

Russia and the Ukraine - the Other Side of the Story

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By Stephen Ebert

We “know” how evil the Russians and Putin are, yet most Americans know little about this area of the world: a recent poll found only 1 in 5 Americans could locate the Ukraine on a map. Beyond geography, the US, a historical “newcomer”, has often underappreciated the importance of history and related cultural differences.

Russians and Ukrainians, comprising the “Eastern Slavs”, are ethnically related. Were it not for some tragic history, they would have had closer ties today than those afforded by the US/UK “special relationship”. Their history stretches back at least 700 years before the first settlers landed in America when Kiev was the center of power of a nascent Russian state. In the early 15th century, as the center of power shifted north-eastward, Moscow assumed the mantle of power.

After Mongol domination ended in the early 15th century, Russia has had to fend off numerous threats – then powerful Poland/Lithuania union in the 15th and 16th centuries and Sweden in the 17th century, Napoleon and Turkey and the West in the 19th century, and Germany in the 20th century. At its pre-revolutionary peak, the Russian Empire included Finland, the Baltics and the Ukraine.



Modern Ukraine outlined in Yellow. Note how it was a mixture of Polish, Hapsburg, ethnic Russian, and “Little Russian” (Ukrainian) lands back in 1896.

For centuries, the Ukraine (meaning “borderland” – initially of Poland) was a Russian Empire region known as “Little Russia”, and tensions today have a lot to do with perceived Russian condescension towards their “little brothers” (more like country-bumpkin cousins), and Russian serving as the “lingua franca” in the Ukraine. Ironically, pilots bombing the East speak Russian, as do many of the soldiers fighting there. Actually not that surprising – around 50% of “Ukrainians” speak fluent Russian and still use it in everyday life.

Over time, various “gifts” from Russia and the USSR more than quadrupled the Ukraine’s territory:

Today, roughly 25% of current Ukrainian population is of Russian heritage – equal to or greater than Hispanics in the US or Francophiles in Canada. The blue area – present-day rebellious “East and South” where most of the Russian population is concentrated – has

been inhabited by such Russians since the 18th century when it was known as “Novorossiya” (“New Russia”). Ukrainian patriots have recently shown their gratitude to Lenin by tearing down his statues.

In 1954, without any agreement from the hugely predominant Russian population, Premier Khrushchev gave the Crimea away to the Ukrainian Republic. Today, Russians still comprise 60% of Crimea’s population, Ukrainians only 15%. The idea that it took armed Russian intervention to ensure a favorable secession vote disingenuous to say the least. During my recent July 2014 visit, I found the people there, totally abandoned by the dissolution of the USSR, genuinely joyous about rejoining their homeland.

✖ Two major events further explain present-day animosity. The first – the “golodomor”. During Stalin’s early 1930’s agricultural collectivization, millions of Ukrainians died of starvation or were “liquidated”. Proof, say Ukrainian nationalists, of barbaric Russian genocide, albeit this exact same campaign was carried out throughout the USSR, with agricultural areas along the Volga also hit hard. Moreover, this was Communist, not “Russian”, driven – led by Stalin, a Georgian, and dedicated Communist followers, including a large number of Ukrainians.

The second event was the June, 1941 German invasion the USSR. Many “native” Ukrainians, especially in the West, saw Hitler – then well-known for proclaiming Slavs good only for slave labor – as their savior from Stalin. Many happily joined the German army and the SS, enthusiastically murdering “Ukrainian Russians”, Poles, Belorussians, Jews and fellow Ukrainians.

Today, a “Tea Party” sized, very influential Ukrainian minority idolizes Nazi collaborationists – mainly Stepan Bandera – and, many wearing masks, routinely participates in frightening “torch marches”, displaying not only Bandera’s picture, but overtly Nazi symbols on clothing and flags. They may not dominate the Ukrainian political landscape, but they, unlike the Tea Party, they are an extremely active and violent armed force committed to ridding their pure Ukraine of Russians and other undesirables like ✖ Jews. At best, we see so-called “innocent” street mobs chanting “suitcase, train station, Moscow” (shut up or leave), at worst, the current genocidal war and ethnic cleansing in the East.

Today, the relatively young Ukraine appears increasingly bent on forging its identity at the expense of Russian elements. Witness the seemingly benign “campaign” shaming innocent Russian-heritage kids in this video (bellow) as well as this laminated card – the left hand column says “incorrect (Russian) name”, the right the “correct”, Ukrainian name (right).

Imagine US teachers telling Jose and Juan their correct names are Joseph and John, the US formally rejecting Hispanic as a de facto second language, refusing permits for Cinco de Mayo parades, and tossing elected minorities out of office, and into garbage cans or prison? Or, Canada saying enough is enough to Francophiles.

Continued rejection of federalization and acceptance of Russian as one of two major national languages makes peaceful resolution impossible. Indeed, the “civilized” Western solution

would be either federalization, or, as with Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, dissolution into separate ethnic states.

Admittedly, while some Russians retain a highly sentimental, truly genuine affinity for their fellow Slavic “brothers”, many pure Ukrainians do not share these feelings. Even if such bonds are overestimated or weakening, consider other important factors:

- Russia has been the Ukraine’s main trading partner by a ratio of 4 to 1 over the next largest one.
- The Ukraine has, since the break-up of the USSR, been receiving very favorable trade terms, rates, and outright aid from Russia.
- Millions of Ukrainians legally work in Russia – coming and going freely, and sending money home to support their families. Prime Minister Mevedev’s recent statement that this will likely end was not the threat widely portrayed by Western media, but a sober fact., leading to the loss of large cash inflows and millions of workers returning home to face unemployment.
- About 1 in 5 Russians and Ukrainians have very close familial or blood ties. The current animosity, largely supported by the West, is literally depriving millions from seeing their close relatives again.

The headlong rush into the EU does not bode well for the average Ukrainian, already facing massive unemployment and inflation amid dramatically reduced social payments. The West cannot continue to provide handouts, and is not going to buy inferior Ukrainian goods. Finally, the related push to join NATO proves Russia’s point about continued, threatening eastward expansion right up to Russia’s borders (not the opposite) – a very real threat if you are a Russian.

If one polled as to whether the Ukraine should continue moving “Westward” (away from Russia), 1/3 would likely be in favor, 1/3 opposed, and 1/3 wanting to have their cake and eat it too – i.e, not have to sever relations with Russia. The question boils down to whether the West, in blaming Putin for all the ills of the Ukraine, is going to continue to stand idly by while the “new, free” Ukraine continues to basically settle scores, and foster not a democratic society, but one heavily influenced by significant and growing ultra-right wing nationalist forces.

Stephen Ebert is a Russian Translator, Consultant, and Political Commentator. The article was originally written on January 24, 2015 but ignored by the US media then. Exclusive publication on ORIENTAL REVIEW courtesy of the author.

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