History, Divisive Mistress

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This is an essay in search of the historical roots of the political polarization that has dogged Ukraine since independence in 1991. I am looking at long-term factors that have shaped Ukrainian political culture, to be presented thematically. The aim of these reflections is to explore why Ukrainian society contains a pro-Western, exclusivist Ukrainian nationalism as well as a pro-Russian, national indifferentism, and at times has swung between these -isms like a pendulum, unable to come to rest at a center.

This essay is aimed at readers with more than a passing familiarity with the history of Ukraine. I am using, as it were, historical shorthand, and so some readers might not register some of my points. I am, however, deliberately avoiding longer explanations of historical events and processes so as to bring to the fore the essentials of my argument.

Geopolitics

Divisive geopolitical orientations have been a feature of Ukrainian history since the end of the fifteenth century. At that time, some of the Ukrainian ecclesiastical elite, trying to improve their status in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, converted to Uniatism. In reaction, other churchmen looked to Orthodox Muscovy to restore what they considered the true faith. Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky made an ally of Muscovy with the Treaty of Pereiaslav in 1654, but four years later his successor, Hetman Ivan Vyhovsky, repudiated that agreement and instead signed the Treaty of Hadiach with Poland. For many decades thereafter, the Cossack officers and rank and file were divided between a pro-Russian and a pro-Polish party.

As a sense of national identity began to crystallize among the Ruthenians of Galicia in the second half of the nineteenth century, most of their educated elite chose between the Russophiles and the gente Rutheni, natione Poloni.[1] The ascendance of a Ukrainian identity took off only in the early 1880s. Later, in the 1930s-40s, the geopolitical division reappeared with a vengeance as the influential Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists in Western Ukraine allied itelf with (or looked to) Nazi Germany, hoping that it would help them establish an independent state, while many other Ukrainians remained loyal to the Russian-dominated Soviet Union. In independent Ukraine, there has been a recurring confrontation between pro-Western and pro-Russian orientations.

Regionalism

Every country has regional divisions, and often these regional divisions translate into different political cultures. The USA was rent by a civil war in the 1860s, and the voting patterns of North and South have remained very different to this day. In contemporary Germany, there is a tremendous difference between the political cultures of the West and the East, while Italy is divided between North and South.

Since there had been no successful Ukrainian state formed until 1991, its territory has been the host of many different polities. The whole south of the country was ruled by the Crimean Khanate from the mid-fifteenth century until Catherine II conquered it in the late eighteenth. Poland, Lithuania, and then the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth ruled most of the rest of Ukraine from the late fourteenth century until Russia pushed the Commonwealth westward, beginning in the mid-seventeenth century

1 Anna Wendland, *Die Russophilen in Galizien: Ukrainische Konservative zwischen Österreich und Rußland, 1848-1915* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2001). Adam Świątek, Gente Rutheni, *Natione Poloni: The Ruthenians of Polish Nationality in Habsburg Galicia* (Edmonton, Toronto: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press in cooperation with Księgarnia Akademicka, 2019).

and ending also in the late eighteenth century, when Catherine II incorporated most of the Ukrainian territories of the partitioned Commonwealth. Thus most of Ukraine found itself within the Russian empire on the eve of the nineteenth century.

The Western regions of Ukraine had a different history. Bukovina was under Moldavian rule until the Habsburg monarchy acquired it in 1775. Galicia, which had been part of Poland since the end of the fourteenth century, had fallen to Austria three years earlier. Transcarpathia was ruled by Hungary for over a millennium. Although Hungary was, as of 1526, part of the Habsburg realm, it ruled Transcarpathia in a manner very different from how Galicia and Bukovina fared in the Austrian half of the monarchy.

The only time that all of the territories of today's Ukraine were united in a single state was in the period 1954-91, when all of it was incorporated into Soviet Ukraine, a republic within the Russian-dominated Soviet Union.

The second half of the nineteenth century was a formative period for Ukrainian political cultures. Ukrainians in Austria, i.e., Galicians and Bukovinians, lived in a constitutional monarchy, with the basic civic freedoms of the era (notably, freedom of speech and the rights of assembly and association), widespread public education in the Ukrainian language, and participation in elections with a franchise that expanded over time. Most Ukrainians, however, lived under the tsar, in an autocracy, with censorship, little public education and none in the Ukrainian language, and no elections until 1906. In Austria, Ukrainians organized themselves and sent deputies to parliament; in Russia the primary political outlet for Ukrainians who adhered to a separate Ukrainian nationality was revolutionary activity.

To the divisions produced by differing state cultures, we can add others, the most important of which resulted from economic diversity. The West has remained a region of small-scale agriculture, the South of large-scale agriculture, and the East of resource extraction and manufacturing. Then too, there are language differences. From the late 1940s, i.e., after the Germans killed the Jews and the Soviets deported the Poles, Lviv has been a Ukrainian-speaking city, although Russian and Polish are also used by its population. Kyiv in the Soviet period, especially the postwar period, was largely Russian-speaking. In fact, foreigners travelling there in the mid-1970s were ridiculed if they asked for morozyvo instead of morozhenoe. Odesa, Donetsk, Dnipro, and Kharkiv were also Russian-speaking.

Forty Years of Trauma

Political polarization also resulted from damage in the womb to independent Ukraine. The Ukrainian population suffered horrifically from 1914 to 1954: two total wars, in both of which the front crossed back and forth across all of Ukraine; revolution, uprisings, and civil war; purges of the Ukrainian elite in Soviet Ukraine; a manmade famine that killed millions; vicious rule by Nazis and Stalinists; and a national insurgency that was brutally suppressed. Ukraine has proven to be the quintessential "bloodland."[2] The whole political history of independent Ukraine shows that the wounds inflicted in these forty years have never healed, and that different parts of the Ukrainian body have suffered differently and from different causes.

Related to these traumatic experiences, but having separate effects, was the transformation of Ukraine in modern times from a land with many nationalities to a much more homogenous country. Major moments include the mass murder of the Polish population in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, and particuarly in Soviet Ukraine; the deportation of Poles from Western Ukraine in 1939-41; the Holocaust; the Ukrainian nationalist ethnic cleansing of Poles in Volhynia and Galicia in 1943-44; the Stalinists' expulsion of Germans and Crimean Tatars; and the brutal postwar population exchanges between Soviet Ukraine and Poland. The most formative result of this transformation was that Ukraine

2 Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

became a country reduced primarily to a condominium of Ukrainians, about half of whom were Russophone, and Russians (22 percent in 1989). But in addition, this transformation left in its wake many mass graves, which still trouble the country.

Differing Legacies of Earlier Attempts at Statehood

The two world wars both seemed to offer a chance to establish a state, thus thrusting the question of identity policy upon Ukrainian historical actors. In 1917-18 the Central Rada opted for a democratic polity in which Ukrainians were the majority nation, now endowed with all the rights of which they had been deprived under Russian rule; but the Rada also offered generously extensive rights to all national minorities. The Hetmanate of Pavlo Skoropadsky of 1918 was an authoritarian monarchy in which both Russians and Ukrainians were the major players. In 1941 the Bandera faction of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists attempted to establish a dictatorial "Ukraine for Ukrainians," in which ethnic Ukrainians, through the medium of the nationalist Leader, held sway. National minorities were slated for elimination, through assimilation and/or killing.

Thus there was no single tradition that could be seen as the natural way to organize a center around which a Ukrainian civic identity could coalesce. One can see reflections of the above three policies in, respectively, the Declaration of Sovereignty of 1990, the presidency of Viktor Yanukovych, and the presidencies of Viktor Yushchenko, Petro Poroshenko, and (since 2022) Volodymyr Zelensky.

Inadequate Political Thought

The processes that led directly to the formation of a durable Ukrainian state in 1991 were initiated only a few years earlier, in 1988-89, when the Gorbachev reforms began to take root in Soviet Ukraine.

My impression is that the intellectual elite of Ukraine at that time was not up to the task of formulating the kind of profound analyses that were necessary to cement a workable and strong identity for the newborn state. The historian Ivan Lysiak-Rudnytsky often said that the strength of the Ukrainian nation was in its common people and that its weakest component was its elite.

However, there are reasons why the intellectual elite was particularly weak at the moment when independence could be achieved. The problem started in the interwar period. In Western Ukraine the Polish authorities imposed restrictions on Ukrainians who sought higher education. For some years in the 1920s an underground Ukrainian university functioned in Lviv, but after it was banned the most accessible higher education for Ukrainians was the Lviv Theological Academy founded by Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytsky in 1928. Aside from limited access to higher education in interwar Galicia, the intellectual development of the young Ukrainian intelligentsia was hampered by the popularity of the voluntarism and irrationalism promoted with great success by Dmytro Dontsov. As the Soviets were closing in on Galicia in 1944, large numbers of the Western Ukrainian intelligentsia migrated abroad.

The story of the Ukrainian elite was much more tragic in Soviet Ukraine, where a large portion of the Ukrainian intelligentsia was killed in the 1930s.

In the postwar years, when Ukrainian territories were united in the Soviet Ukrainian republic, the authorities imposed uniformity of political thought and conformity in the humanities, arts, and letters. Thus, the Ukrainian elite of the late 1980s was ill-prepared for the challenges that history had tasked them with.

Admittedly, this is an exacerbating rather than a determining factor. One can look at what happened in East Central Europe, where some intellectuals of the highest caliber had been the influential actors in 1989. Today's Czech Republic is not what Václav Havel imagined, nor is today's Poland what Adam Michnik imagined. A global trend towards increasing nationalism has levelled the intellectual field.

Late Statehood

Ukraine became a state very late. Not only did it not have deep roots like France, England, or China, but it also was not included among the states formed in the nineteenth century, such as Belgium, Germany, Italy, and numerous Latin American countries. Most painfully for Ukrainian activists, they failed to achieve statehood during the imperial collapse and revolutionary events following World War I, in spite of heroic efforts. This failure was particularly frustrating given the emergence at that time of many completely new countries such as Finland and Yugoslavia as well of two states that were revived after over a century's absence from the map (Poland and Lithuania). Even during Nazi Germany's rule over Europe, Ukraine could not achieve the status of the collaborationist states of Croatia and Slovakia (both of which were to revive after the collapse of communism). And of course, Ukraine was not able to participate in the anticolonial movements after World War II that saw the establishment of new states across much of Asia and Africa (e.g., Laos and Angola).

If Ukraine had become a state earlier, it still might not have been able to create an identity center, but then again, over time, it might have.

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Clearly, it will be a challenge to develop a centered Ukrainian identity, one that would unite rather than divide Ukraine's society. But, as I think this critical moment in Ukrainian history indicates, this is the direction in which the country must proceed in order to survive. It needs a strong foundation to withstand the blows directed at it.