault lines within them. My research suggests that the division of communities into ethnicities and nations is not always a very helpful analytical tool. On the level of identity-building projects and collective identities, the line between the two is blurred, and the division of human history into ethnic and national phases simplifies and distorts that history more than it promotes understanding.

Consequently, as explained above, I often fuse the two categories by applying the term “ethnonational” in the text of this book. I have also adopted the practice of categorizing nations as modern and premodern, introducing “premodern nation” along with “ethnicity” as one of the main terms of my analysis. I use this term to denote premodern communities that acquired many but not all of the characteristics of the modern nation. At various times, nations have been defined in terms of culture, language, religion, territory, and polity, to list the most obvious factors.⁸

⁷ See Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, “Beyond ‘Identity,’” *Theory and Society* 29 (2000): 1–47, here 1–8.

⁸ On the changing meanings of “nation,” see Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), pp. 4–9.

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Thus, while drawing a distinction between premodern communities and modern nations, I do not shy away from the term “nation,” which occurs in some of my early modern sources, in discussing the premodern history of the Eastern Slavs. I employ “nation” quite consistently when discussing developments after the turn of the seventeenth century, as I consider the Ruthenian and Muscovite communities of the time to be the first East Slavic groups that possessed the characteristics of a premodern nation. They constituted a type of community that did not offer membership in its ranks to the whole population of its territory, limiting it to members of the elite, but managed to formulate its identity outside (or concurrently with) the concept of loyalty to the ruler or dynasty.

Dealing with premodern East Slavic identities means following the development of a number of Rus’ identities. In spite of their profound differences, the creators and bearers of all these identities connected them with the name of Rus’, which denotes both the land and the people. For the sake of clarity, I use different names for these various types of Rus’-based identities. While I refer to most of the medieval East Slavic identities as Rus’ or Rus’ian, I follow established English-language practice in switching from “Rus’” to “Ruthenia” when discussing Ukraine and Belarus after the incorporation of the Rus’ lands into the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the second half of the fourteenth century. I switch from “Rus’” to “Muscovy” to denote the territories of Northeastern and Northwestern Rus’ that were annexed to the Grand Duchy of Moscow in the second half of the fifteenth century. I speak of Ukrainian (Little Russian) identity starting with the second half of the seventeenth century, and I refer to (Great) Russian and Russian imperial identities from the beginning of the eighteenth century.

The political and ecclesiastical elites whose members were largely responsible for the identity-building projects discussed in this book left a significant number of texts that shed light on the development of ethnonational identity. The effect of those elite projects can be measured by their impact on communal identities, and it is here that problems begin to multiply. In many cases, no full investigation of that impact can be undertaken for lack of sources. Although I have tried to pay as much attention as possible to manifestations of ethnonational identity among rank-and-file members of East Slavic communities, the book often focuses on elites and their efforts to construct and implement ethnonational projects. Thus I am entirely in accord with the approach adopted recently by Simon Franklin and Emma Widdis in their interpretation of Russian identities as texts written by “producers of culture.” They write:

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It is these culturally inscribed Russias that are our focus here. It would of course be nice to know what proportion of the wider population might have heard of or associated themselves with which aspects of which type of identity at which time. By and large, however, we try to steer clear of the trap of taking the populace for granted when attributing an identity to it, and such speculations are beyond our scope.⁹

When it comes to “identity texts” produced by elites, it is worth noting that political and religious institutions, with which those elites were closely associated, generally tend to sustain identities that justify their existence and present their view of the world. There is also a tension between central and local institutions. Thus it is hardly surprising that in the fifteenth century chroniclers sponsored by the Muscovite metropolitans promoted the unity of the Rus’ lands under Moscow, while chroniclers working under the auspices of the Lithuanian princes emphasized the unity of the Lithuanian land and Lithuanian Rus’. It would certainly be wrong to treat ethnonational identities in isolation from political, religious, and other types of loyalties constructed and sustained by early modern societies. This book focuses mainly on ethnic and national identities, but other types of identity, such as religious, political, and social, are discussed as well, usually in connection with the formation of the former. The study of their interaction suggests that up to the late eighteenth century ethnonational identities were secondary to other types of identity and loyalty, such as those based on family, clan, social group, region, dynasty, and religion. This does not mean, however, that ethnonational identity did not exist before that period or did not contribute significantly to the formation of collective and individual self-consciousness in premodern societies.

Given the focus of this book on builders and producers of identity, the main analytical category that I employ in my research is the identity-building project. In my discussion of East Slavic identities, I show how they were constructed by means of diverse efforts that created reservoirs of collective memory, images, and symbols. The first such undertaking examined in the book is the Rus’ project of the Kyivan period, which served as the basis for most of the later competing projects developed by the East Slavic elites. These included the Muscovite project, matched on the opposite side of the Mongol boundary by the Ruthenian project of the Ukrainian and Belarusian elites. In eastern Europe, the second half of the seventeenth century saw the beginnings of the first modern national project, that of Russian imperial identity, with blurred

⁹ Simon Franklin and Emma Widdis, “All the Russias . . .?” in *National Identity in Russian Culture: An Introduction*, ed. edem (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 1–8, here 3.

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boundaries between its imperial and national components. I argue that it was fully formed in the first decades of the century, during the era of the Petrine reforms. The construction of Ukrainian Cossack identity, which laid the foundations for the Ukrainian national project of the modern era, was completed at about the same time. The Ruthenian identity that developed in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania prepared the ground for the nineteenth-century Belarusian national project. By the end of the eighteenth century, literary works written in languages very close to modern Russian and Ukrainian had emerged from the cocoon of bookish Church Slavonic.

The questions posed in this book are largely informed by historiographic tradition. Every chapter begins with a discussion of different viewpoints concerning a given problem, while in the conclusions I return to the historiographic problems posed at the beginning. Since the book is addressed to an English-speaking Western audience, the historiographic sections pay special attention to the presentation and critique of approaches developed by Russian and Soviet historians, which still frame Western interpretations of the subject to a significant degree. Although I often discuss in great detail the pluses and minuses of each historiographic approach, my purpose is not to pick winners and losers in historiographic debate but to go beyond the national paradigms that have largely shaped historical discussions over the last two centuries in order to present a fresh view of the subject. The only way to assess the validity of historiographic tradition is to check its main assumptions and conclusions against the evidence of the sources, which take center stage in my investigation. The reader should therefore be prepared to encounter many excerpts from a great diversity of historical sources. Selecting sources in a narrative that covers almost a millennium is a challenging task in itself, and different approaches are required to deal with twelfth-century chronicles and eighteenth-century bureaucratic correspondence. Still, I believe that direct access to the voices of the past helps the reader make sense of complex historiographic concepts from which s/he is separated by layers of cultural insulation.

Owing to the scarcity of modern research directly related to my topic, each chapter of the book deals with a limited number of identity-related issues that have some basis in the historiographic tradition. In discussing these issues, I try to reconstruct the main stages of development of East Slavic identities on the basis of the available data. Provocative questions posed in this book, such as the one on who has the better claim to the Kyivan Rus' heritage, may strike specialists in the field as overly simple and anachronistic. Nevertheless, they are highly relevant to ongoing public debate about the premodern history of the Eastern Slavs and often

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helpful in tackling a number of “historiographically correct” questions with which specialists are concerned. My approach to the subject is twofold. First, I seek to deconstruct the existing “nation-based” narrative of East Slavic history. Long before I began to write this book, that narrative was questioned in specific studies on individual periods of East Slavic history. For example, debates on the Old Rus’ nationality of Kyivan times undermined the concept of one Rus’ nation, while research on early modern Belarus and Ukraine questioned the existence of separate Ukrainian and Belarusian identities in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Yet there has been no systematic effort to reevaluate the entire historical paradigm. My other major goal, and a risky one at that, is to suggest a new outline of the development of East Slavic identities and thus prepare the ground for a reconceptualization of the premodern history of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. I hope that both attempts will stimulate new research on the history of East Slavic identities and lead eventually to a new synthesis of the history of the Eastern Slavs.

Finally, a few words about the structure of the book, whose focus on the development of premodern identity-building projects has led me to depart from the conventions of traditional Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian national histories. Chapter 1, which considers the origins of Rus’, is followed by a discussion of the changing meanings of the term “Rus’ Land” during the appanage period (chapter 2). A Great Russian narrative would continue by focusing on Muscovy, but chapter 3 of this work is devoted to Rus’ identities in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania: judging by available sources, the concept of the Rus’ Land was adopted in the Rus’ territories under Lithuanian control much earlier than in the lands under Mongol suzerainty. A work on Ukrainian or Belarusian history would go on to discuss Ruthenian identity, but that topic is deferred here to chapter 5, while the intervening chapter 4 is concerned with the development of Muscovite identity, forged between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. Knowledge of that process is indispensable to understanding the transformation of Lithuanian Rus’ loyalties into the Ruthenian identity of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The multiple lines of my narrative meet in chapter 6 (“Was there a reunification?”) and then divide into separate but related streams: chapter 7 discusses the construction of imperial Russian identity, while chapter 8 deals with the metamorphoses of Ruthenian identity in the Muscovite state (including the Hetmanate) and the Commonwealth in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The conclusions summarize the results of my research and discuss their bearing on present-day concerns.

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1 The origins of Rus'

The history of Kyivan (Kievan) Rus', the medieval East Slavic state that existed between the tenth and thirteenth centuries and extended from the Baltic in the north to the Black Sea in the south, and from the Carpathian Mountains in the west to the Volga River in the east, has remained at the center of Russia's search for identity ever since the emergence of historical studies as a scholarly discipline in the Russian Empire. In fact, the first historiographic debate in the empire, which took place in the 1740s and pitted one of the founders of historical studies in Russia, G. F. Müller, against Russia's preeminent scientist and linguist, Mikhail Lomonosov, focused on Kyivan Rus' history. At the core of that debate, which subsequently became known as the "Varangian Controversy," was the question of whether the first Kyivan princes and the state they created were Germanic (Varangian) or "Russian" (East Slavic). The debate has now been going on for more than two centuries, gaining new impetus in the years of World War II and the Cold War, and turning on the definition of Russian identity and that of other Eastern Slavs vis-à-vis the West.¹

With the rise of the Ukrainian movement in the Russian Empire in the 1840s, the history of Kyivan Rus' turned into a battleground between followers and opponents of the Slavist Mikhail Pogodin. According to Pogodin's theory, Kyiv and its environs were originally settled by Great Russian tribes that migrated north after the Mongol invasion of the mid-thirteenth century. Only after this migration, claimed Pogodin, did the "Little Russians" or Ukrainians settle the area. At stake was the question of Russian and Ukrainian historical identity and which of the two East Slavic nations had the better claim to the legacy of the Kyivan Rus' princes. The twentieth century added a new twist to the debate,

¹ On the origins of the Varangian controversy and the uses of history in the eighteenth-century Russian Empire, see Hans Rogger, *National Consciousness in Eighteenth-Century Russia* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), pp. 186–52, and Vera Tolz, *Russia* (London and New York, 2001), pp. 50–53. For the history of the debate, see I. P. Shaskol'skii, *Normanskaia teoriia v sovremennoi burzhuaznoi nauke* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1965), and A. A. Khlevov, *Normanskaia problema v otechestvennoi istoricheskoi nauke* (St. Petersburg, 1997).