1

# A Constructivist Survey of Ukraine's Ethnolinguistic Divisions in Historical Perspective

Daniel MARKOVIC

**Abstract:** This article seeks to fill a general gap in the literature on the Russo--Ukrainian conflict by analyzing the ethnolinguistic circumstances that have prefaced the outbreak of war. Starting with the Rus', the origins of the East Slavs and their divergence into the modern Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian identities are traced in reference to historical geopolitics. The rise of nationalism and the mobilization of populations by elites along identity concerns are argued to have turned ethnolinguistic issues into a subject of state security for the first time. The Russian Empire and the Soviet Union are found to have employed Russification towards the end of internal security and modernization, whose outcomes have led to the divisions faced by Ukrainian society today.

**Keywords:** Ukrainian history; Russian history; Russification; identity policy; securitization

# Introduction

As media outlets increasingly began to cover the buildup of Russian forces on the eastern borders of Ukraine towards the end of last year, few expected that the geopolitical situation there would erupt into the first major international conflict on European territory since the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. The unpredictability of the future is a problem for any expert of current events, especially in contexts where the presence of various complex factors contributing to the evolution of any given social or political issue make an earnest analysis even more challenging. The events transpiring in Ukraine certainly reflect that complexity, and various experts focusing on Eastern European affairs have dedicated immense intellectual effort into making sense of the totality of circumstances that have led Ukraine, Russia, and the world into the conditions that they face today. While many analyses focus on aspects such as security policy, grand strategy, resource conflicts, and weaponized nationalism, this work seeks to employ the cultural dispositions of the two main ethnolinguistic identities in Ukraine as its primary unit of analysis. Unlike in the case of Yugoslavia, for example, where one's ethnic signifier usually corresponded to religion, "Russianness" and "Ukrainanness" in Ukraine are divided across both language itself and ethnic identity as determined by ancestry over generations. For historical and other reasons, these two factors often do not overlap with each other and therefore pose a certain difficulty that, when considering the Ukrainian state's borders and the complicated makeup of its citizens within these abstract borders, reflects the broad basis of this present analysis.[1]

Questions of ethnic identity and their formalization into national schemas are first and foremost questions about communities of people brought together along a variety of similar characteristics that exist over long periods of time.[2] Understanding why such characteristics converge and, in the

[1] More precisely, given that so many self-identified ethnic Ukrainians are bilingual in Russian and Ukrainian from an early age, the traditional conception of ethnicity being directly tied to language is not totally reliable in this case.

[2] Here I essentially take the so-called "revisionist" position of scholars Serhii Plokhy, John A. Armstrong, Anthony D. Smith, Adrian Hastings, and others. See the introduction to Serhii Plokhy's *The Origins of the Slavic Nations: Premodern Identities in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus* (2006) for a more detailed account of theoretical distinctions.

context of the East Slavs, diverge also reflects an understanding of why two separate nations may come to exist in the first place. While basically all nations are artificially constructed by some empowered actors, if the basis for a nation's formation is either forceful enough, convincing enough to its purported people, and/or based on some valid phenomenon, then it is at least possible for that nation to exist unto itself. With enough time, that constructed nation can, instead of merely reflecting some general qualities among a people from its initial point of creation, begin to actively create its own cultural forms that bind a people together under a civic and/or ethnic national identity. Ukraine does not only need to reproduce its own inertia for national existence, however, but also contend with a larger and stronger neighbor potently linked to its own history. Indeed, across the Ukrainian nation-state's vast borders, are people who are either at least partially non-Ukrainian linguistically, non-Ukrainian ethnically, or both. This work seeks to survey these complicated cultural circumstances through an analysis of the concrete historical past and resulting sociocultural dispositions that lie firmly in the background of the massive armed conflict that is happening in Eastern Europe today.

Given the relatively limited scope of this analysis, the contemporary political dimensions of this conflict, such as the NATO-Ukraine-Russia dynamic and the breakdowns of international diplomacy, will be avoided. However, it may be assumed from a primarily cultural perspective of this kind that if the Ukrainian state and/or population seeks a certain political direction, then that likely derives from sociocultural concerns relative to its neighbors, i.e. Russia. This same logic, therefore, reflects Russia's military ambitions in Ukraine. Nevertheless, it is evident once again that various factors help define the existing conflict between these states and their peoples, more than what is or could possibly be covered from the foundational perspective of this work. A more precise discussion of cultural and policy nuances is recommended for a much longer publication; shortened presentations of this kind always suffer from some manner of incompleteness. Here it is hoped that the policy perspectives derived from the basic phenomena outlined here may assist in generating positive peace in Eastern Europe long after the final bullet is fired.

# On the Origins of East Slavic Identities

## *The Rus' Dominion*

The first state from which virtually all East Slavic people emerged was called the Kievan or Kyivan Rus'.[3] According to a key chronicle from the 12th century, the Rus' was founded by the Varangian Prince Oleg.[4] This ruler of Novgorod and its surrounding land conquered the cities of Kyiv/Kiev towards the south before consolidating his territorial gains into one entity around 882.[5] Due to the future Ukrainian capital's advantageous strategic and economic position on the Dnieper River, Oleg formally changed his capital from the city of Novgorod to Kiev/Kyiv.[6] This new Eastern European state would quickly establish itself as a major power in the region. Under Oleg and later his son Igor, the Rus' would expand further into its surrounding territories and establish diplomatic and trade relations with the Byzantine Empire in 911.[7] Little is known about the demographic composition of the Rus's territories, but various Scandinavian influences seem to have permeated the early history of this state due to the viking background of its leaders as well as the alike makeup of the population that Oleg ruled around Novgorod.[8] However, likely due to the increasingly Slavic demographics of the areas that the Rus' conquered over time, Igor's son Sviatoslav would abandon the Scandinavian traditions that characterized the ruling dynasty up to his leadership.[9] By the ascension of Sviatoslav's own son Vladimir/Volodymyr the Great in 980, Slavic traditions dominated the rulers of the Rus'.[10]

---

[3] Originally *Роусь*; "Kievan" or "Kyivan" was added after the fact. The Anglicized *Rus'* will be used herefrom.

[4] Paul Bushkovitch, *A Concise History of Russia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 3.

[5] The Old East Slavic spelling is *Кыѥвъ*. Since the modern Russian and Ukrainian languages differ from this original form, "Kyiv" and "Kiev" will be used together for contexts before the East Slavic languages diverged.

[6] Bushkovitch, 1.

[7] "Kievan Rus," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed July 2022, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Kyivan-Rus.

[8] Bushkovitch, 4.

[9] "Kievan Rus," *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

[10] The original Old East Slavic spelling of this ruler's name is *Володимѣръ*. See the third footnote for the approach used to reference this historical figure.

Volodymyr/Vladimir's rule marked the beginning of a golden age for the relatively young state established by his recent ancestors. Less than a decade after assuming power, in 988 he formally converted himself to Orthodox Christianity through a baptism performed in a Greek colony in what is today Crimea.[11] This conversion occurred, far from purely religious reasons, as part of a political arrangement between Vladimir/Volodymyr and Byzantine Emperor Basil II for the marriage of Basil's sister to the Rus' ruler as well as military assistance that deepened the ties between these two powerful nations orbiting the Black Sea.[12] In only one generation, Rus' elites changed a nominally Scandinavian-Slavic pagan country into a purely Slavic pagan one before finally settling on Orthodox Christianity.[13] Indeed, a sociocultural criterion as basic as Orthodoxy to most Eastern Europeans today was far from inevitable and actually rested upon the temporary political circumstances of this time, not to mention the fact that the final decision was decided upon by a single person. However, the deed was done. Traditional Slavic paganism soon became supplanted by the Rus' authorities in favor of Byzantium's gospel. Religious services were still given in Slavic speech since Cyril and Methodius, the inventors of the Cyrillic script, had already translated the bible into Old Church Slavonic a century earlier.[14] Due to Volodymyr/Vladimir the Great's conversion to Orthodox Christianity, he not only solidified a formal religion for the East Slavs but also introduced a literary foundation through Old Church Slavonic that would act as the written template for all East Slavic languages.[15] Following his death, Vladimir/Volodymyr's eldest son Yaroslav the Wise would continue his father's profound legacy.

---

[11] Ishaan Tharoor and Gene Thorp, "How Ukraine became Ukraine, in 7 maps," *Washington Post*, 9 March 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/03/09/maps-how-ukraine-became-ukraine/.

[12] "Kievan Rus," *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

[13] Due to the lack of evidence detailing how local populations reacted to elite edicts about cultural and linguistic norms, the distinction between state policy and public sentiments cannot be explored in detail until the modern era.

[14] *Ibid*. Furthermore, it should be noted that Old Church Slavonic was foreign to the East Slavs and that it was created largely with the intention of converting Slavic peoples across Europe to Orthodox Christianity.

[15] Lack of evidence suggests that there was no earlier writing system developed in the Rus' before Orthodoxy.

**Map 1:** Kievan Rus


Source: Britannica

Yaroslav became the ruler following a power struggle among his brothers. Sviatopolk, the eldest of the bunch, managed to kill all but Yaroslav himself; with the support of Novgorod and its population as well as various Varangian mercenaries, he defeated his eldest brother before formally coming to power in 1019.[16] Under Yaroslav's rule, the Rus' continued to flourish as it did under his father. Continuing this trend, Kyiv/Kiev became the most populous and one of, if not the most significant city in Eastern Europe. Along with this power came a cultural explosion that injected Orthodox ideas, art, and architecture into the East Slavic consciousness on a massive scale for the first time; the literary policy established by Yaroslav's father through the adoption of Orthodox Christianity also expanded with attempts to import and translate various texts that he found significant.[17] While Yaroslav succeeded in spreading culture across the East Slavic world, he was not as successful with ensuring the strength of the Rus' after his own death. Yaroslav's proposed schema for succession failed. Although no bloodshed took place between his sons, the Rus' domains were split among them.[18] The decentralization caused by this division weakened the foundation created by past leaders and these circumstances consequently assisted in the East Slavs' inability to resist the Mongols once they crossed the Eurasian steppes in the middle of the 13th century. Although some western territories of the Rus' remained independent from Mongol rule, these would eventually be absorbed into Poland and Lithuania during the 14th century.[19] It was the Khans that inadvertently produced the first and most important divide between the East Slavs—between the Muscovite Russians and the Ruthenians.

## *Eastern Europe after the Mongols*

The vaguely common culture and language of the East Slavs was split after the Mongol invasions. While the state power of the Rus' was far less centralized than in the Russian Empire, language and culture generally

---

16 "Kievan Rus," *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

17 Bushkovitch, *A Concise History of Russia*, 12.

18 "Kievan Rus," *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

19 *Ibid*.

remained consistent across the wide Rus' domains. It was only once various foreign entities began to exert their unique influences upon the people of the Rus' unevenly that the divisions between Belarusians, Russians, and Ukrainians now seen today took form. Since the vast majority of East Slavs remained Orthodox Christians, language thus became a primary signifier of the distinctions between East Slavic peoples.[20] Historically, this division took shape at first with the eastern half of the Rus' becoming dominated by the Khans under the Golden Horde and later through the annexation of the remaining Principality of Galicia-Volhynia by Poland and Lithuania during middle of the 14th century.[21] The territories held by this moderate principality originally stood at an uncertain border between the Rus', Poland, and Lithuania up to the 11th century when the Rus' firmly established control during the reign of Yaroslav the Wise. By the beginning of the Mongol invasions, Galicia-Volhynia was one of the only entities of the fractured Rus' domains capable of resisting outright domination.[22] This principality acquired nominal independence by its ceding sovereignty to the Golden Horde and reluctantly assisted the Khans in their expansion westward into Poland, Hungary, and Lithuania.[23] However, when ruling elites turned against the Golden Horde with the help of Poland and Lithuania by the beginning of the 14th century, Galicia-Volhynia entered a severe political decline. After its two kings died in battle against the Mongols in 1323 with no heirs remaining, the rulers of Poland and Lithuania gradually absorbed this fledgling Rus' domain directly into their own territories by the beginning of the 15th century.[24] It would be within these and other lands conquered by Poland and Lithuania that the Old East Slavic spoken there would ultimately evolve into the Ruthenian language.

---

[20] Other contributing factors will be discussed as well, though language is emphasized due to available evidence.

[21] Many smaller Rus' states existed during this dynamic period but this one held the most influence at the time.

[22] ."Galicia-Volhynia, Principality of," *Internet Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, accessed July 2022, http://encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?linkpath=pages%5CG%5CA%5CGalicia6VolhyniaPrincipalityof.htm.

[23] *Ibid*.

[24] *Ibid*.

**Map 2:** Partitions of Poland


Source: Britannica

Meanwhile, East Slavs under the direct control of the Golden Horde gradually regained their political independence under the growing power of the Duchy of Moscow. Across the two centuries following the conquering of the Rus', from around the middle of the 13th century to around the middle of the 15th, Moscow gradually unified the disparate East Slavic entities under the Mongols to form a highly centralized state that eventually became the Russian Empire. This centralization proved significant

in overcoming the internal decentralization that had allowed the Rus' to be conquered so swiftly by the superior Mongol forces during the past and in creating an independent power base for East Slavic elites while standardizing local dialects into the future Russian language.[25] But even as Moscow succeeded and crystallized into a Tsardom under the rule of Ivan the Terrible during the 16th century, territories that were once key parts of the Rus' remained firmly out of Moscow's dominion. The massive expansion eastward seen under future Tsars did not translate to comparable territorial gains towards the west for centuries as Poland, Lithuania, and later Poland-Lithuania proved to be powerful adversaries that checked Russian power in Eastern Europe. Over time, a combination of instability within the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the rise of Prussia towards the west, the intensification of Russia's involvement in European affairs after modernization under Peter the Great, as well as various other factors, Poland-Lithuania and its dominion over former territories of the Rus' populated by East Slavs began to weaken.[26] This process culminated in 18th century when a series of partitions took place between Prussia, Russia, and Austria that gradually absorbed the Commonwealth into their own territories. By the final partition at the end of this century, Poland-Lithuania ceased to exist as an independent entity, with Ruthenia (compromising Belarus and central Ukraine today) annexed by Russia and Galicia (eastern Ukraine and southeastern Poland today) annexed by Austria.[27]

Between the collapse of the Rus' as a result of the Mongol conquests and the annexation of East Slavic groups in Poland-Lithuania by the Russian Empire, the Ruthenian and Russian ethnolinguistic identities independently emerged from Old East Slavic over a period of roughly 400 years. Ruthenian is the term generally given to both the East Slavic literary language and the people who spoke it that lived under Poland, Lithuania,

---

[25] Denis V. Kadochnikov, "Languages, Regional Conflicts and Economic Development: Russia," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Economics and Language*, ed. Victor Ginsburgh and Shlomo Weber (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 541, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-32505-1_20.

[26] "Partitions of Poland," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed July 2022, https://www.britannica.com/event/Partitions-of-Poland.

[27] *Ibid*.

and the succeeding Commonwealth; it is also the common ancestor of both Ukrainian and Belarusian, where the division appears to have emerged by the beginning of the 19th century as the partition of Poland-Lithuania concluded.[28] Conscious attempts to influence the ethnolinguistic dispositions of the East Slavs in Ruthenia and Galicia ("Ruthenians") by the new elites were apparent as scholar Ludvik Nemec details:

> *The westernization of old social institutions and the Polonization of cultural life was very effective in Galicia, especially under Polish Supremacy from the time of Casimir IV (1333-70). Although the Poles promised to respect the religious and national traditions of Galicia, Polish influences were strongly felt there. The feudal system made inroads and Latin gradually replaced Old Slavonic in official documents… In 1433, the Roman Catholic nobility obtained the same privileges as the Poles, and in 1438, Galicia was divided into three administrative provinces. This was practically the end of autonomous life in Galicia, especially when in the sixteenth century, the Polish language in turn replaced Latin in official use.*[29]

Over time, as the Russian Tsardom became a legitimate threat to Poland and Lithuania, attempts to bring the Ruthenians in line with the Catholic faith were also advanced but found little success and even resistance, especially with the imposition of Catholic institutions and education on the Orthodox Christians of Poland-Lithuania following the Commonwealth's creation in 1569.[30] As religion played a primary role in the lives of Ruthenians, this situation actually encouraged some of them to seek political help from Moscow; ironically, constant exposure to western influences caused the Ruthenians to be even more cautious of their faith, even if their linguistic and cultural lives had already been permanently altered by centuries

---

[28] Daniel Bunčić, "On the dialectal basis of the Ruthenian literary language," *Die Welt der Slaven* 60, № 2 (2015): 278, https://kups.ub.uni-koeln.de/7496/.

[29] Ludvik Nemec, "The Ruthenian Uniate Church in its Historical Perspective," *Church History* 37, № 4 (Dec., 1968): 370, https://doi.org/10.2307/3162256.

[30] *Ibid*, 371.

of separation from those eastern relatives that many sought assistance from.[31] Others, however, turned to the Tartar Cossacks for salvation.

As social pressures mounted for ethnolinguistic, economic, and other reasons, Ruthenians from across Poland-Lithuania fled southward to the Wild Fields between the Commonwealth, the Crimean Khanate, and the Russian Empire. Here, across the untamed steppes of today's southern Ukraine, the Cossack movement "helped to build a national awareness among the Ukrainians" and "bearing a singular social character, the Cossacks who helped the peasants to consolidate, establish their rights, and defend their property, became determined defenders against the Tartar invasions [from the Crimean Khanate]."[32] This influx of Ruthenians from Poland-Lithuania (and Russian serfs to a lesser extent) was so significant that the Cossacks formally adopted Orthodox Christianity and dedicated themselves to the defense of a Ruthenian identity that, separated from the future Belarusians further north, marked the beginning of the distinct Ukrainian identity seen today.[33] Meanwhile, the Ruthenian language also flourished beyond Cossack lands to the north:

> *[W]ritten texts obeyed certain norms that were more or less uniform all over the Ruthenian lands. Up to the beginning of the 16th century, these norms existed almost exclusively in the chanceries. However, the Reformation brought about an increase in the production of texts of various genres (e.g. Skaryna's Bible translations), so that Ruthenian became a truly polyfunctional [both spoken and written] language*.[34]

While the expansion of the Ruthenian identity caused by the Protestant Reformation's effect on the availability of literature and by diversification through mixing with Cossack culture marked a high point for this ethnolinguistic identity, political circumstances would lead to a major decline.

---

[31] *Ibid*. This process of conscious opposition known as "othering" is a main means of group identity construction.

[32] *Ibid*.

[33] *Ibid*, 372. The individualistic tendencies of this identity would conflict with the authoritarian values of Moscow.

[34] Bunčić, "On the dialectal basis of the Ruthenian literary language," 279.

Map 3: Russian Empire's Westward Expansion


Source: Gene Thorp, The Washington Post.

In the 17th century, the Cossacks would find themselves assisting the Commonwealth against Russian incursions. However, after their rights were restricted, a major uprising occurred that became an ethnic struggle. Nearing defeat, however, the Cossacks turned to Russia for help and managed to secure a high degree of autonomy in exchange for their military skills.[35] The printing of Ruthenian texts across the Commonwealth diminished as a result, and the decreased circulation of Ruthenian writing likely contributed to the eventual rift between Ukrainian and Belarusian by the start of the 19th century.[36] Meanwhile, the skepticism of some Cossacks against Russian authority generated a period of turmoil that divided Cossack Ukraine into one half managed by Poland-Lithuania and another by Russia along the

[35] "Cossack," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed July 2022, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Cossack.

[36] Bunčić, 279.

Dnieper River.[37] Attempts to establish an independent Ukraine free of external domination through revolts during the 18th century ultimately failed.[38]

## The Rise of European Nationalism and Beyond

### *From Russian Imperial Dominance to Revolution*

The emergence of nationalism as a social and political phenomenon in the 18th and 19th centuries fundamentally changed how people across Europe and the world perceived themselves relative to their lived experiences. Indeed, the conceptual shift captured by this period gave birth to the discipline of history as we know it today, speaking to the manner in which the ideas of past, future, and even progress too are largely recent outcomes of modernity. In this context, within a Europe afflicted by chronic conflicts and the constant erasure of states, history became a treasured science of empowered actors, particularly elites, to justify the existence of their states by appealing to events that could legitimize these states' existences to not only their own people against the threat of foreign domination in the present but also to various spectators across time.[39] Fusing the countless array of communities across a state's territory with the interests of that state became possible through the emergence of advanced bureaucracies that assisted the construction and propagation of national mythologies where earlier systems did not have the organizational or technical prerequisites necessary to do so. The possibilities for identity construction multiplied in comparison to previous historical epochs. Here it became advantageous to create a status quo in which individuals did not fundamentally identify themselves in terms of a concrete family, clan, region, or even religion, but in terms of an abstract narrative created by the state and enforced by its authority.[40] Indeed, is along this general trend that the Russian Empire operated as well.

---

[37] "Cossack," *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

[38] *Ibid*. The fact that many Cossacks valued Orthodox principles in association with the Russian Empire more than their individualism contributed to this split significantly.

[39] Serhii Plokhy, *The Origins of the Slavic Nations: Premodern Identities in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3.

[40] *Ibid*, 7.

In contrast to the Ruthenian language, which was often molded by forces beyond its own speakers and cultural producers due to political subjugation, the variant of Old East Slavic that would evolve into the Russian language would do so according to the political requirements of the increasingly centralized system of Moscow that was largely free from foreign interference after the defeat of the Golden Horde.[41] However, the fragmentation that occurred during Mongol rule posed significant challenges that required new linguistic standards which resolved internal miscommunications while distancing the emerging Russian language from Old East Slavic.[42] Old Church Slavonic, originally introduced with the conversion of the Rus' to Orthodox Christianity, proved to be insufficient for a variety of reasons despite its central role in both education as well as religious life. The South Slavic base of Church Slavonic was too distant from the language of the average Russian and complicated such that everyday terminology could not be retroactively implemented without severe confusion.[43] The inconsistent mixture of colloquial Russian and Old Church Slavonic in society also produced its own series of problems, encouraging an active push for a standardized secular language independent of the archaic gospel of the church.[44] Until the beginning of the 18th century, much focus was placed on ensuring internal linguistic consistency for the effective management of the enlarging Russian bureaucracy; and following the reforms of Peter the Great, further changes in the written language encouraging simplification occurred as the complexity of new information injected by modernization called for straightforwardness.[45] French among elites, assisting western knowledge transfer, also shaped Russian significantly.[46]

With the partition of Poland-Lithuania concluded by the beginning of the 19th century, the Russian Empire extended ethnolinguistic principles first employed for its eastern subjects. While Russian authorities encouraged

---

[41] Kadochnikov, "Languages, Regional Conflicts and Economic Development: Russia," 541.

[42] *Ibid*.

[43] *Ibid*, 540.

[44] *Ibid*.

[45] *Ibid*, 577.

[46] The period in which French and other foreign languages permeated Russian elite circles also happened to be the same era where some of Russia's greatest cultural works were produced, speaking to the impact of Westernization.

the spread of the Russian language within imperial borders as its frontier in the east expanded, active policies of identity formation associated with nationalism did not begin to take place until the middle of that century. Scholar Elena Shelestyuk describes the general changes to everyday life that occurred in the east following Russia's conquests:

> *The 'foreigners' (indigenous peoples of Siberia and the Far East) had to pay yasak, less than state tax, with furs and cattle, as a sign of allegiance and for the Russian tsars' protection. They had special rules to be governed and judged by their customs, their elected elders and superiors; general courts had jurisdiction only in more serious crimes. Serious economic development of these territories began in the 18th century*.[47]

This relatively liberal approach to the empire's non-Russian subjects politically also extended to its ethnolinguistic policies, characterized by toleration and cultural exchange among peoples.[48] As Shelestyuk details,

> *Under Peter [the Great], Arabic was taught in religious schools in Muslim areas of Russia. In Estonia and Livonia, German dominated. They also served as languages of official communication. Russian tsars showed curiosity towards local peoples, arranging fancy-dress carnivals in national ethnic costumes, admired the Malorussian tongue [today Ukrainian] etc. Under Catherine [the Great], the Educational Commission was created, which recommended that schools in indigenous areas should use native languages and cultures in teaching. Catherine ordered the collection of data on all the languages and dialects of the Russian Empire*…[49]

This status quo continued well into the 19th century with the treatment of territories gained after the Napoleonic Wars, such as Finland, Napoleonic Poland, and Lithuania, where the languages and traditions of these

---

[47] Elena Shelestyuk, "Review of Literature on the Language Policy of Imperial Russia and the Modern Linguistic Situation," *Quaestio Rossica* 7, № 3 (2019): 941, https://doi.org/10.15826/qr.2019.3.416

[48] *Ibid*, 942.

[49] *Ibid*.

territories generally remained intact through both legal and educational systems; meanwhile, the 1822 Charter on the Governance of Indigenous peoples, one aspect of ongoing reforms in Siberia, reinforced the government's existing policies.[50] But with the rise of nationalism in Europe, revolts in the empire's west caused reciprocal repression by the state.

The Russian Empire's response to the spread of nationalist ideology from both western and central Europe led to the creation of its own nationalist outlook. For reasons of both politics and history, this nationalism was largely reactive and represented a concrete shift from the more tolerant position of the past.[51] The relationship between the creation of national mythologies and the upholding of elites' states that proliferated them was more pronounced in territories that were subject to frequent conflicts that often threatened the basic survival of states. While this process of conflict had been ongoing for centuries, it was the French Revolution that arguably gave birth to nationalism as it is understood today. Various liberal intellectuals central to the revolutionary elite as well as the Coalition Wars that placed them against most of Europe's major monarchies inspired a massive social mobilization dependent upon an ideological narrative to generate the popular support necessary for the revolution and its ideals to survive. A fusion of this kind was simply unseen during past historical epochs, and with the rise of the Industrial Revolution in the decades after Napoleon's defeat that reoriented social structures to the state level as opposed to local power centers as in feudal times, the template innovated by the French would soon become typical across European affairs. But these conditions that defined the French situation were alien to the Russian Empire, which enjoyed existential stability and growth that gradually incorporated a vast array of peoples into its borders over time and limited the imperative to form a mythology for its people that helped to uphold the state's existence; indeed, the strong centralized power of Russian authorities served

---

[50] *Ibid*, 942-943.

[51] For an alternative account supporting this general position from the perspective of Russification, see Theodore Weeks's "Russification: Word and Practice 1863–1914" (2004) https://www.jstor.org/stable/1558142. Russification was usually a culture-neutral policy that often intersected with Russian nationalism, an ideology specifically catered towards the East Slavic peoples of the western parts of the empire against the influence of other nationalist views.

that role when needed. There was essentially no historical precedent for nationalism to emerge organically among Russian elites, and the mythology that did during the 19th century appeared to be an attempt to "fight fire with fire" against an alien phenomenon.

The Polish uprisings of 1830-1831 and 1863 proved to be the first series of events that encouraged flirtations between the Russian Empire and nationalist ideology. Consistent with the general model described above, it was the Polish and Lithuanian elites, or *szlachta*, that pushed forward these revolts with some support from their local populations; the optimistic end goal was the full restoration of Poland-Lithuania with pre-partition borders.[52] The 1830-1831 uprising led to one of the first major examples of ethnolinguistic repression in modern Russian history.[53] According to Shelestyuk,

> *After the 1830–1831 uprising, Russia proclaimed Poland its part, the Sejm and the Polish army was disbanded and voivodeships were replaced by administrative provinces. Russia's coinage, weights and measures were adopted. The administration of local schools was devolved to the Ministry of National Education. The teaching of Russian was introduced. Outside the Kingdom of Poland, Polish was banned from schools and publications. In Lithuania, from 1833, Lithuanian was promoted as the language of education.*[54]

The 1863 uprising featured essentially the same goal as the first but its failure ultimately led to even more ethnolinguistic setbacks for the Russian Empire's western subjects. Russian elites had come to the conclusion that continuing their liberal ethnolinguistic policies for groups

---

[52] Shelestyuk, 944. Russian ethnolinguistic repression as a reactive phenomenon is also supported by the example of Finland, which enjoyed some of the highest levels of autonomy in the Russian Empire; see Kadochnikov, 549.

[53] The status of a Polish-Lithuanian national consciousness prior to the Commonwealth's partition is unclear to this author, though given that the French Revolution was ongoing, it is more likely that nationalism expanded among Polish and Lithuanian elites after the partition than before. However, the Polish Uprising of 1794 that prefaced the final partition indicates that some kind of nationalist tendencies were already present there at the time.

[54] Shelestyuk, 944.

influenced by nationalism was counterintuitive given that the Russian state effectively supported institutions that were undermining its own internal security.[55] As a result, the Polish language was suppressed in official use, state support for entities determined to have contributed to nationalist sentiments was revoked, and Russian language education was made mandatory for all primary schools in Poland and the Baltics.[56] This new policy outlook would also impact other East Slavs as well.

In addition to the negative approach exemplified by policies against the Polish identity, Russian elites would also develop their own positive ideological response for western subjects of the empire in the interest of security, particularly Russian nationalism towards the East Slavs. In the decades first leading up to the rise of nationalism, Cossack elites under the Russian Empire gradually began to merge with the imperial elite, transmitting the notion of Ukraine or Maloruss ("Little Russia") as connected to the traditional "Great" Russian core of the empire in terms of a common faith and ruler without a historical or ethnic dimension.[57] Generally, "Little Russia" was not secondary in the sense of ethnic identity relative to "Great" Russia; instead, the term served a geographical purpose to demarcate the new territories annexed from Poland-Lithuania in which East Slavic (*Rus'*) people lived.[58] The Cossack elite, which by this point was largely congruent with the imperial elite, birthed a Malorussian identity that became dominant in major cities such as Kyiv.[59] Since the western half of modern Ukraine, including significant Cossack territory, was under the Russian Empire shorter than the eastern parts gained before the partition, this partially organic identity did not spread as much there. In competition with

---

[55] *Ibid*, 945.

[56] Kadochnikov, "Languages, Regional Conflicts and Economic Development: Russia," 550-551.

[57] А.Л. Котенко, О.В. Мартынюк и А.И. Миллер, «„Малоросс": эволюция понятия до Первой мировой войны», *Новое литературное обозрение* 108, № 2 (2011), https://magazines.gorky.media/nlo/2011/2/maloross-evolyucziya-ponyatiya-do-pervoj-mirovoj-vojny.html.

[58] The ethnic or national element associated with Maloruss would emerge in the middle of the 19th century in the All-Russian Nation concept that built upon the linguistic argument that East Slavic languages were closer than apart.

[59] *Ibid*. This identity basically reflected the geographical, religious, and imperial ideas defining "Maloruss" itself.

the Malorussian identity was the "Ukrainophile" identity that found more reception in areas less connected to imperial power and the Russian language such as this western part of Ukraine, the countryside, and places with significant anti-imperial sentiments overall.[60] A class divide was evident between Russian and Ruthenian or Ukrainian, and those on the weaker side of that divide, not too dissimilar from the French revolutionary elites, would be most responsible for developing Ukrainian nationalism.

As Ukrainophilia was targeted in a negative manner by imperial authorities following the events in Poland, the basic principles of the Malorussian identity would be consciously employed positively to create a Russian nationalist ideology. The Ukrainian national consciousness largely developed within the social context of the Russian Empire after both the partition and the French Revolution.[61] It was in this context during the 19th century that the written forms of the Ukrainian and Belarusian languages emerged under the Russian Empire's liberal policy, marking the formal end of Ruthenian as an organic ethnolinguistic identity.[62] Elena Shelestyuk describes further:

> *Theoretical Ukrainophilia appeared, at first 'of an archaeological colour' (meaning the study of folklore, legends, songs etc.), then as a social political trend, producing Ivan Franco's party… In the spirit of Slavic revival, Ukrainophilia was embraced by many Russian and Polish intelligentsia. [Various thinkers] propagated Ukrainian, compiled histories of Ukraine, engaged in education, literary work, ethnography and folklore. [M. S. Grushevsky] was especially instrumental in the development of "ukrayinska mova" and wrote an eight-volume history of Ukraine, separating Malorussian facts from common Russian history. Ukrainian books were freely published, Sunday schools set up and plays put on stage. Ukrainophiles engaged in politics.*[63]

---

[60] Shelestyuk, "Review of Literature on the Language Policy," 943-944.

[61] Kadochnikov, "Languages, Regional Conflicts and Economic Development: Russia," 548.

[62] Shelestyuk, 944.

[63] *Ibid*.

However, after the Polish uprisings, this tolerant posture of the Russian state began to diminish. The policies of ethnolinguistic repression designed to promote state security in the Polish context were preemptively extended to Ukraine, where requirements were introduced for historical and educational books, the importation of literature from Ukrainian Galicia in the Austro-Hungarian Empire was restricted, and the Ukrainian language was temporarily banned from theaters.[64] But these preemptive measures actually encouraged greater national consciousness among Ukrainian elites, believing that their identity was gradually being liquidated under Russian control.[65] This repression in the early days of the Ukrainian project continues in nationalist narratives today.[66]

Meanwhile, as the Russian Empire continued its liberal policies for its eastern subjects, the basic principles of Russian nationalism were formed. The Polish uprisings of 1830-1831 and the spread of the doctrine of nationalism more broadly encouraged scholar and statesman Sergey Uvarov, the Minister of Public Education, to develop the Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality triad that proliferated under the rule of Nicholas I.[67] While the first two points were clear to all observers, the vagueness of "nationality" eventually encouraged two general interpretations: the first, a conservative reaffirmation of existing imperial structures as represented by the Romanov dynasty, and secondly a romantic nationalist perspective that envisioned Russia and its people on a metaphysical mission to dominate the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires, unite all Slavic people, and bring order to a restless world represented by its European neighbors and their more liberal ideals.[68] The more extreme and "revolutionary" views of the latter romantic idea, despite retaining high levels of popularity among the

---

[64] *Ibid*. Internationally, these measures were also a response to Austria-Hungary's suppression of Russian speakers in Galicia; this policy was a result of the Balkans rivalry, speaking to the role of identity in great power conflicts.

[65] Kadochnikov, 548.

[66] The large movement of Russians into areas annexed after the partition is also an important point of contention.

[67] А.Л. Котенко, О.В. Мартынюк и А.И. Миллер, «Малоросс».

[68] Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, "'Nationality' in the State Ideology during the Reign of Nicholas I," *The Russian Review* 19, № 1 (Jan., 1960): 40-41, 44-45, https://doi.org/10.2307/126191.

Russian intellectual elite, found little favor among Nicholas I's statesmen and even some disdain as Sergey Uvarov's flirtations with both narratives, culminating in his ambivalence to the Revolutions of 1848, led to a forceful resignation from his position as Minister of Public Education.[69] Despite the positive nature of Russian nationalism in imperial policy, it ultimately served a negative purpose in addressing the spiritual or ideological holes left by suppressing more organic nationalist tendencies in western parts of the empire that projected ethnic and romantic projects as some Russian elites did. The tendencies characterized by the nationalist projects of western and central Europe challenged both the Russian system and the careful maintenance of its status quo prized by the imperial leadership. Here the empire was arguably intended to exist as a domain of various *peoples* but simultaneously of no *nationalities*. Indeed, nationalism has largely proved fatal to most multiethnic empires, i.e. Austria-Hungary.

While this nationalist policy largely persisted until the end of the Russian Empire, much would change with the economic modernization spurred by capitalism and later socialism during the Soviet era. Most of these ethnolinguistic concerns were initially administrative, establishing the groundwork for further economic reforms, as scholar Denis Kadochnikov details:

> *[R]uling the empire as if it was a conglomerate of different nations with varying legal and administrative systems as it had been in the 18th and early 19th centuries was no longer a viable option, primarily for political and economic reasons… Central authorities sought greater control over developments in the periphery of the empire and the expanding of the use of Russian in administrative and social affairs was part of this trend.*[70]

The introduction of universal conscription in 1874, a response to the growing great power rivalry assisted by the Industrial Revolution's "shrinking" of the world due to technological innovations, also encouraged a common

---

[69] *Ibid*, 42. The link between this era and today's Russia with thinkers like Aleksandr Dugin should be explored.

[70] Kadochnikov, "Languages, Regional Conflicts and Economic Development: Russia," 556.

language across the empire.[71] But it would be economic concerns that encouraged Russification the most. New transportation infrastructure allowed for the creation of an integrated internal market that connected various parts of the empire to both itself and foreign markets, increasing the pace of Russia's late industrialization.[72] The existence of local laws and customs enabled a competitive advantage for regional and local producers but were challenging for the new class of capitalists based in major centers of power that formed strong ties with the traditional elite given their importance to the future of the Russian Empire's power in the global arena.[73] Russification played a key role in accommodating these interests, encouraging common standards across the empire that were good for business but marginalized various ethnolinguistic groups through the elimination of local customs in favor of Russian law.[74] As political discontent grew into the 20th century, Russification was targeted by nationalists and revolutionaries alike.

## *From the Soviet Era to Present Day*

The Bolsheviks under Vladimir Lenin opposed the outlook of Russia's imperial elites, arguing that economic development would bring the various ethnolinguistic groups in the empire closer and that a forceful policy would only make adoption less appealing for the non-Russian population while encouraging divisive sentiments.[75] This outlook would reflect the policy of the early Soviet Union as well.[76] Literacy education in native languages was promoted, policies for translating official decrees into local languages were introduced, and the republics of Ukraine, Belarus,

---

[71] *Ibid*.

[72] *Ibid*.

[73] *Ibid*, 556-557.

[74] *Ibid*, 573. Alienated intellectuals and elites in Ukraine began to more frequently distance themselves from the Malorussian identity in favor of the Ukrainian one. As the empire weakened, so too did its identity battle in Ukraine.

[75] Kadochnikov, "Languages, Regional Conflicts and Economic Development: Russia," 558.

[76] Although an analysis of Ukrainian independence movements is worthwhile, this will be avoided due space issues as well as the fact that the intellectual project of Ukrainian identity was largely completed by the early 20th century.

and Transcaucasia (Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia today) in addition to Russia were created within the USSR.[77] However, this outlook changed in the 1930s. With the optimism of global revolution under Moscow faded, the logic underpinning the independence of the republics of the USSR shifted from a global orientation to a national one, leading to centralization and less national autonomy for the internal republics.[78]

**Map 4:** Borders before and after 1917


Source: Gene Thorp, The Washington Post.

Especially important to Ukrainian national identity is the Holodomor, which took place in the Ukrainian SSR during the Soviet Famine of 1931-1934 and was precipitated by the transition from the state capitalist New Economic Policy under Lenin to the five-year plan doctrine under Joseph Stalin.[79] Similar to the manner in which ethnolinguistic repression in the Russian

[77] *Ibid*, 559-560. Of particular note here is the "korenizatsiya" (indigenization) policy, existing until the 1930s, that sought to bring national minorities into Soviet sociopolitical life by accommodating their ethnolinguistic identities.

[78] *Ibid*, 562-563.

[79] Anne Applebaum, "Holodomor," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed July 2022, https://www.britannica.com/event/Holodomor.

Empire partly took place for reasons of economic modernization, so too did this famine and the policies surrounding it. The collectivization of agriculture was a primary target of Soviet elites during the early 1930s, and given that Ukraine is one of the major bread baskets of Europe, it is no surprise that any agricultural policy enacted by the USSR would disproportionately affect Ukraine. Since Ukrainian was typically the language of the countryside, and people in the countryside tended to be peasants, it is not surprising that the lines between class and ethnic identity were blurred by these conditions. Soviet statesmen emphasized the class dimension due to communist ideology; ways of life related to economic activity reflected historical processes and did not have the level of ethnolinguistic or cultural importance as in, for example, a nationalist perspective. Those who align closer to the latter outlook almost unanimously refer to the process of collectivization and the crushing of resistance against it, unique to Ukraine, as a genocide; preemptive suppression against Ukrainian elites to quell possible nationalist sentiments, resembling that of the Russian Empire, took place to ensure internal security for the completion of collectivization and assists claims of genocide.[80] The breakdown of production caused by collectivization policies proved to be the main reason behind the deaths of around 4 million Ukrainians, most of whom were in the countryside where these policies were most significant; due to suppression by Soviet elites, it would only be around the collapse of the Soviet Union that these events reentered the national consciousness of most Ukrainians, promoted by the Ukrainian state with a nationalist outlook.[81]

Despite the decrease in republics' autonomy under Stalin, the 1936 Soviet Constitution propagated their existences and no official state language was declared. In 1938, however, the Russian language became a required subject in Soviet schools with the expectation that all Soviet graduates would have at least a working knowledge of it; this development marked another key divergence from the optimistic revolutionary vision of the

[80] *Ibid*. Fears over nationalist sentiments overall also precipitated the end of the "korenizatsiya" policy in this time.

[81] *Ibid*.

Bolsheviks.[82] Like with English today, Russian language education provided a *lingua franca* for Soviet citizens across the increasingly interconnected country in which they lived and minority languages were still supported.[83] And as in the Russian Empire, a common language was necessary for the Red Army, which would soon face the biggest land invasion in history from Nazi Germany.[84] The Great Patriotic War erased negative stigmas around Russian language use in intercultural communication and the Soviet Union's newfound position as a global superpower after the Second World War solidified the use of Russian further.[85] As the importance of Russian in everyday life grew during the postwar period, policy changes that allowed it to be taught as a primary language oftentimes displaced local ones; this trend was encouraged by some minority populations that saw Russian as a key factor in social mobility while others prioritized native languages against Russification.[86] By the end of the Soviet Union, over 80 percent of the population spoke Russian fluently, satisfying the needs of modernization; in Ukraine, around 52 percent of students were taught in the Russian language.[87] Although media in minority languages proliferated, leaders of Ukraine and some other republics prioritized theirs before the realization of independence.

In the background of linguistic Russification during the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union was also the gradual movement of ethnic Russians into areas that now comprise Ukraine. Ethnic Russification generally occurred in areas that are now part of the modern Ukrainian state but were either initially part of the Russian Empire, i.e. the Donbas region, or areas

---

[82] Kadochnikov, "Languages, Regional Conflicts and Economic Development: Russia," 564.

[83] *Ibid*, 565. For another account of this intermediate policy approach between ethnolinguistic decentralization and Russification, see Peter Blitstein's "Cultural Diversity and the Interwar Conjuncture: Soviet Nationality Policy in Its Comparative Context" (2006) https://www.jstor.org/stable/4148593.

[84] *Ibid*. The deportation of various ethnicities without national representation also occurred in response to the war.

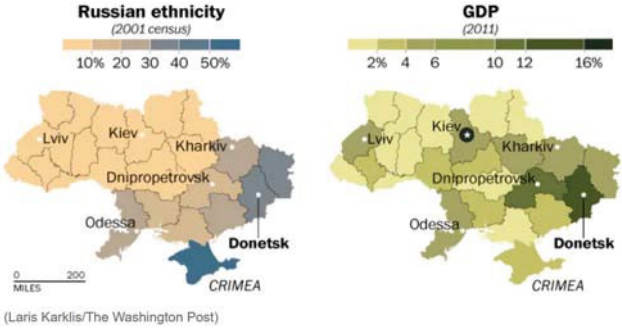
[85] *Ibid*, 566. Meanwhile, areas with Ukrainians first annexed by Austria were given to Soviet Ukraine from Poland.

[86] *Ibid*, 566-567. However, Russian became *de facto* necessary as students advanced to higher levels of education.

[87] *Ibid*, 568-569. Russian was certainly learned through other means besides public education in Ukraine.

that neither Russia, Poland-Lithuania, nor the Cossacks occupied, i.e. the Crimean Khanate largely inhabited by Tartars and other Muslims as a vassal state of the Ottoman Empire until becoming conquered by Russia in 1792.[88] Under imperial elites, this territory became the Novorossiya region that has now been reconstructed by the Russian Federation following its invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The fact that settlements founded under the Russian Empire in largely unpopulated areas became key cities in modern Ukraine with most of Ukraine's Russian speakers and pro-Russian population contributes to the Russian state's claims over this region.[89] However, the fact that Ukrainians are still the primary ethnolinguistic group besides Crimea supports the Ukrainian state's dominion. It is primarily the convergence of both Russification during modernization and the simultaneous entrance of former Muslim territories into the modern histories of Russia and Ukraine that has laid the groundwork for Ukraine's division along ethnic, linguistic, and national lines today.

Map 5: Ukraine's Ethnic and GDP Distributions




Source: Laris Karklis, The Washington Post.

As Ukraine turned from a constituent state in a federal system to an independent country, its ethnolinguistic circumstances would be inherited by

[88] Ishaan Tharoor and Gene Thorp, "How Ukraine became Ukraine, in 7 maps."

[89] Adam Taylor and Laris Karklis, "'Novorossiya,' the latest historical concept to worry about in Ukraine," Washington Post, 18 April 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/04/18/understanding-novorossiya-the-latest-historical-concept-to-get-worried-about-in-ukraine/.

centuries of interconnected history with the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. While the project of Ukrainian identity was primarily formalized by 1917, the effects of Russification on this identity as it simultaneously proliferated under the Soviet project largely gave birth to existing dispositions. Although modern Ukrainian elites have persistently tried to make Ukrainian the country's main language both *de jure* and *de facto*, forces in civil society have continued to favor Russian in everyday life, reflecting Lenin's relationship between Russian language adoption and modernization; the resulting outcome is a fundamentally bilingual society in the post-Soviet era.[90] In politics, the Ukrainian government has pursued an inconsistent language policy due to the majority vote swinging in favor of pro-western and pro-Russian governments on a pendulum, speaking to the country's divided nature; pro-western governments have actively encouraged Ukrainization policies during their time in power, while pro-Russian ones have encouraged the policies of bilingualism and blocked further attempts at Ukrainization.[91] The leading pro-Russian Party of Regions that legalized the regional use of Russian in 2012 sparked a series of intense debates that revealed this divide even further:

*Ukrainian society was literally subdivided into two 'camps': on the one hand, lamentations about 'discrimination' against Ukrainian and the 'threat' posed by Russian as the second state language, on the other hand, claims about Russian-speakers' 'vulnerable' position and their unequal status to Ukrainians were also widespread in Ukraine*.[92]

These mutually contradicting views of oppression reached a climax in the Euromaidan of 2014.

---

[90] Ksenia Maksimovtsova, "Ukrainian vs. Russian? The Securitization of Language-Related Issues in Ukrainian Blogs and on News Websites," *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 34, № 2 (May 2020): 375-376, https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325419870235.

[91] *Ibid*, 376.

[92] Maksimovtsova, 376.

**Map 6:** Unrest in Ukraine after the Euromaidan


Source: National Geographic.

After years of conflictual relations between these two general camps in Ukrainian society, tensions would help spark a massive wave of protests against President Viktor Yanukovych of the Party of Regions over his rejection of an EU trade deal for a Russian one lacking politically risky austerity measures and upholding the status quo.[93] Despite the attractiveness of the Russian offer at that time, this rejection happened in the midst of gradual

[93] Jamila Trindle, "The Loan That Launched A Crisis," *Foreign Policy*, 21 February 2014, https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/02/21/the-loan-that-launched-a-crisis/.

successes by pro-western forces to bring Ukraine closer to the European Union; those opposed to Yanukovych and his party viewed this as a major setback, leading to, alongside valid evidence of corruption, the beginning of protests in late 2013 that escalated in violence until pro-western forces in Kyiv successfully deposed the government in early 2014.[94] Unsurprisingly, the western half of Ukraine, namely areas with nationalist, pro-western, and anti-communist views that were annexed by the Soviet Union after the Second World War, disproportionately propagated the Euromaidan movement.[95] Indeed, prior to crackdowns on protesters that damaged the credibility of Yanukovych's government, research conducted by an NGO based in Kyiv found that only half of Ukrainian citizens supported the movement overall.[96] It is thus also unsurprising that pro-Russian groups inside Ukraine protested and even revolted against the new government, consistent with the historical and ethnolinguistic trends outlined above.[97]

## Conclusion

From the collapse of the Rus' as a political entity following the Mongol invasions, the East Slavs became ethnolinguistically divided along the shifting borders of the Golden Horde, Poland, and Lithuania. Over a period of around 400 years, two separate identities in the form of the Russians and the Ruthenians developed from Old East Slavic. Although the former identity largely became uniform due to the centralized nature of the Russian state, the latter formed under persistent external pressures due to its subjection to Poland-Lithuania. These pressures of both passive and active assimilation gradually produced the Ruthenian language. Furthermore, the lack of its formalization by institutions, demographic instability, and

---

[94] *Ibid*.

[95] Dan Peleschuk, "How western Ukraine is driving a revolution," *The World*, 28 January 2014, https://theworld.org/stories/2014-01-28/how-western-ukraine-driving-revolution.

[96] "Half of Ukrainians don't support Kyiv Euromaidan, R&B poll," *Interfax-Ukraine*, 30 December 2013, https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/184540.html.

[97] Eve Conant, "A Cease-fire Takes Hold in Ukraine as Territorial Questions Linger," *National Geographic*, 6 September 2014, https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/140905-ukraine-cease-fire-russia-invasion-geography-history.

repression tied to political circumstances contributed to the further generation of the Ukrainian and Belarusian languages out of Ruthenian by the start of the 19th century. Here the evolution of the Cossacks to the south of Poland-Lithuania and Russia between the 16th and 18th centuries assisted offshoot of Ruthenian that would become inherited as the Ukrainian identity. Once the "Wild West" period of the Cossacks ceased with the conquests of the Russian Empire and the partition of Poland-Lithuania, nearly all of the East Slavs (excluding Galicia until the 20th century) would be reunited again under a single political entity for the first time, though with uneven ethnolinguistic development from earlier centuries that had created notable differences within the East Slavic population in aggregate. And with the rise of nationalism on the horizon, the view defining Poland-Lithuania's treatment of Ruthenians would later resemble the Russian Empire's policies towards Ukrainians.

As nationalism emerged across western and central Europe during the late 18th century, this element of modernity would lead to ethnolinguistic identities becoming a matter of internal security for the first time. The attempt to connect the fate of individuals and communities within a state with the interests of elites that controlled it began an irreversible process that states such as the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and its former constituents contended with and still do to this day. Here the organic Cossack identity fused with nationalism among new Ukrainian elites to create the Ukrainian national project, competing with the semi-nationalist Malorussian identity of pro-imperial elites that unified modern Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine. As imperial power faded, so too did the latter identity which led to the propagation of the Ukrainian national idea. Meanwhile, in order to promote security, imperial elites reacted to nationalist revolts in western territories such as Poland through repression and revoking the empire's liberal ethnolinguistic policy to replace it with the promotion of their own "Romanov" nationalism that challenged romantic alternatives. The preemptive extension of this reactive stance to Ukraine backfired, encouraging intellectuals' national project that would become increasingly popular as confidence in the empire diminished into the 20th century. Russification represents one object of this diminished confidence

that was also motivated by modernization. In order to compete with its industrializing adversaries, imperial elites imposed Russian customs across the empire over local ones towards standardizing administrative processes and promoting the growth of industrial capitalism. Lenin criticized the ethnolingustic effects of these policies, promoting inclusivity over economic needs. But as the internationalist goals of the USSR crumbled, Soviet elites after Lenin mostly returned to stances of the Russian Empire to consolidate their gains and compete internationally. Both ethnic and linguistic Russification that continued in areas now held by the Ukrainian state ultimately led to its present divisions.

In contrast to suggestions from figures such as United States President Joseph Biden, this analysis will proceed from the assumption that both negative and positive peace in Ukraine may be established without modifying its existing borders.[98] This first of all requires a recognition of the interests of the Russian ethnolinguistic identity's stakeholders by the Ukrainian identity's stakeholders and vice-versa. With the elimination of the Donbas region as a voting party in the Ukrainian government in 2014, the balance of power has shifted entirely towards pro-western forces that have made reconciliation with pro-Russian separatists as well as the pro-Russian political opposition more difficult.[99] Since 2020, Donbas separatists have banned the Ukrainian language from official use.[100] And since the Russian invasion began, the Ukrainian government has banned all major pro-Russian and socialist parties.[101] Besides obvious threats to democracy in Ukraine, this deterioration of ethnolinguistic relations is not sustainable if the state is to remain intact in its current form. If policy continues to be

---

[98] Steven Nelson, "Biden says Ukraine might have to give Russia land in 'negotiated settlement,'" *New York Post*, 3 June 2022, https://nypost.com/2022/06/03/biden-says-ukraine-might-have-to-give-russia-land/.

[99] The failure of both Minsk agreements leading up to the Russian invasion contributes to this position.

[100] Halya Coynash, "Ukrainian stripped of official language status in Russian proxy Donbas 'republic,'" *Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group*, 11 March 2020, https://khpg.org/en/1583536107.

[101] Michael W. Chapman, "Ukraine Bans Main Opposition Political Party, Assets and Property Seized by State," CNSNews, 22 June 2022, https://cnsnews.com/blog/michael-w-chapman/ukraine-bans-main-opposition-political-party-assets-and-property-seized.

conducted along such parameters, then ethnic cleansing or genocide is possible. The rejection of ethnic nationalism is necessary in favor of the civic nationalism that defined Ukrainian politics before the Euromaidan, especially of the zero-sum thinking that reflects this worldview. The idea that the Russian and Ukrainian identities are in existential opposition to each other is not supported by historical evidence and recognizing their mutually supporting nature may be the only way for Ukraine as we know it to survive.