# Between Empires: Ukraine in the Nineteenth Century

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The 19th century was a time of empires in the history of Eastern Europe; there was neither a Ukrainian state nor a territory defined as Ukrainian within a state. Instead, the territory of modern-day Ukraine was governed by two imperial states, with their border going back to the partitions of Poland in the 18th century. To the west, Austria ruled over the crownlands of Galicia and Bukovina, while the region of Transcarpathia was a rural backwater on the edge of the Kingdom of Hungary, the other half of the Habsburg Monarchy. On the border's eastern side, nine provinces of Russia had a predominantly Ukrainian-speaking population. Three of these were situated on the right bank of the Dnieper River: the provinces of Kiev, Volhynia, and Podolia. Another three were located further east on the river's left bank: Poltava, Chernigov, and Kharkov. The remaining three were sprawled out over the southern steppes down to the Black Sea: Ekaterinoslav, Kherson, and the Tauride (including Crimea) – these provinces were at the time also known as New Russia. The Russian part of Ukraine was much larger in terms of its population, boasting 25 million inhabitants to Galicia's four million.

Over the course of the 19th century, both empires underwent significant modernization, albeit in different ways. The Austrian half of the Habsburg Monarchy developed into a relatively democratic constitutional state that offered its multilingual and multiconfessional population wide-ranging cultural autonomy. Starting in the 1860s, Vienna instituted an all-imperial parliament and regional assemblies. They were elected on an ever-broadening franchise until universal male suffrage was introduced in 1906. Meanwhile, the Russian Empire remained a bureaucratically governed autocracy. Only after 1905 did it cautiously begin to introduce constitutional structures. Saint Petersburg attempted to preserve the supremacy of the Russian language and the Orthodox religion in the empire, especially in Ukraine. In both cases, the most important

watershed in terms of social history was the abolition of serfdom, which legally freed the peasant majority from their noble landlords. Serfdom was abolished in Habsburg Galicia in 1848, while the Russian Empire's peasants had to wait until 1861.

Like many East European regions, 19th-century Ukraine had a diverse population in terms of language and religion. What was typical for Ukraine, especially its western regions, was that linguistic and religious categories often corresponded to socio-economic status. This was especially applicable to the territory's three major groups: Orthodox speakers of Ukrainian, Catholic Polish-speakers, and Yiddish-speaking Jews. Each of these categories had a tendency to belong to certain professions and occupy specific social positions. As the historian Andreas Kappeler noted, Ukrainian society was characterized by an "interethnic division of labor" – a clear socio-ethnic ordering of the population.

Orthodox speakers of Ukrainian dialects formed a majority in most regions of what is today Ukraine. Many of them were illiterate and spoke local dialects rather than modern standard Ukrainian. From a socio-economic perspective, most Ukrainian speakers were peasants working in agriculture. During the 19th century, many migrated to the cities and towns, where they found employment as artisans or factory workers. In the process of urbanization and social mobility, they tended to assimilate by adopting the Russian or Polish language. Ukrainian dialects were thus spoken mostly in the countryside and in smaller towns by those with little or no formal education. A rare but important exception were rural priests, from whose ranks many of the earliest Ukrainian-speaking intellectuals emerged. There were also some Orthodox elites in the cities of Russian Ukraine, such as bureaucrats, soldiers, priests, academics, or medics. These elites consisted of assimilated Ukrainians and Russian immigrants from the empire's central provinces.

Ukraine's Polish-speaking population mostly descended from the *szlachta*, the Polish nobility. Usually Catholics, Polish-speakers were concentrated in the west of Ukraine, where they formed an upper class living in cities or on country estates. The *szlachta* were very diverse in terms of wealth, ranging from impoverished, peasant-like nobles to magnates who owned thousands of serfs and influenced high politics in both Russia and Austria-Hungary. Some magnates even owned entire, largely Jewish, towns such as the *shtetl* of Berdychiv, which belonged to the Radziwiłł family. In Galicia, the Austrian state reached an agreement with these Polish elites in 1867, handing them control

over the provincial administration. Subsequently, all Galician governors were Poles, and the crownland increasingly fell under Polish cultural dominance.

The Jewish population was mostly settled in large villages and small towns, called *shtetlekh* in Yiddish, and often occupied mediating positions between the nobles and the peasants. Jews worked as innkeepers, grain merchants, or stewards on rural estates. This economic role fueled antisemitic resentment among the Slavic Orthodox majority: if a peasant encountered state power, it was usually embodied not by a bureaucrat or nobleman but by a Jewish steward collecting taxes or an innkeeper lending money with interest. This situation gave rise to the antisemitic stereotype of supposedly parasitic Jews oppressing the Christian peasants through usury and alcohol, a caricature later adopted by Russian, Polish, and Ukrainian nationalists alike.

Thus, Orthodox Ukrainian peasants formed a majority in the countryside, while towns and cities were Jewish, Polish, or imperial Russian enclaves. This socio-ethnic order was most pronounced in Western Ukraine. The southern provinces of so-called "New Russia" had a different demographic structure, having been conquered and colonized considerably later by the Russian Empire. Here, Slavic peasants mixed with Tatar Muslims and immigrants from all over Europe, including German settlers and Greek merchants. Serfdom was less rooted and ethnic categories less rigid than in the rest of Ukraine. In left-bank (Eastern) Ukraine, by contrast, the population was more linguistically and confessionally homogeneous, with fewer Jews and almost no Catholics. Eastern Ukraine's nobility was Orthodox and comprised largely of former free Cossack officers who had been co-opted into the Russian nobility during the 18th century. Most left-bank nobles were loyal to the imperial state, and some of them reached high positions in the government service. Thus, the state offered opportunities to those Ukrainians who chose to assimilate. Still, some Cossack nobles glorified the earlier period of Cossack freedom and a few of them became the first inspirers of modern Ukrainian nationalism.

The ideological basis of the later Ukrainian nation state was established in the 19th century: the idea that the territory had a common culture, that its (East Slavic Orthodox) inhabitants formed their own nation, and that they ultimately had a right to self-determination. During the early 1800s, scholars began to collect popular songs and Cossack chronicles; writers used the Ukrainian language in ballads and stories, often for comical effect. These developments were in line with European Romanticism, as intellectuals across the continent grew interested in the lives of common people. However, they

often viewed Ukrainian culture from an antiquarian perspective, as a relic that would eventually die out.

The politicization of Ukrainian national romanticism began in the 1840s, as intellectuals connected their interest in popular culture with a critique of social injustice and political oppression under Tsarism. Since most Ukrainian speakers were peasants, these intellectuals conceived of Ukrainians as a particularly democratic or "plebeian" nation. The most prominent figure of this period was the writer Taras Shevchenko, today venerated as Ukraine's national poet. Born a serf, Shevchenko revolutionized the Ukrainian literary language and wrote highly political poems that propagated the myth of Ukrainian Cossack and sometimes included anti-Polish, anti-Jewish, as well as anti-Russian invective. The connection between Ukrainian patriotism and the idea of peasant revolution would remain characteristic for most Ukrainian nationalists of the century. Complete independence was rarely their declared goal; most of them envisioned the transformation of the Russian Empire, or even all Slavic lands, into a federation of national territories. In Austrian Galicia, nationalists also began to write in Ukrainian and attempted to reach out to the peasants.

The Russian authorities soon cracked down on Ukrainian high culture and demands for autonomy. Shevchenko and his peers were exiled from Ukraine in the late 1840s. Consequently, whenever these so-called "Ukrainophiles" sought to re-politicize their cultural circles, the imperial state would intervene. In 1863, a Circular issued by the Russian Interior Minister, Petr Valuev, prohibited most publications in Ukrainian, infamously declaring that "[…] there was not, is not, and cannot be any special Little Russian language, and that their dialect, as used by uneducated folk, is the same Russian language, only corrupted by Polish influence." In 1876, Tsar Alexander II signed the Ems Ukaz, tightening the earlier law and even prohibiting Ukrainian theater performances.

Imperial propagandists and Russian nationalists repeatedly sought to denigrate the Ukrainian literary language as artificial, claimed that the national movement was in fact a Polish intrigue, and insinuated that its goal was to sow division among the Russian population. For them, Ukraine's peasants were Little Russians, a peculiar yet integral branch of the Russian nation that formed the ethnic core of the empire. They hoped to assimilate these Little Russians completely into imperial Russian culture as they became literate, creating a bulwark of a loyal Russian population on the Western border. Conversely, Ukrainian nationalists wanted to educate these peasants without assimilation, or, put the other way round, to strengthen the peasantry's social position by turning Ukrainian from a peasant dialect into a literary

language suitable for all spheres of society. It is difficult to say how the broad population of Ukraine identified in national terms, however. While some may have viewed themselves as Ukrainians in the national sense, others defined themselves regionally as Little Russians or as Russians writ large. Many were probably indifferent and saw themselves above all as peasants or Christians, defying the claims of the competing national movements.

Besides Ukrainian and Russian nationalists, Polish nationalists also claimed at least Western Ukraine as part of their national territory. In 1830 to 1831 and 1863, Polish nobles staged uprisings against Russian rule. The Russian state repressed these revolts with force, confiscated nobles' estates, and removed thousands of Polish administrators from their posts. Meanwhile, the Polish nobility was de facto able to govern Austrian Galicia thanks to Vienna's classic "Divide and rule" policy. This policy also meant that Vienna saw the Ukrainian movement as a welcome counterweight to the powerful Polish nobility and treated it relatively well. During the closing decades of the 19th century, the first Ukrainian political parties were formed in Galicia, including both social-democratic and national-liberal groups. Galicia's Ukrainian-language press flourished, schools were permitted to teach in Ukrainian, and the provincial capital of Lemberg introduced Ukrainian-language chairs at its university. By the outbreak of the First World War, the Ukrainian educational society *Prosvita* had over 36.000 members in Galicia and reached 200.000 people through its libraries and reading clubs.

Who were the people who gave rise to the Ukrainian national movement during the 19th century? A distinguishing feature was that most of them had received a good education at universities or religious seminaries. Just as importantly, most Ukrainian nationalists made a conscious decision to see themselves as Ukrainians. A notable case in point is the biography of the Ukrainian historian Volodymyr Antonovych. Born Włodzimierz Antonowicz in a village west of Kyiv in 1834, he was the son of an impoverished Polish gentry family. His autobiography describes his youth on a noble estate where his mother worked as a governess. Young Antonovych became increasingly disgusted with the arrogance of the Polish nobility, who believed the peasants to be drunk and primitive good-for-nothings and did not see any need to educate them.

As a student, Antonovych's reading of French Enlightenment philosophy led him to identify the peasants as a democratic element within Ukraine's society. On several hikes across rural Ukraine, he stayed with local peasants and tried to learn about their lifestyle. In the late 1850s, he co-founded a secret school in Kiev to educate peasant children in a democratic and Ukrainian-na-

tional spirit. Unsurprisingly, the Polish intelligentsia was not amused, insulting Antonovych as a *khlopoman* (peasant lover) and turncoat. In 1862, he published an article entitled "My Confession," where he proudly embraced this epithet, declaring that a conscientious Polish nobleman in Ukraine had the moral duty to "to love the people in whose midst he lived, to become imbued with its interests, to return to the nationality his ancestors once had abandoned, and, as far as possible, by unremitting labor and love to compensate the people for the evil done to it."

Thus, Antonovych consciously chose the Ukrainian nationality for himself for political reasons and encouraged others to do the same. Feeling guilty before the exploited peasantry, he tried to repay his debt by working towards their socio-economic and national liberation. Antonovych almost experienced his self-Ukrainianization as a religious conversion, and indeed he did convert from Catholicism to Orthodoxy. Having grown up in Polish-speaking surroundings, he made the effort to learn Ukrainian as an adult (his fifth language after Polish, Latin, Russian, and French). Despite his subversive views, Antonovych became a history professor at Saint Vladimir Imperial University of Kiev, where he founded a social historical school that focused on the life of the common people. He wrote his works in Russian, since Ukrainian was restricted, and while he openly denounced the historical role of the Polish nobility, his criticism of the Russian state remained subtle and restrained.

Individuals like Antonovych had various options for national identification, each of which was linked to a political project and broader worldview. Antonovych's family background would have enabled him to be a Catholic Pole and a member of the Polish rural gentry, which would likely have gone along with the political project of Polish autonomy or even the re-establishment of an independent Polish state. His education at Russian universities enabled him to become a professor and he could easily have assimilated fully into Russian culture. This would have been a political decision for the imperial state, with the possibility of a successful career in the administration. Instead, Antonovych chose the third option of learning the language of the peasantry, working towards the advancement of Ukrainian high culture, and becoming a member of a peasant nation. His decision to identify as Ukrainian resulted from his political loyalty to the project of nationally based Ukrainian socialism. Like Antonovych, many 19th-century Ukrainian nationalists were not native speakers of Ukrainian. Among them were Russian- and Polish-speaking nobles as well as Jewish intellectuals and even individuals with French or Swiss ancestors. The Ukrainophiles were not connected by their ethnicity or native

tongue but by their political dedication to the peasants' cultural and societal improvement.

For much of the 19th century, Ukrainian nationalism remained the project of a small intellectual elite. In the Habsburg Monarchy, various clubs and economic co-operations took advantage of the relatively liberal legal regime to turn it into a true mass movement by the early 20th century. Consequently, the earliest demands for an independent Ukrainian state were voiced in Galicia around the turn of the century. Meanwhile, in Russia, the number of self-declared national Ukrainians slowly rose among the educated population, especially university students and teachers, but a mixture of repression and popular indifference delayed the formation of mass organizations. Only during the 1917 revolutions would Ukrainian nationalism become a truly relevant political force in Kiev, as the Ukrainian movement profited from the post-imperial power vacuum and briefly managed to establish a nation-state. However, as the subsequent civil war showed, the idea of Ukrainian nationhood was not yet sufficiently anchored in the population to guarantee Ukraine's independence in the face of several competing political forces. A combination of state policies, bottom-up mobilization, and extreme violence would change this over the course of the twentieth century, ultimately leading towards the establishment of a more sustainable independent Ukrainian state in 1991.

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