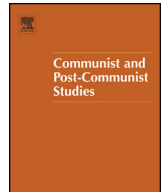


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Ukrainians as Russia's negative 'other': History comes full circle



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ABSTRACT

The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war, euphemistically called the "Ukraine crisis," draws attention to its ideological underpinnings that include a historically informed Russian hegemonic view of Ukrainians as "younger brothers" who should be both patronized and censured for improper behavior. The paper examines a particular aspect of this superior attitude as embedded in ethnic stereotypes – both "vernacular", primarily in folklore, and ideologically constructed, in both cultural and political discourses. In both cases, the structure of stereotypes reflects the dominant position of one group and subjugated position of the other within a more general paradigm of relations between Robinson Crusoe and Friday. A peculiar dialectics implies that a "good" Friday can be civilized and assimilated and become almost equal to Crusoe – "almost the same people", in a popular Russian parlance about Ukrainians. Yet, a "bad" ("wrong") Friday should be strongly reviled and thoroughly demonized as a complete evil, manipulated allegedly by hostile ("Western") Robinsons. The paper argues that the Russo-Ukrainian relations cannot be normalized until Russians learn to see Ukrainians as neither "good" nor "bad" but just different – as all the people around.

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In the last decade, Russian President Vladimir Putin has increasingly relied upon Russian nationalist and neo-fascist ideology from the post-revolutionary White émigrés and writers within the USSR and post-Soviet Russia. The most prominent influence upon Putin has been that of White émigré Ivan Ilyin who was 'a publicist, conspiracy theorist, and a Russian nationalist with a core of fascist leanings' (*Barbashin and Thoburn, 2015*). Even after the defeat of Nazi Germany and the axis powers in 1945, Ilyin continued to believe in fascism and the manifestations of this ideology in Franco's Spain and Salazar's Portugal. Putin's turn to extreme nationalistic and fascist ideology began to grow after the 2003–2004 Rose and Orange Revolutions, which he viewed as Western -backed conspiracies to install anti-Russian political forces, and from 2006 Putin 'began to feature the philosopher prominently in some of his major addresses to the public' (*Barbashin and Thoburn, 2015*). Putin's strident nationalism became public in his speech delivered to the 2007 Munich Security conference and the 2008 Bucharest NATO summit where Putin told then President George W. Bush that Ukrainians are not a 'people' and when he made his first territorial claims on what he later termed 'New Russia', or *Novorossia* (southern and eastern Ukraine). That same year Russian invaded Georgia and recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia which became a dry run for the annexation of the Crimea six years later. *Hill and Gaddy (2015, 263)* point out that Putin's justification for his invasion of the Crimea was not 'new' as 'He was circling around familiar territory.' Nevertheless, Russia's annexation of the Crimea contradicted everything Russian leaders had said since 1991 (*Allison, 2014, 1267*) and violated international law and the 1994 Budapest Memorandum (signed together with the US and UK) and 1997 Ukrainian-Russian inter-state treaty.

Putin has instructed his regional governors to read and study Ilyin who, like Putin and the contemporary Russian leadership, believed that Ukrainians have no right to statehood and Ukrainians cannot be permitted to develop independently of

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Russia. Ilyin and other émigré writers, including former dissident and writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn, espoused views commonly found among contemporary Russian leaders. Most of them are convinced that Russia constitutes a ‘unique’ Eurasian civilization different from Europe and Asia; that the West is profoundly hostile and deeply engaged in an anti-Russian conspiracy; and the Russian Orthodox Church should play a particular role in the national ‘spiritual revival.’ After mass protests in Russia in 2011–2012, Putin and the Russian leadership turned to ‘conservative values,’ aligned with anti-EU nationalists and fascists in Europe and mobilized extreme nationalists and fascists Sergei Glazyev, Aleksandr Dugin and Aleksandr Prokhanov who were ‘given center-stage’ and becoming ‘operational tools in the informational and psychological aspect of the new warfare that Putin waged in Ukraine’ (Hill and Gaddy, 2015, 372–373)

History has come full circle with contemporary Russian nationalists such as Putin drawing ideological inspiration from pre-Soviet and Russian émigré writers (descendants of the White Guard monarchists and provisional government federalists) who always denied Ukrainians were a separate people. As Anna Procyk writes, all Russian groups – even those calling themselves democrats – fought against an independent Ukrainian state in 1917–1920. Remarkably, Russian President Putin praised both of them for the heart-warming unanimity expressed vis-a-vis Ukraine: “What is curious, is that both the Red and the White camps were struggling to the death, millions perished in the course of that struggle, but they never raised the question of Ukraine’s secession. Both the Reds and the Whites proceeded from the principle of [territorial] integrity of the Russian state” (Putin, 2013).

This article shows the deep historical roots of ‘Ukrainian nationalism’ as a negative other for Russian nationalists such as Putin who believe Ukrainians are not a separate people that have been promoted through stereotypes stretching back to the eighteenth century. Ukrainian writer and political activist Volodymyr Vynnychenko recalled that the ‘liberalism’ of Russian liberals ends at the Ukrainian border when they become nationalists and chauvinists. At the same time, while repeating the Tsarist era mythology of Russians and Ukrainians as ‘one people’ contemporary Russian leaders and nationalists find themselves living in a confused world with a majority of Ukrainians not accepting that they are the same as Russians. This was clearly seen in the abject failure of the ‘New Russia’ project’s failure to mobilize Russian speakers in Ukraine’s east and south who instead showed their Ukrainian patriotism; indeed, far more Russian speakers are fighting for Ukraine in the ATO (Anti-Terrorist Operation) than on the separatist side. Russia’s annexation of the Crimea and its hybrid war and invasion of the Donbas has made Putin the most negatively viewed foreign leader in Ukraine and dramatically reduced support for integration into Eurasia (Razumkov, 2015).

The Red–White unanimity in regard of Ukraine is exemplified by new voices from various, sometimes the most unexpected corners, including the ardent critics of Putin’s regime such as Aleksey Navalny, or Mikhail Khodorkovsky, or Andrey Bitov. In mid-March 2014, shortly after the Russian annexation of the Crimea, a collective letter in support of this brazen action was published on the official website of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation. More than five hundred culture figures, including prominent actors, musicians, theater and film directors signed a dull bureaucratic petition prepared reportedly by the deputy minister of culture in the best traditions of the Soviet “unanimous approval” (Deyateli, 2014). Khodorkovsky, a well-known former oligarch who languished in Russian prisons until his release in December 2013, supports Russia’s annexation of the Crimea but criticizes Russia’s war in the Donbas.

An independent, ‘Europeanized’ Ukraine poses a strategic threat not so much to Russian national security as to Russian premodern, imperial identity. Ukraine’s historical myths of seeking independence over a long period of time, its claim to sole historical title to the medieval principality of Kyivan Rus and other elements of historical symbolism conflicts with Russian nationalist historical and territorial claims. Ukraine remains a crucial part of the Russian imperialistic mythology and imagination and will remain a ‘sublime object of desire’ for too many Russians unable to reconcile with its sovereignty, independent development and integration outside the *Russkii Mir* (Russian World). Deconstruction of Russian imperial and great power nationalistic mythology and stereotypes of ‘Ukrainian nationalism’ as a negative ‘other’ is an important component of political, cultural, and psychological processes for the rebuilding of Russo-Ukrainian relations on a thoroughly new and democratic basis.

1. Discovering ‘almost the same people’

The Russian imagination created the image of Ukrainians as ‘Little Russians’ a few centuries ago – alongside the appropriation of Ukrainian territory and history, and the transformation, under Tsar Peter the Great, of medieval Muscovy into the Russian Empire. Despite the popular notion that Ukrainians and Russians are kin nations, with allegedly very deep cultural and historical ties, their initial encounters and mutual apprehensions in fact date back only to the 18th century when the newly formed Russian Empire gradually absorbed the Ukrainian (Ruthenian) lands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (Kohut, 1988). Until the mid-17th century, Ukrainians occupied a very marginal place in Muscovite thought – something that is indirectly reflected in the relatively small number of ethnic references in the Russian folk proverbs and expressions recorded two centuries later. Tatars are the most frequently mentioned, followed by the Germans – under the generic name “Nemtsy” (“mute”) that referred to all Europeans who spoke incomprehensible languages. Gypsies and the Jews come next, with Ukrainians (“khokhly”, “malorosy”) sharing fifth place with the other historical newcomer to the Muscovite realm – the French (Shevchenko and Zubkov, 2012). Another researcher applies a bit different method of calculation to the similar folklore material and finds out that the most intensively stereotyped groups are Gypsies, Jews, Germans (“Nemtsy”) and Tatars. Ukrainians, again, are listed the fifth, sharing the place, this time, with Poles and Greeks (Belova, 2011).

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