

# N&N themed section: Reflections on nationalism and the Russian invasion of Ukraine: Introduction

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## Abstract

This introduction to themed section consists of two parts: a sketch of national(ist) historiography and a brief description of the following contributions.

## KEYWORDS

invasion, nationalism, Russia, Ukraine, war

## 1 | THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT<sup>1</sup>

Shortly prior to ordering the Russian armed forces to attack Ukraine, Vladimir Putin (2021) published a statement setting out what he claimed to be the historical justification for this “special operation”. This is a version of the case that Ukrainians (“Little Russians”), Byelorussians (“White Russians”) and Russians (“Great Russians”) have been since the time of “Kyivan Rus”<sup>2</sup> (the Ukrainian rendering in English), and remain today, essentially one nation united by blood and culture.

There are serious historiographical debates about these different national names: what they mean, how significant they are and how they have changed and clashed over centuries. The key debate between competing historiographies is whether there was an essential East Slavic unity that underpinned the various polities and conflicts in the region. Greater Russian national historiography argues that there was; what has become Ukrainian (and to a lesser extent Byelorussian) national historiography argues that there were distinct national identities.

Modern historians will probably be sceptical about competing arguments based on mainly a series of medieval and early modern chronicles written by churchmen, set widely apart in time and space, and often only surviving as fragments and speculatively restored texts (for a lucid and scholarly account, see Plokhly, 2006). However, such scholarly historical accounts, even when arguing one or another national identity case, must be clearly distinguished from the writings of Putin and others like him. Those are framed in ways that put them beyond empirical or logical criticism. That is typical of nationalist ideology that pillages the past for present purposes.

Before sketching out the serious historical debates about Russian and Ukrainian national identity, it is important to establish how such debates relate to the conflicts of today. If one considers that the legitimacy of claims to “national self-determination” is grounded in what the current generation wants, then historical arguments about

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national identity and nationalism are irrelevant for evaluating such claims. It is difficult enough in any case to establish such legitimacy in terms of defining the territory and population to which self-determination should apply and then ascertaining what the majority of that population wants.

Rather, the study of history matters not in legitimising and justifying national self-determination claims but in enabling one to trace out key processes that have resulted in the situation in which such claims arise and seeking to explain the appeal of different claims.

The ways in which national identity claims were framed in the medieval and early modern periods should be distinguished from how they were made from the early 19th century onwards. These claims, mainly to be found in chronicles written by church figures, usually monks, can be related to the interests of particular elites. So, for example, in the 1670s after the Cossack leader Bohdan Khmelnytsky switched the left bank of the Dnieper region from Polish-Lithuanian control to that of the Tsardom of Muscovy, regional elites had an interest in identifying with Muscovy. A selection of fragments from a chronicle known as *The Synopsis*, written in Kyiv Cave Monastery, asserted a single Slavic-Russian identity. Regional church and Cossack leaders succeeded in reaching key positions in Moscow, later assisted by Catherine the Great enabling a mass fabrication of certificates of nobility. This resembles how Protestant Irish, Welsh and Scottish elites identified with the British state and came disproportionately to dominate key central economic and social positions. Such elite identity claims often combine notions of regional cultural variation and loyalty to the state. Later nationalist historiography then reinterprets this as narratives about the mutually exclusive national identities of whole populations.

This extended view of national identity first took clear form in the early 19th century, shaped by the radical arguments about nation articulated in the American and French revolutions and extended into east-central Europe during the Napoleonic wars (see Miller, 2003). The failed Decembrist uprising of 1825, for example, claimed that various Slavic tribes were all part of one Russian nation.

Initially, such national movements were small, dominated by intellectuals. In the middle decades of the century, claims were made for a distinct Ukrainian national identity in western Russia, as well as for a closely related "Ruthenian" identity in Galicia, in the eastern part of the Habsburg Monarchy. These were directed against the respectively dominant Russian and Polish elites, often eliciting harsh responses, including state repression. With the abolition of serfdom and the growth of peasant schooling, these claims moved beyond elite spheres into disputes about such matters as the language in which mass literacy was to be taught.

The historiography on the significance of the Ukrainian national movement up to the end of the Romanov Empire is influenced by later political positions. At the time, leading advocates of Ukrainian identity played down its significance.

Comparing Ukrainian with patois and Platt-Deutsch, Dragomanov noted that both Provençal and Low German dialects had more ground to claim the status of an independent language than Ukrainian, which had neither a systematised grammar nor vocabulary. (Miller, 2003, p. 160)

Dragomanov also disavowed any political implications for cultural nation-building projects. Of course, one could regard such assertions as designed to deflect Russian efforts to suppress the national movement.

Many Ukrainian nationalists in the last decades of the empire despaired that urban and capitalist growth and increased physical mobility across Russia favoured assimilation to a greater Russian identity. This led to differences as to whether repression or tolerance was the best way to undermine Ukrainian nationalism.

It was the outbreak of the First World War that enabled the mass mobilisation of ethnic national identity claims along with the active pursuit of "national self-determination".

Austria-Hungary and Germany occupied parts of western Russia and promoted separatist movements. This was not reversed when the Bolsheviks gained control of the region; they acted ferociously against Russian nationalists, for example, executing all known members of the leading Russian nationalist organisation in Kyiv. The favouring of Ukrainian and other non-Russian national movements continued after the formation of the Soviet Union with the

creation of “national” republics in which cultural national identity was explicitly cultivated and local elites promoted politically (Martin, 2001). However, this was accompanied by the imposition of a one-party state committed to an anti-nationalist communist ideology, followed by the massive changes wrought by Stalin's collectivisation, including a famine that hit Ukraine especially hard and that has been interpreted as a genocide by many historians and others (Applebaum, 2018). After that came the astonishingly destructive war between the USSR and Nazi Germany during which Stalin cultivated Russian nationalism (Snyder, 2012).

That was followed by the Cold War, and then the stagnation and collapse of the USSR. All this deeply affected in different and changing ways how people living in Ukraine and Russia thought about themselves and others. Further radical change has characterised the region since the formation of Ukraine as an internationally recognised state (including by Russia) and the abandonment of socialism. No historian or social scientist can be satisfied with any account that seeks to tell this rapidly changing history in terms of some “essential” identity—Ukrainian, Russian or any other—persisting over the *longue durée*.

In this introduction, it is impossible to take account of this complex and changing history. So far as the present is concerned, even when obscured by the “fog of war” and the propaganda of competing nationalisms, the main effect seems to have been a strengthening of popular identification with Ukraine and, especially since 2014, an identification against Russia. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russia has not only waged war against Ukrainians in Ukraine but has started treating Ukrainians residing in Russia as suspect aliens. All this undermines Putin's claim that “Ukrainians and Russians belong to one nation”.

## 2 | THE CONTRIBUTIONS TO THIS THEMED SECTION

It is against this broadly sketched historical context that the contributions to this themed section focus on recent and current events. Specifically, these contributions examine the Russian invasion of Ukraine by addressing the different dimensions of the role that nationalism plays in the conflict. While different in their conceptual, theoretical and empirical approaches, the contributions highlight three key themes that underpin the dynamics of this conflict: (1) Russia's imperial nationalism; (2) how this nationalism denies Ukraine's right to existence; and (3) Ukraine's mobilisation against Russia's nationalism.

Kuzio and Girvin both attribute the conflict to Putin's imperial and irredentist nationalism. Kuzio's contribution places Putin imperial nationalism at the core of the Russian invasion and makes three relevant key points: First, the invasion of Ukraine was indeed driven by Vladimir Putin's imperial Russian nationalism, which merges Soviet national Bolshevik and Tsarist imperial nationalism. Second, the surprising lack of scholarly work on the growth of imperial nationalism prior to the invasion has placed researchers at a disadvantage in explaining why the invasion took place. Third, Russian imperial nationalism is vulnerable to miscalculation because essentially it views Russian speakers as supporters of the Russian world while in reality this has not proven to be the case. The majority of Ukraine's Russophones have shown their allegiance to Ukraine.

Girvin's contribution focuses on the tensions between imperial/majority nationalisms on the one hand and independence nationalisms on the other, drawing on the principle of national self-determination. In effect, Girvin argues, the former has priority over the latter, and this is exploited by established states to deny autonomy to sub-state nations. While states may have appeared more secure within the context of the post-WWII geo-political world order established on the basis of state sovereignty and territorial integrity, great powers continue to impose their political will on other states. The Russian invasion of Ukraine constitutes the most direct 21st-century threat to the national self-determination consensus. Russian nationalism denies Ukraine's right to exist and is closely related to revanchism and imperial nationalism. Girvin agrees with Kuzio that Putin rejects secessionist nationalism but embraces state and majoritarian nationalism established on imperial and ethnic foundations. Putin's main aim is to restore the Czarist empire and USSR whose collapse he views as a geopolitical disaster. This, Girvin argues, leaves no room for self-determination of sub-state nationalities, because in a crucial sense, their existence is denied.

Knott's contribution systematises this point by introducing the concept of "existential nationalism": One state (State A) is fighting for its existence, while another state (State B) is fighting against the A's right to exist. Ukraine is fighting for the right to exist and maintain its right to determine what that existence should look like (democratic, multi-cultural, tolerant and multi-ethnic). Russia is fighting for a version of Ukrainian existence that is non-consensual and hierarchical, where Ukraine is subservient to Kremlin hegemony and ideology. Existential nationalism is Russia's motivation to pursue war at any cost and Ukraine's motivation to fight with everything it has. The stakes are different but the war is existential for both Ukraine and Russia, Knott argues.

In developing the concept of existential nationalism, Knott also discusses the nationalism and mobilisational capacity of the state under invasion. Scholars, Knott notes, have recently observed shifting forms of identification in Ukraine and the growing prominence of civic nationalism. Onuch focuses on this point more explicitly both in theoretical and empirical terms. While one might expect, Onuch notes, ordinary Ukrainians to unite around an ethno-national collective identity, instead the ongoing regional war, crises and now all-out invasion by Russia have shored up civic identities. Her argument is based on panel survey data collected for the MOBILISE project among the Ukrainian population in March/April 2019, January/February 2021 and 2 December 2021/16 February 2022 and a cross-sectional nationally representative survey collected 19–24 May 2022. These data show that a broad majority of Ukrainian citizens are increasingly identifying with the Ukrainian state. Ukrainians are also simultaneously increasingly identifying with pro-democratic and pro-European positions. The shift in identification from ethno-linguistic to civic/European has occurred incrementally, at a time when Ukrainian political opponents, even when polarised on all other fronts, found unity in their discourse around democratic Europeanness and civicism since the 2019 election cycle and have continued to identify civic Ukrainianness as European bound and democratising.

Howlett also examines Ukraine's mobilisational capacity, but from an everyday nationalism perspective. Despite the devastation at all levels of society caused by Russia's ongoing attacks, Howlett argues, Ukrainians' expressions and practices of nationhood have endured and even evolved in light of their country's war-torn reality. A strong attachment to the Ukrainian nation has arguably even grown since Russia's invasion. Indeed nationalism has been "actively constructed" as a response to Russia's antagonism. Overt expressions of Ukrainian nationhood have been widely observed across the country since February 2022, many of which have been shared globally across multiple platforms. Howlett's contribution considers these expressions by focusing on the experiences of ordinary Ukrainians in bomb shelters in some of the most heavily attacked cities of Chernihiv, Kyiv and Kharkiv. In demonstrating that nationalism has served as both a sentiment and expression of self, this contribution illustrates the significant role nationalism plays in the current conflict as an unifying and motivating force in Ukrainian citizens' everyday lives.

Put together, the contributions in this themed section suggest that in order to understand the Russian invasion of Ukraine, scholars must take into account the different manifestations of nationalism that underpin this conflict. From Russia's imperial nationalism to Ukraine's mobilisation and struggle for existence, conflicting national narratives and the tensions that underline them are shaped by and continue to shape the existing international system. As the contributions of this themed section point out, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has significant implications not just for the region itself but also for the very consensus of the current international order, as well as the future of multi-national states and the principle of self-determination.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> John Breuilly is indebted to advice from Alexei Miller, including sharing his forthcoming article "National Identity in Ukraine: History and Politics", *Russia in Global Affairs*, 20/3 (2022), pp. 94–114.
- <sup>2</sup> "Kyivan Rus" was a polity established in the 10th century by princes of the Rurikid dynasty. It fragmented after the Mongol invasion in the mid-13th century. After a long and confusing sequence of conflicts between regional princes and elites, accompanied by the involvement of Polish–Lithuanian, Ottoman and other powers, a new power formed under the princes of Moscow was clearly established by mid-15th century and began to arrogate to itself the name of "Rus".

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