

**SOVIET NATIONALITY
POLICY, URBAN GROWTH, AND
IDENTITY CHANGE IN THE
UKRAINIAN SSR 1923–1934**

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Introduction

In the third decade of the twentieth century the Soviet Ukrainian writer and literary critic Borys Antonenko-Davydovych (1899–1974) succinctly expressed the Ukrainian dilemma:

One could live one's entire life in a Ukrainian city and not know Ukrainian. You could ask the conductor in a Kiev streetcar a question in Ukrainian and he would not understand or would pretend that he did not understand you. A Ukrainian writer, appearing before a provincial audience, might discover that ninety percent of the audience had never read any of his works or heard anything about him at all.

But it should be axiomatic that it is best and most "natural" to learn Ukrainian in a Ukrainian city, for the most part to hear Ukrainian on Kiev's streets, and for eighty percent of the readers to borrow Ukrainian books from urban libraries. $2 \times 2 = 4$, right? But this equation has yet to be demonstrated under our conditions in the Ukraine. For us, this is still a theorem.¹

Antonenko-Davydovych's frustrations echoed those of all nationally conscious Central and East Europeans in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For them, the city was more than just an economic, cultural, military, political, transportation, and communications center. Cities, especially such historic capitals as Prague, Budapest, Vilnius, and Riga, were the flagships of emergent national movements. Because the overwhelming majority of nationally conscious Central and East Europeans defined their identity by primary language usage, they believed that the language of the cities would have to reflect the language of the surrounding countryside for their national movements to triumph.

In terms of their residents and dominant language, cities were barometers of power, the most visible centers of conflict in Central and East European societies (as in other parts of the world). Inasmuch as the majority of urban residents developed national identities different

from the majority living in the rural areas, a hierarchy based on these identities emerged. Russians, Germans, and Jews occupied the more influential positions, while the indigenous populations possessed those that were less prestigious. In this cultural division of labor, individuals were "assigned to specific occupations and other social roles on the basis of observable social traits or markers." This labor distribution existed "regardless of the level of structural differentiation in society."² As industrialization and urbanization unevenly penetrated the Austro-Hungarian, German, Russian, and Ottoman empires prior to the First World War, nationalist conflicts intensified in the cities.³

As a result of peasant migration into the cities, as well as the successful political struggle of the Central and East European national movements after 1848, the national composition of the cities gradually came to mirror that of the surrounding countryside. The dissolution of the four empires and the establishment of independent states at the end of the First World War legitimized the political and social control wielded by the one dominant national group (or two in the case of Czechoslovakia) over its multi-national cities. Over the course of time, the countryside in effect triumphed over the cities.⁴

By 1920 only Vilnius and the urban centers in Belorussia and the Ukraine defied this phenomenon. Because the Belorussian and Ukrainian national movements were weak and because of White, Bolshevik, German, Austro-Hungarian, Polish, and other interventions, the nationalists could not gain control of the cities and lost their struggles to establish independent and indivisible homelands immediately after the First World War.

One of the most prominent discrepancies between the national composition of the cities and the countryside occurred in the Ukraine. Before the 1920s, Ukrainians dominated the countryside, while the Russians, Russified Ukrainians, and Russified Jews controlled the urban areas. Few Ukrainians found employment in the cities. Those who did gradually absorbed the Russian urban ethos and soon came to identify themselves as Russians.

But as the cities and towns grew in the late 1920s as a consequence of the Soviet industrialization effort, the large number of migrating Ukrainians reversed this process. This migration reinforced the Communist Party's *korenizatsiia* (indigenization or nativization) policy, which advocated the equality of the non-Russian languages and cultures *vis-à-vis* the Russian language and culture and subsidized their development. Most importantly, this plan sought to integrate the

non-Russians into the Soviet state by promoting them into leading positions in the party, the government, and the trade unions.

The symbiotic relationship between the social processes of industrialization and urban growth and *korenizatsiia* produced important long-term consequences. Although the party did not create the non-Russian identities, it did nurture them. By establishing Soviet republics congruent with the homelands of the non-Russians and by promoting the indigenous languages and cultures, the Communist Party highlighted the national, cultural, and political differences between nationalities. By constructing cultural and political symbols in the non-Russian republics, the Communist Party played a decisive role in organizing the institutions which would promote national consciousness among non-Russians. At the same time, by industrializing economically backward regions and collectivizing the countryside, the party introduced millions of non-Russians, willingly and unwillingly, to the cities and the urban way of life. In many cases, the party accidentally jump-started modern, mass national movements among the non-Russians in the 1920s. The most dramatic acceleration of these processes occurred in the Ukraine.

Due to their number and strategic location, the Ukrainians played a leading role in the development of the newly formed Soviet state's nationalities policy. According to the December 17, 1926 Soviet census, Russians constituted 53.0 percent of the USSR's population. Thirty-one million Ukrainians composed 21 percent of the total Soviet population and 45.0 percent of the entire non-Russian population.⁵ Ukrainian peasants, moreover, comprised over one-half of all non-Russian peasants in the USSR.⁶ Geographically the Ukraine was located next to the heartland of Europe, where the Bolsheviks aspired to spread their revolution. With an area of 451,730 square kilometers, it was one of the largest geographic entities in Europe, following the Soviet Union and the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR) in size.

Although the Ukraine formed only 2.1 percent of all Soviet territory, it produced more than 20 percent of the Soviet industrial and agricultural output and one-fourth of its grain. Seven million Ukrainians lived in countries bordering the USSR, especially in Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Rumania, and the Soviet leadership could play the Ukrainian "card" to destabilize these bourgeois governments. Most importantly, the Ukrainians – despite nearly three centuries of Russian rule, the sharing of Orthodox religion and culture, and the pressures of Russification – exhibited an unprecedented degree of assertiveness during the revolution and civil war.

But until 1917 a mass “national” assertiveness did not emerge in this region. Because of its location and historical contingencies, the Ukraine experienced a high degree of political discontinuity and social backwardness and a low level of national consciousness.⁷

The majority of peasants living in the Ukrainian provinces of the Russian Empire (the Kiev, Podillia, and Volhynia [the Iugozapadnyi krai, or Right Bank Provinces], Kharkov, Poltava, and Chernihiv [the Left Bank Provinces], and Ekaterinoslav, Kherson, and Taurida provinces [Novorossiia]) could not define their national identity with any great precision. The inhabitants of each of these regions experienced imperial integration at different times and under different circumstances. These uneven political developments in a predominantly agrarian society hampered the formation of a standardized mass Ukrainian memory and identity. As a consequence, these peasants lacked clearly defined criteria which they could easily use to distinguish themselves from the Russians.

What then was distinctively Ukrainian about the Ukrainians? An analyst with the Political Intelligence Department of the British Foreign Office submitted a memorandum about the Ukraine to the Imperial War Cabinet in May 1918:

The peasants speak the Little Russian dialect; a small group of nationalist intelligentsia now professes a Ukrainian identity distinct from that of the Great Russians. Whether such a nationality exists is usually discussed in terms in which the question can receive no answer. Were one to ask the average peasant in the Ukraine his nationality, he would answer that he is Greek Orthodox; if pressed to say whether he is a Great Russian, a Pole, or a Ukrainian, he would probably reply that he is a peasant; and if one insisted on knowing what language he spoke, he would say that he talked “the local tongue.” One might perhaps get him to call himself by a proper national name and say that he is “rusски,” but this declaration would hardly prejudice the question of a Ukrainian relationship; he simply does not think of nationality in the terms familiar to the intelligentsia. Again, if one tried to find out to what State he desires to belong – whether he wants to be ruled by an All-Russian or a separate Ukrainian Government – one would find that in his opinion all Governments alike are a nuisance, and that it would be best if the “Christian peasant-folk” were left to themselves. All the big landowners and practically the entire Christian population of the towns speak either Polish or Great Russian. There are no more Ukrainian noblemen or big landowners in the Ukraine than there are Non-Conformist noblemen in Great Britain – the Ukrainian may rise to higher rank, but then he ceases to be what his fathers were . . . As a

rule it sufficed for the Ukrainian peasant to leave his village community in order to lose his marked provincial peculiarities and his dialect. The larger part of the bureaucrats and the school teachers and priests speak Great Russian though they are very largely Ukrainians by birth. Even when going as unskilled labourers to the towns the Ukrainian peasants changed into Great Russians . . . The Ukrainian nationality of the peasant in the Ukraine is linguistic to some extent, but it rests mainly on the intense class consciousness of the peasant, on the herd instinct which he feels within his village community and within his social class. He feels a hatred of the strangers who, like a visitation of God, swarm about the Ukraine – the Polish “pany” (lords), the Jewish traders, the Russian “bureaucrats,” the shady “townees.” At times he doubts whether even the priest, not being a peasant, can be altogether pleasing to Heaven . . .⁸

In a masterful analysis of this report, David Saunders asserts that Ukrainians emerge as “stoutly religious peasants who had their own language and saw themselves as members of a society called Rus’, whose political existence belonged to the mists of time. Anti-intellectual, almost anarchist in their hostility to governmental institutions, they had yet to enter the capitalist world . . .”⁹ Saunders calls the Ukrainian identity a multi-layered consciousness which evolved over centuries and remained distinct from the Russian national identity.

But this consciousness was not definable in precise terms. The peasant could not articulate his views in isolation and only in reference to himself. If pressed, he could present his perceptions only in reference to strangers. As this British official’s report demonstrates, the peasant, unaccustomed to intellectual constructs, when asked what his criteria were in differentiating between Ukrainians and Russians, would shrug his shoulders and divide people into two categories: “us” and “them.” He understood his universe through the prism of this polarization.

There was one major unspoken assumption behind this view of the world: that outsiders, generally from the cities, possessed political and economic control. The Ukrainian peasant, who comprised the majority in the countryside, had neither. In addition to his religion, language, and way of life, powerlessness was the primary psychological bond he shared with his neighbors and kinsmen in the countryside.¹⁰ Thus, the division of labor between the countryside and the alien cities defined the peasant’s comprehension of the relationship between power and national allegiances.

When the agrarian Ukrainian provinces confronted industrial-

ization and modernization in the late nineteenth century, the experience was psychologically disorienting and economically painful for the peasants. More significantly, the elites promoting modernization lived in the cities. But most of the urban residents considered themselves Russians or Jews, rather than Ukrainians. And if the "townees" once came from the countryside surrounding the cities and towns, they had long abandoned the traditions and values of their forefathers and adopted the Russian language and culture, the language and culture of industry, economy, politics, and urban life. Thus, an irreconcilable difference emerged between things Ukrainian and modern, between the Ukrainian and urban worlds. Peasant awareness of this division provoked envy and hatred towards the "townees." Vasyl Shakhrai, a prominent Ukrainian Bolshevik, best described the peasants' hostility toward the cities:

The city governs the countryside and "foreigners" govern the cities. The city attracts all good unto itself and gives the village almost nothing in return. The city sucks in taxes, which are almost never returned to the village, to the Ukraine. . . . In the city you have to pay the bureaucrat bribes in order to avoid insults and red tape. In the city the merchant deceives while selling and buying. In the city the landowners gobble up the goods collected in the village. In the cities fires burn. There are schools and theaters. Music plays. The city puts on clean . . . clothes, as if on a holiday . . . (the city) drinks, and there is much carousing. In contrast, in the village there is almost nothing but poverty, impenetrable ignorance, and hard work.

The city is for the upper classes, for gentlemen, foreign, it is not ours, not Ukrainian. It is Great Russian, Jewish, and Polish – not ours, not Ukrainian.¹¹

For the peasant, people like himself were Ukrainians, however inadequately he could explain this word in intellectual terms. For him, urban inhabitants were non-Ukrainians. This division between "us" and "them" – rural and powerless, on the one hand, and urban and powerful, on the other – was brought home to the Ukrainian peasants between 1917 and 1921. They quickly perceived that the conflict between themselves and these strangers was a struggle to control the food they grew.¹²

Even if the Ukrainian peasants could not rationally explain the boundaries of their identity, their rage at the godless strangers from the cities who spoke a different language while expropriating their grain reached a boiling point. Their fury forced them to conclude that "alien rule is illegitimate rule,"¹³ that those not from the surrounding countryside were interlopers and that only people of their "kind"

should rule. Thus, the Bolshevik problem in the Ukraine was not simply winning the acceptance of their urban-based revolution in a predominantly agricultural region (which was a major problem throughout the USSR), but legitimizing an urban-based revolution nationally alien to the Ukrainian countryside. The Bolsheviks confronted this dilemma throughout most of the non-Russian regions under their control.

In order to establish political authority in the Ukraine and in the other non-Russian regions, the predominantly urban, proletarian, and Russian party had to introduce (in addition to the New Economic Policy) a new moderate nationalities policy, far different from that of its autocratic predecessors. Warily the Soviet authorities encouraged the manifestation of a mass Ukrainian identity. By the early 1930s industrialization and urban growth abolished the dichotomy between the Ukrainian, on the one hand, and the modern and urban worlds, on the other. Now one could be Ukrainian, modern, and socially mobile. This transformation of the Ukrainian identity from an amorphous, reactive identity grounded in the countryside to a dynamic identity welded to the cities occurred under the auspices of the All-Union Communist Party (VKP (b)).

Instead of integrating the Ukrainians into the Soviet order, however, this urban harvest produced different results. The end product – an assertive Ukrainian national communism strengthened by the acquisition of a social base of support in the cities – threatened to delegitimize Soviet Russian control of the non-Russian areas and thwart the Soviet industrialization effort. The modernization and urbanization of Soviet society and the grounding of the Ukrainian elites in the cities challenged not only the Russian *cultural* hegemony in the cities of the Ukraine, but also the Russian *political* hegemony.

Since 1933 Soviet scholars have downplayed and often ignored altogether the national factor in the political mobilization of Ukrainian society in the 1920s.¹⁴ Most of the Western studies of this period have not analyzed the internal tensions within *korenizatsiia* or the full impact of industrialization and urban growth on Ukrainianization.¹⁵ By concentrating on the Ukrainians in the Ukrainian SSR during the first fifteen years of Soviet rule,¹⁶ this inquiry will investigate the uneasy conjuncture between Ukrainianization and the unintended social and political consequences of rapid economic development.

At the heart of this study is the complex relationship among social identities, social change, and legitimacy,¹⁷ in a post-revolutionary, multi-national state. Which social identities (class, gender, race, or

nationality) should the victorious party emphasize and to what degree?¹⁸ How are state-sponsored identities constructed at the center and accepted by the periphery of a multi-national state? How do these identities change as a result of industrialization and urbanization? Most importantly, how can a socialist regime legitimize an urban-based revolution in a predominantly agricultural, multi-national state by encouraging the development of distinct national cultures during a period of rapid social changes?

By 1921 the revolutionary, predominantly Russian regime had to answer these questions. Appealing to non-Russian national feelings in order to establish legitimacy made political sense at the time. But because the eruption of national consciousness among non-Russians between 1917 and 1921 was not merely a cultural transformation, the Soviet regime's compromises became a Faustian bargain, especially after the radical industrialization and urbanization of the late 1920s.