The Projection Room

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A virulent nationalism is currently being injected along Russia's newly blurred southwestern border with Eastern Ukraine. As tempting as it my be to slip back into Cold War rhetorics, Monica Eppinger warns us that the old framework and distant gaze of geopolitics are prone to missing much.

Throughout Crimea in the summer of 2007, Russian government outreach had taken on a newly assertive tone of identity politics. From poetry contests to biker rallies, literary retrospectives to naval salutes, a seemingly nonstop pageant of prestige pumped Russian cool. Though seven years shy of invasion and annexation, the message was literally in the air, even dominating the radio dial of my ancient station wagon as soon as I crossed onto the peninsula to return to ethnographic research there.

One of my fieldwork interlocutors stood squarely in the target demographic: mid-sixties, born in Russia, he had come to Crimea as a Communist Youth League enthusiast in the 1960s to help build socialism and repopulate a region still recovering from World War II and post-war Stalinist deportations. He taught high school history until the Soviet Union itself passed into history and he unexpectedly found himself in an independent Ukraine. His ties to Russia remained close: his family had all stayed in central Russia and, even 40 years on, he still paid them an extended visit every summer.

A historically improbable Ukraine, a power-projecting Russia, a post-Soviet Crimea: in this liminal time, the arid plateau of southern Ukraine had come to feel more like a precipice. Beneath the beating southwestern sun, I had to ask, did he feel Russian or Ukrainian? “Oh, Ukrainian,” he answered without hesitation. “My family in Russia doesn’t understand at all. They think there’s no difference, that it’s all the same.” He explained that the difference for him was somehow a product of Ukraine being independent. Even though he experienced politics as a game played in the capital far away and democracy as a spectator sport, Ukraine’s independence somehow changed him. “My family does not get it at all, but we are completely different countries.” He paused, the teacher searching for the right heuristic. “This is how it is: they have their movie, and we have ours.”[1]

[1] A.N., interview with author, T-ogo Village, Crimea, Ukraine (June 7, 2007) [identity concealed to protect interlocutor]. Thanks are also due to Russian students of the Mikolayiv Summer School for sharing their thoughts on contemporary Russia.

The teacher's metaphor suggests an experience curiously molded by civic preoccupations without conscious participation in politics. Kyiv[2] didn't even bother trying to produce a coherent narrative, much less "messaging," yet he lived engrossed in the drama of Ukraine unfolding. His experience offers a pragmatic starting point for reconceiving "Russia" in today's specific historical moment.

In a time of tested territorial boundaries and expansively conceived grounds for national affiliation, pragmatics is not the intellectual road most taken. Facing a specter of Russian power projection, an American public primed by decades of superpower rivalry and caught unawares by a post-Soviet future seems ready to believe that a Cold War has begun afresh. The old Cold War, as Katherine Verdery suggests, was not simply a superpower standoff, but a form of knowledge production and cognitive organization of the world.[3] It left an intellectual apparatus—from Kremlinology and political science to an intelligence community set up to deal with Kennanesque scenarios—that stands ready to get firing again. Geopolitics, a set of normative claims well disguised as an analytic frame,[4] is once again common idiom.

Admittedly, a Cold War grammar may be apt in some respects for parsing a Russia whose institutions of multi-party democracy have been taken over by veterans of the Soviet intelligence services. However, it also obscures obvious differences between the contemporary situation and the Cold War. Socialism as a motivating counter-ideology or program of governance is missing in action. Rolling back private property ownership is not on offer. Instead, we are witnessing the apparent consolidation of a new style of politics in Russia that weds pointed critique of Western democracies and economic liberalism with tolerance of extreme wealth gaps and active support for nationalist forces at home and across Europe.[5] Nationalism, not socialism, motivates its most ardent proponents, and with nearly 8,000 people killed in southwest Ukraine in the past sixteen months, their ardor burns hot.[6]

But the geopolitical lens seems to have only two settings: a bird's-eye view for taking in vast territorial boundaries, or a close zoom for peering into micro-scenarios within Kremlin corridors. It is focused, in other words, on either the limits of the state or on the inner workings of its deepest insiders. As tempting as it may be to dust off the familiar lens or slip into boisterous Cold War rhetoric, the old framework and the distant gaze of geopolitics are prone to missing much.

For a quiet alternative from a more intimate vantage, Faith Hillis' monograph of 19th and early 20th century intellectual history, *Children of Rus': Right-Bank Ukraine and the Invention of a Russian Nation*, can guide us to new terrain.[7] Studying Russia's

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[2] "Kyiv," the transliteration from Ukrainian, refers to the capital of the Ukrainian state independent since 1991. I use "Kiev," the transliteration from Russian, to refer to the city before 1991, in imperial or Soviet times.

[3] Katherine Verdery, *What was Socialism, and What Comes Next* (1996), 4.

[4] This characterization is Timothy Snyder's. *See* Timothy Snyder, "Not Even Past," Thinking Ukraine Forum (May 19, 2014) *available at* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fnvGFN0NkKo.

[5] See, e.g., Anton Shekhovtsov, *The Kremlin's Marriage of Convenience with the European Far Right*," Open Democracy (April 28, 2014) *available at* https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/anton-shekhovtsov/kremlin's-marriage-of-convenience-with-european-far-right.

[6] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Human Rights Monitoring Mission Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine (Aug. 15, 2015) *available at* http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/UA/11thOHCHRreportUkraine.pdf.

[7] Faith Hillis, *Children of Rus': Right-Bank Ukraine and the Invention of a Russian Nation* (2013).

southwestern border region (parts of what would now be called "western Ukraine"), then known as the "right bank" for which Kiev was the regional administrative center, Hillis finds that it proved key to the fate of the empire.[8] How and why are relevant today.

The idea of popular sovereignty spread across Eastern Europe with Napoleon and engendered a new preoccupation with "nations" and "nationalism." Among right-bank intellectuals, the particularities of the people of that region—known as "*Malarossiya*," "Russia Minor" or "Little Russia"[9]—became the basis for a set of claims premised on the idea of a "nation." The historical narrative they composed had it that the tsarist empire traced its origins to medieval Kiev, making Kiev the cradle of a "Slavic Eastern Orthodox" civilization continued in Russia. This genealogy thus joined in special relationship two purported national unities, the "Great Russian" and the "Little Russian" people.

This history, right bank intellectuals believed, could shape the future. They thought the "Little Russian" nation, in the authenticity of its folk culture, served as the bearer of a crucial "national spirit" that could reinvigorate the empire and help it combat internal enemies. From this (what Hillis identifies as "the Little Russian idea"), right-bank thought evolved into two strains. One camp, self-identifying as "Little Russian" and supporting the idea of nations and nationalism, became a point of origin and leading proponent of *Russian* nationalism (alarming St. Petersburg tsarists who recognized the idea of "nations" as inherently destabilizing to an empire based on an estates system of loyalty and service). This is one of Hillis' most revelatory, carefully documented, and explosive claims: that Kiev subjects, self-identifying with right-bank Ukraine and loyal to the tsar, played a key role in establishing Russian nationalism.

A second strain also evolved, and its camp found "Little Russia"—what would later become Ukraine—distinctive not because of a special relationship to Russia, but because of a non-ethnic civic identity built on tolerance between ethnicities and faiths. Hillis' second well-supported and explosive finding is that this camp—core Ukrainophilic sponsors of "Ukrainian" regional autonomy and eventually separatism—was based in Kiev's multi-ethnic elite of Poles, Jews, and Ukrainians and their mutually accommodating civic culture. At the turn of the 20th century, each of the two camps in Kiev developed into a bastion of mass politics, increasingly radicalized and mutually antagonistic. They took their fight to the Civil War that followed the Socialist Revolution of 1917, a war raging disproportionately on Ukrainian battlefields. Neither side "won," at least not that round. Certainly, the Russian empire did not survive the Russian nationalism generated from its southwestern borderlands.

The relevance of this history to understanding contemporary Russia goes beyond the uncanny parallels between a northern state and its troubling southwestern flank. Ideas that motivated Kiev politics at the turn of the 20th century—versions of nationalism and contending visions of the basis for civic engagement—continue to shape action and thought today. Some of the most violent manifestations of "pro-Russian" sentiment along Russia's border with Ukraine come from deep commitments to these old ideas (and some resistance to it, from deep-seated opposition to their very premises). Contemporary

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[8] The reference is to the western bank of the river that bisects the country, the Dnipro; viewed from Kiev looking downstream towards the Black Sea, the west side is to the "right."

[9] Hillis translates *Malarossiya* as "Little Russia." It could with equally validity translate as "Russia Minor." Read anachronistically, it could stand as a synonym for "Ukraine."

struggles are legible through the paradigm Hillis offers, connecting ideas to action and action to new social formations. What her account deemphasizes, but contemporary experience does not, is a place in the equation for the passions.

Several other unresolved questions from this earlier time, it turns out, also drive action now. In the idea of "the nation," at least as it played out in this region, Hillis finds the origin of a mass politics manifest in elections, newspaper reading, rallies, strikes, street violence, and pogroms. In other words, she treats mass violence as a point on the spectrum of mass politics. One hundred years later, those questioning the legitimacy of a government in Kyiv or would-be Russophilic splinterlands are asking what, in the end, is the relationship between the idea of the nation and the idea of popular sovereignty? People on both sides of the border have reason to ask about connections between those ideas and mass violence. Are mass politics—including the violence Hillis finds associated with them—a mechanism of popular sovereignty? Or, in their radicalizing self-justifications, its very defeat?

These questions continue to galvanize some forms of Russian nationalism today, and—despite well-warranted skepticism towards some of its proponents—they deserve thoughtful consideration. If not mass politics, what other modes of engagement might popular sovereignty and national ideas yield? Can tolerance breed its own "nation"? Can cosmopolitanism—taking mutual respect as a basis for civic identity—compete with the simplifying narratives of nationalism? And, uncomfortably, are tolerance and cosmopolitanism inextricable virtues of a liberalism that might be ripping off post-socialist publics in other ways?

The idea of a Russian nation and the enthusiasms it generates have proved a great unifier within a contemporary Russia riven by rural-urban divides, sharp disparities in living conditions, and enormous gaps between a fabulously wealthy petro-few and a subsistence-poverty many. A virulent nationalism is currently being injected along Russia's newly blurred southwestern border with eastern Ukraine as a backfire against putative liberal or fascist threats from the West. At this moment, a sophisticated understanding of nationalism—where it came from, the internal tensions it promulgates, and where it can lead—is indispensable. As with my Crimean friend's family back in Russia, the idea of a civic identity that is not based on genealogical relationships in polity, blood, or faith baffles some in Russia today.

The easy takeaway from Hillis' book is that nationalism is a framing proposition particularly salient nowadays. The origin story of Russian nationalism (and the 19th century narrative of Kiev as the cradle of two peoples that persists even today) may explain some of the close attention Russia pays to Ukraine. However, another, and perhaps greater, import of the historical story for understanding the contemporary lies in its revelation of process: how projections, ideas cast from afar, can give rise to social formations and action.

This is a radical change from the current mode of thinking about Russia. The analytic of geopolitics orients us to look at Russia as a source of plans and power projection cast upon others. It traces artillery, fighters, and broadcasts pouring from Russia across the border into Ukraine; it paints Russia's southwest border and those resident or hovering in its vicinity as the object of Moscow's designs. Hillis' work causes us to ask: What about *their* projections—of admiration, affiliation, resentment, or, as with my Crimean friend, indifference?

My cue from Crimea is to see state and citizen as mutually constituting. Rather than treating either as a static unit of analysis, it challenges us to think about the state as a matter of pragmatics rather than ontology and to look at the nuances of lived experience through which states and identities are formed. Instead of looking into Kremlin corners, history suggests we pay attention to the precariously placed fighters and thinkers on both sides of Russia's southwestern border, not because they are puppets of Moscow (or "zombies," as some internet memes of the last year had it), but because in thinking about "love," "threats" and "defense," they are generating powerful ideas about what "Russia" is and what it should be.

The story of how nationalism came to Russia encourages us, among other things, to see Russia as a screen upon which others' ideas about it are projected; but this is a queerly interactive technology of projection, in which the images projected change the screen itself. What might be more farsighted, instead of looking only at the screen, would be to peek into the projection room.

To understand "Russia," then, I suggest looking to people at its edges and the ambitions, hopes, or fears they are projecting onto the center. Their ideas and passions will not form Russia in the same way as those of a century ago, but in their dynamism, volatility, and perhaps disappointments, even "pro-Russian" fighters and thinkers may unwittingly provide a set of challenges with which intelligence bureaucrats at the center have next to contend.

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