The Origins of the Slavic Nations

The latest developments in the countries of eastern Europe, including the rise of authoritarian tendencies in Russia and Belarus, as well as the victory of the democratic “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine, pose important questions about the origins of the East Slavic nations and the essential similarities or differences between their cultures. This book traces the origins of the modern Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian nations by focusing on premodern forms of group identity among the Eastern Slavs. It also challenges attempts to “nationalize” the Rus’ past on behalf of existing national projects, laying the groundwork for a new understanding of the premodern history of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. The book covers the period from the Christianization of Kyivan Rus’ in the tenth century to the reign of Peter I and his eighteenth-century successors, by which time the idea of nationalism had begun to influence the thinking of East Slavic elites.

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The Origins of the Slavic Nations

Premodern Identities in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus

Serhii Plokhy
To Maryna
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Preface

I did not intend to write this book. I was working on another project pertaining to modern history when questions related to the premodern identities of the Eastern Slavs slowly but surely took over most of my time and attention. Looking at the major modern narratives of East Slavic history, I suddenly realized that perceptions of the premodern Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians, both in their homelands and in the West, are still shaped by the views of national historians and the paradigms they created. While historians studying individual periods and topics of East Slavic history have made significant progress over the past century, the main national paradigms have survived both Soviet repression and the emigration of the bearers of national historiographic traditions to the West. Since the fall of the USSR, those paradigms have reappeared in the East Slavic lands and even blossomed on the ruins of Soviet historiography.

“Has anybody done better since the Depression?” asked the wife of an acquaintance of mine who was preparing a talk on the Ukrainian national historian, Mykhailo Hrushevsky (1866–1934). “Well, frankly, no,” was the answer he gave. I asked myself the same question, broadening its range from Hrushevsky to the entire field of Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian historiography. I also had to extend the chronological scope of the question, starting not with the Depression but with the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5 and the Revolution of 1905 in the Russian Empire. It was then that Hrushevsky published the first twentieth-century outline of Ukrainian history; the patriarch of Russian historiography, Vasilii Kliuchevsky, began to issue his Survey of Russian History; and Belarusian national historiography began to emerge from the shell of Russian imperial history. The answer to my question was equally negative. In the last hundred years, no one had done it better, nor had any approach to the “nationalization” of the past improved significantly on the achievements of those two outstanding scholars. In the end, I could not resist the urge to take a fresh look at the dominant versions of premodern Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian history and try to denationalize and update
them according to the standards of contemporary historical scholarship. In order to do so, it turns out, I had to write this book.

I could not have written it without the support offered me (intentionally or not) by many individuals and institutions – at times they, too, were under the impression that I was working on a different project altogether. I would like to offer individual thanks to those who helped me most. My special thanks go to Myroslav Yurkevich for his support, tactful advice, and thorough editing of my Ukrainglish prose. Advice from Roman Szporluk, Blair Ruble, Terry Martin, and Timothy Snyder was instrumental in shaping the scope of this book and my analytical approach. So were the comments of Volodymyr Kulyk, who, for good reason, advised me against writing this work. I am also grateful to Frank E. Sysyn and Zenon E. Kohut for sharing their insights on the history of early modern Ukrainian texts and identities, as well as books and copies of articles from their personal libraries. Also very helpful were discussions with Natalia Yakovenko, Charles J. Halperin, Michael S. Flier, and Edward L. Keenan on early modern Russian and Ukrainian identities. Paul Bushkovitch, Simon Franklin, Valerie Kivelson, Don Ostrowski, Oleksii Tolochko, Olena Rusyna, and Michael Moser read individual chapters of the book and gave me excellent advice on how to improve them. I would also like to thank participants in the Workshop on Cultural Identities at the University of Alberta – John-Paul Himka, Jelena Pogosjan, Natalia Pylypiuk, Oleh Ilnytzkyj, Heather Coleman, and Peter Rolland – for their comments on chapters originally presented at meetings of the workshop. Parts of chapters 7 and 8 originally appeared in my article “The Two Russias of Teofan Prokopovycz,” published in Mazepa e il suo tempo. Storia, cultura, società / Mazepa and His Time: History, Culture, Society (Alessandria, 2004), pp. 334–66. I thank Giovanna Brogi Bercoff for her advice on the content of the article and the editor of the volume, Giovanna Siedina, for permission to reprint parts of it in this book.

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Note on transliteration, dates, and translations

In the text of this book, the modified Library of Congress system is used to transliterate Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian personal names and toponyms. This system omits the soft sign (ь) and, in masculine personal names, the final “й” (thus, for example, Ostrozky, not Ostroż’kyi). In bibliographic references, the full Library of Congress system (ligatures omitted) is used, and the titles of publications issued after 1800 are given in modernized spelling. Toponyms are usually transliterated from the language of the country in which the designated places are currently located. As a rule, personal names are given in forms characteristic of the cultural traditions to which the given person belonged. If an individual belonged to (or is claimed by) more than one national tradition, alternative spellings are given in parentheses. In this case, as in the use of specific terminology related to the history of the Eastern Slavs and titles of east European officials and institutions, I follow the practice established by the editors of the English translation of Mykhailo Hrushevsky’s History of Ukraine-Rus’.¹

The Julian calendar used by the Eastern Slavs until 1918 lagged behind the Gregorian calendar used in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and western Europe (by ten days in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and by eleven days in the eighteenth century). Dates in this study are generally given according to the Julian calendar; where both styles appear concurrently, the Gregorian-calendar date is given in parentheses, e.g., 13 (23) May.

Translations within the text are my own unless a printed source is cited.

Maps
1. Kyivan Rus’
2. Rus’ principalities ca. 1100
(Source: *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Russia and the Former Soviet Union* [Cambridge, 1994].)
3. Muscovy in the fifteenth–sixteenth centuries
(Source: The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Russia and the Former Soviet Union [Cambridge, 1994].)
4. Lands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the sixteenth-eighteenth centuries
5. Cossack Ukraine ca. 1650
6. The Cossack Hetmanate in the mid-eighteenth century
(Source: Zenon E. Kohut, Russian Centralism and Ukrainian Autonomy: Imperial Absorption of the Hetmanate, 1760s–1830s [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, 1988].)