Brothers Or Enemies: The Ukrainian National Movement and Russia from the 1840s to the 1870s

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A closer look at the rhetoric surrounding the current Ukrainian-Russian conflict reveals it is as much about past as about the present or future. Not only have both sides regularly resorted to historical arguments, turning the past into yet another battleground in a ‘hybrid war’, but outside observers also look to the past in search for answers and explanations. The time could hardly be more opportune for publishing a book about Ukrainian-Russian relations during a period crucial to the emergence of modern Ukrainian identity.

Johannes Remy’s book adds to the growing literature on the Ukrainian national movement in the 19th-century Russian Empire. For some time, academic literature has abandoned a simplistic picture of two easily identifiable national communities, with Russians as the oppressors and Ukrainians as the oppressed. For nearly two decades the literature in English was essentially limited to the book by David Saunders covering the beginning of the 19th century.⁽¹⁾ Saunders not only pointed out the Ukrainian contribution to the building of the Russian Empire in the 18th century, but also the crucial role Ukraine played during the early stages of the Russian national imagination. At the beginning of the 19th century older pre-modern social and political differences acquired new connotations and were reconceptualised as national, facilitating the birth not only of modern Ukrainian, but also of modern Russian culture.

Then Alexei Miller’s provocative reconceptualization of the relationship between the modern Ukrainian nationalism and imperial Russia came, shifting focus to the 1860s and 1870s.⁽²⁾ He drew attention to a number of possible conceptualizations of Ukrainian and Russian identity co-existing in the 19th century, their 20th-century codification as two separate nations being but one possible outcome. According to Miller, the Ukrainian national project’s relative success should be attributed to the Russian Empire’s relative weakness and inability, or unwillingness, to pursue ‘modern’ assimilationist policies. Miller also saw anti-Ukrainian measures introduced by the imperial government as unsystematic ad hoc tactical improvisations, rather than a consistent and coherent anti-Ukrainian policy.

Two further recent studies developed some of the themes initially explored by Saunders and Miller. Serhiy Bilenky added Polish projects to the equation producing a comprehensive taxonomy of national

communities and cultural spaces as imagined by Romanticist nationalists in Poland, Russia and Ukraine in the first decades of the 19th century.⁽³⁾ Faith Hillis' important and controversial book expanded the chronological focus to the whole of the 'long nineteenth century'.⁽⁴⁾ Hillis argues that Right-Bank Ukraine, one of the most 'multicultural' regions of the Russian Empire with historically little ethnic Russian presence, was also a birth-place and early 20th-century stronghold of exclusivist ethnic Russian nationalism. According to her interpretation, local 'Little Russian' patriots, conventionally assigned to the Ukrainian project, in fact belonged to the larger 'All-Russian' ethnic nationalist project throughout most of the 19th century. She identifies the emergence of a separate Ukrainian nationalism only towards the end of the 19th century.

Remy's book contributes to these debates with a number of fascinating findings offering long-overdue corrections to both the arguments and evidence circulating in the existing literature. Remy's chronological focus is on the period between 1845, when the Cyrillo-Methodian Society – the first political Ukrainian organization in modern history – was founded, and the late 1870s, when in the aftermath of the 1876 Ems Ukase the prohibition of Ukrainian publications in the Russian Empire was greatly expanded. In many respects these decades determined the mode of interaction between the Ukrainian national movement and the Russian imperial government.

Unlike other studies on the subject, Remy's book focuses not only on 'celebrities,' a narrow group of well-known and often cited intellectuals, but also on 'ordinary Ukrainian activists', who have remained on the sidelines of historiography. It also allows glimpses into the world of ordinary bureaucrats offering the fullest available description thus far of the actual implementation of anti-Ukrainian decrees. The book's findings are derived from a close re-reading of published documents and painstaking archival research rather than from new theoretical frameworks or methodologies.

In agreement with many others, Remy sees that the Cyrillo-Methodian Society as the first political organization of modern Ukrainian nationalism. While Soviet historiography exaggeratedly claimed that the society was divided between 'revolutionary-democratic' and more moderate factions, *Brothers or Enemies* identifies a number of real differences within the Society. The book shows that even the Society's programmatic document, the so-called *God's Law*, survived in two slightly different versions: one which tended to blame Polish lords and Russian rulers specifically, while the other placed blame for Ukraine's misfortunes squarely on all Poles and Russians. Differences between more or less anti-Russian stances inside the Society are also evident. Remy shows that while most Society members never spoke of the violent overturn of the existing order, some did not rule out violence. More importantly, he shows that the Society did not exist in splendid isolation but reflected moods and ideas that were shared by certain segments of the Ukrainian educated public. Already in the 1840s Ukrainian nationalism acquired socially egalitarian and politically democratic connotations. The Ukrainian nation, as imagined by the Ukrainian activists of the 1840s, was plebeian and republican.

While the Society was clandestine and its activities remained unknown to the educated public, among legal Ukrainian publications ethnography and history predominated. Seemingly purely academic collections of Ukrainian folklore often tended to underline ethnic differences between Russians and Ukrainians. Presenting these differences as innate and reproducible through generations, these publications helped to demarcate two ethnic groups and to accept the boundary between them as natural. Moreover, they tended to attribute positive traits to Ukrainians and portray Russians negatively.

Imperial authorities identified the dangers of Ukrainian separatism early on. They suspected the Cyrillo-Methodian Society was not an isolated group, and became concerned with ethnographic materials which emphasized Ukrainian distinctiveness. Remy discovered that as early as 1854 a circular by Minister of Popular Education Platon Shirinskii-Shakhmatov recognized publications on Ukrainian folklore as politically sensitive and due for additional censorship scrutiny. A growing concern with Ukrainian publications was evident throughout the 1850s as the Russian censor's concerns expanded beyond simply collections of Ukrainian folklore.

After the death of Nicholas I, in the more liberal atmosphere of the early 1860s, Ukrainian activism resumed and the number of Ukrainian publications surged. Ethnic stereotypes were now propagated not only in folkloristic collections but also on the pages of the first Ukrainian monthly *Osnova*, published in St. Petersburg in 1861–2. Imperial censorship was concerned with Ukrainian cultural separatism and especially with its increasingly more visible 'social egalitarianism' (p. 87). In the early 1860s the Ukrainian national movement tried to reach out from its educated ghetto to the common people. Out of 98 books published in Ukrainian in 1860–3 in the Russian Empire, 68 belonged to the category of popular publications (p. 81). Moreover, many Ukrainian activists were prominent in the so-called Kharkiv-Kyiv group formed in 1856, the first clandestine revolutionary organization to appear in the Russian Empire in the second half of the 19th century. In Remy's depiction the activities of the Ukrainian circles – the so-called *Hromadas* that sprang up in Kyiv, Chernihiv and Poltava—appear far more formidable than we have hitherto imagined.

The Russian government's concerns with the Ukrainian activists definitely predated the Polish uprising of 1863. The book confirms our suspicions that Petr Valuev used the Polish uprising as a pretext, to execute a crackdown on the Ukrainian movement he had conceived long before. Valuev also fabricated some evidence around the alleged connections between the Ukrainian and Polish national movements. The Valuev circular, according to Remy, 'reflected Valuev's fundamentally hostile, long-term stance towards Ukrainian as a literary language' (p. 183). Remy also correctly points out that the 'temporary' character of Valuev's circular should not be taken literally. While 'formally ... it was a provisional measure that would remain in force until a final decision on Ukrainian publications was rendered' (p. 166) in Russia much of the technically provisional legislation remained in force for decades. The circular was also the solution to the authorities' frustration with the need to read 'between lines', since Ukrainian writers had become quite apt at masking subversive meanings and carefully avoided anything that could be read as explicit disloyalty. The circular was also accompanied by an unspoken agreement to reduce the number of Ukrainian publications.

The first half of the 1870s witnessed another revitalisation of the Ukrainian national movement in Kyiv under the protection of the local governor-general Aleksandr Dondukov-Korsakov. This was the period when the Ukrainian movement's connection with egalitarian political visions crystalized into the Ukrainian socialist option. Some members of the movement decided that in the Ukrainian case national and social liberations were inseparable. This option found its best known expression in Mykhailo Drahomanov's famous formula: 'In Ukraine's conditions, bad is the Ukrainian who does not become a Radical, and bad is the Radical who does not become Ukrainian'.[\(5\)](#)

The central government was alarmed by this show of strength from the Ukrainian movement, but was more concerned with its separatist than its socialist aspects. After Ukrainian activists were denounced by the local Russian nationalist Iuzefovich, an ethnic Ukrainian himself, the imperial government reconfirmed the Valuev circular with the so-called Ems Ukase. Not only were all the prohibitions of the Valuev circular left in force, additional restrictions were placed on Ukrainian publications, such as a ban on the import of Ukrainian literature, staging of plays in 'Little Russian', and the orthography developed for Ukrainian language by Panteleimon Kulish. Only *belle-lettres* and historical documents could be published but in standard Russian orthography. While Russian bureaucracy was not unanimous on the issue of Ukrainian language and Ukrainian activism, the Ems Ukase meant the triumph of the repressive approach.

Wholesale repression produced some unintended consequences. In the first half of the 1870s the Ukrainian

national movement in the Russian Empire included both anti-Russian and strong pro-Russian strands. Those activists who belonged to the latter group saw Ukrainian culture as intimately connected with the Russian, saw in Russia an ally in the anti-Polish question, and believed that the fate of the Ukrainian national cause was tied to the democratic and liberal transformation of the whole empire, which could only be achieved through cooperation with Russians. The Ems Ukase produced a backlash that helped the separatist, anti-Russian orientation among Ukrainian activists to triumph, alienating the Ukrainian national movement from the Russian Empire and Russian nation.

It is hard to argue with Remy's findings and arguments. He has demonstrated quite convincingly that under the conditions of Russian autocracy even 'innocent' ethnographic research could be politically subversive, if not outright explosive. Remy's discoveries dash the expectations invoked by Miroslav Hroch's famous scheme of definite 'stages' in the nation-building of 'small' European nations, which equates 'political' with mass parties, explicitly formulated political programs and goals.⁽⁶⁾ As Roman Szporluk noticed, the Ukrainian national movement in the Russian Empire did not conform to the Hroch's stages.⁽⁷⁾ The Cyrillo-Methodian Society emerged during the purely intellectual 'heritage gathering' stage, while stage B, that of patriotic agitation, never fully materialized in the Russian Empire. Remy shows that a collection of proverbs could function as a political statement under the conditions when no explicit political statements are allowed.

The presence of a 'Ukrainian orientation' among local patriots, identified by Remy during the movement's very beginnings and alongside other hypothetical solutions, is also important. There is certain parallelism with the history of Galician Ukrainians. In the case of Habsburg Galicia we used to think about the Ukrainian orientation as something that crystalized quite late, after various other options had been tried and discarded. Now we know that it was there, alongside other options, already in the 1830s and 1840s. Whether the triumph of the Ukrainian orientation was merely an outcome of a particular constellation of choices made by the governments involved with the 'Ukrainian question', or whether there were more profound structural causes at work is a different matter, which Remy's book does not explicitly engage. The book is careful to tackle only those questions, to which well documented answers could be given. It does the job extremely well and will be a must read for anyone working on 19th-century Ukrainian history.

Notes

1. David Saunders, *The Ukrainian Impact on Russian Culture, 1750–1850* (Edmonton, 1985).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Alexei Miller, *The Ukrainian Question: The Russian Empire and Nationalism in the Nineteenth Century* (Budapest and New York, NY, 2003).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Serhiy Bilenky, *Romantic Nationalism in Eastern Europe: Russian, Polish, and Ukrainian Political Imagination* (Stanford, 2012).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Faith Hillis, *Children of Rus': Right-Bank Ukraine and the Invention of a Russian Nation* (Ithaca, NY, and London, 2014).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Mykhailo Pavlyk, *Mykhailo Petrovych Drahomanov, 1841–1895. Ieho iubylei, smert', avtobiohrafia i spys ieho tvoriv* (Lviv, 1896), p. 59.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Miroslav Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe: A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups Among the Smaller European Nations* (New York, NY, 1985).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Roman Shporliuk (Szporluk), 'Ukrains'ke natsional'ne vidrozhennia v konteksti ievropeis'koi istorii kintsia XVIII – pochatku XIX stolit', *Ukraina: Nauka i kul'tura*, 25 (1991), 159–67.[Back to \(7\)](#)

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[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/257966>