

THE RUS AND THE RESCUE OF NATIONS, PART I

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Organic association and the principle of subsidiarity

are the rescue of nations. They allow for the political articulation of common roots without alienating local cultural differentiation. They also permit overarching identities to be honored along with overlapping ones. Keeping this principle in mind, we may trace the history of relations between Moscow and Kyiv with an eye to how it could have been, and may yet, be applied.

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The Cossack chief is used to burying his gaze in the distance, like an invisible anchor, and pulling his people forward to the horizon his sight has claimed for them. Today, as he looks out into his country's flatlands—on whose behalf so many have fought and will fight—he knows he cannot ride away. With sullen dignity, the plumage on the front of his low, fur *astrakhan* hat barely moving, he returns to the negotiating table.

The man is Bohdan Khmelnytsky, destined to be remembered as both hero and villain, and the date is 1654. Christmas is just ending, and here, in the town of Pereyaslav, near Kyiv, where it all began, it may all begin again; where history's centrifugal storms sent forth the Rus into their eastward sprawl, a centripetal force might join them back to their ancient home.

The force in question are the Cossacks themselves, unwilling any longer to live under the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Six years prior they set off an uprising that would end with their incorporation into the Russian Tsardom. On this day, they negotiate the terms of

that incorporation.

Human affairs often contend between origin and urging-forth, the beginning and a distant beckoning. The heritage of the past and the heroism of what lies ahead. The reconciliation of these two is like the return of a prodigal son. Was Aeneas not guiding his people forward, and yet also back, to the Italian homeland where the Trojan folk originated? And was the *Odyssey* not an ordeal of return?

In the future, many will claim that such a homecoming occurred in Pereyaslav: here, was the tsar, an Odysseus, coming to replace the interlopers who had hitherto held sway in his home. If Moscow is the journeying hero, Kyiv is the mother city (did not the prophet-king Oleg describe her so?), a homely hearth, hard-won, to whose warmth any good son must surely bring his own.

Yet the point of homecoming epics is not merely the hero's return, but the founding of his own family.

On the 18th of January 1654, [Khmelnysky assembles the Cossack elite](#), and together they decide that they will have no other lord than the Tsar. The people are then gathered in the town square, walking to the beating of drums, and hear their leader, the *hetman*, speak to their needs. For reasons of *realpolitik*, and perhaps owing to the medieval instinct that the local should integrate into wider structures, it is understood that going forward the Cossacks will need a powerful lord, whether Pole, Tatar, Turk, or Muscovite—king, khan, sultan, or tsar. The decision, as the hetman now proclaims, is to appeal to the tsar. In this way, religion and kinship will be done justice to.

But if Kyiv is the mother city, how is it that the men of Moscow do not yield to the embrace of their motherland? All have assembled at the town church in Pereyaslav. From the Russian side, Vasiliy Buturlin, envoy of the Tsar, a nobleman and military leader, is empowered by his emperor to seal the alliance. But the Cossacks expect a mutual oath. They will give their loyalty to the Russian Caesar, and he, in turn, will promise them his

own, manifest as armed protection and the preservation of their laws. The dual pledge is a Polish practice, but one which suits the free spirit of the ethos of the steppe.

Buturlin, however, will have none of it. He cannot fathom his tsar abasing the imperial office by swearing an oath to his future subjects. The Cossacks eventually conceded on this point, requiring, as they did, the Tsar's favor, and viewing the affair as largely formal.

We may briefly look at [different interpretations](#) of Khmelnytsky's revolt. Whether it is referred to as integration or reunification is a matter of historical debate. In 1954, the Soviet Central Committee produced several theses on this event, providing the academic orthodoxy scholars were to follow. These deemed the above a 'reunification' between the Rus. Lev Zaborovsky, expert on 17th-century Russian foreign policy, argued that emerging historical evidence (being uncovered in the 1990s) concerning the sentiments of the denizens of the Cossack state—as recorded by Russian diplomats at the time of the Pereyaslav agreement—suggested it was indeed viewed as a reunification of the Rus. Zaborovsky, however, was unsympathetic to the political pretensions which the term had been used to justify.

In contrast to the Soviet 1954 theses, the so-called 'statist school,' developed among the Ukrainian diaspora outside the USSR, understood the agreement at Pereyaslav principally in terms of its leading to a Cossack state. Soviet historiography was uncomfortable with Cossack state-formation, focusing on 1654's display of national affinity with Moscow (to justify Soviet unity and push back against the legacy of anti-communist, and often pro-axis, Ukrainian nationalism) and mass mobilization (constituting a Marxist interpretation that played down local institutions and leadership).

There were also approaches that emphasized the latter (proto-Marxist mass mobilization) but not the former (national affinity with Moscow), like that of prominent historian Mykhailo Braichevsky, who underscored the mass rebellion against Poland without the sense of overarching Russian nationhood. This was not well received, but the idea of 'national liberation' caught on in some circles, since the USSR was supporting local struggles in the Third World during the 1960s. Zaborovsky, even though he saw

'reunification' as a valid descriptor, also accepted that of 'national liberation,' popular among Ukrainian nationalists, when applied to Khmelnytsky's uprising (in this, he was consistent with a medieval conception according to which the word 'nation' can apply to groups that are thought of as being part of other, wider nations.)

Returning to the Cossack disappointment with the tsar's envoy, we may suggest that the practice of reciprocal oaths, a feature of the Polish polity whose rule they had rejected, might have been edifying. The Cossacks saw no problem in this being a Polish practice. Indeed, we should strive to learn from our political opponents and integrate what is admirable in them and has contributed to their success. There was plenty of precedent for such arrangements, from the dual dependence of Pope and Holy Roman Emperor, such that, for a period, these swore loyalty to each other, to the two capitals of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. As Peter Wilson writes in his history of the Holy Roman Empire (an empire which, we should remember, lasted one thousand years):

Places ... acquired symbolic importance through events like royal elections, coronations, and assemblies, as well as more permanent palaces or tombs. It was a characteristic of the Empire's political order that it used multiple locations rather than a single capital ... the number of places with imperial associations grew over time.

The tsar's failure to offer his loyalty to the Cossacks can, therefore, be seen as a missed opportunity to achieve what might be described as organic association, and to apply the principle of subsidiarity. This does not mean that the consequences of being incorporated into the tsardom were all negative, but the instability of that incorporation should certainly give us pause.

We compared the Russian emperor to Odysseus, returning home by incorporating Kyivan lands. And yet, this incorporation of the homeland did not accompany a successful effort to build a joint future. It is as though this Odysseus had no Penelope—as though this Aeneas

failed to marry his Latin princess. In this regard, we should remember that the Trojans had to become Latin to fulfill their destiny, rather than making Italy Trojan. Or perhaps the Cossacks are the Trojans, as they are the ones whose nation was conquered—and theirs is a political return in asserting themselves as Rus. But unlike the king of Latium, who offered his daughter's hand to Aeneas, the Cossacks seem not to have been fully embraced as family. Indeed, the events that were to follow give the impression that a true unification of the Rus was left somehow unconsummated.

The instability of Kyivan incorporation begins with the tsar's failure to properly accommodate his new subjects in the peace with Poland. After the Russian-Polish war, which led to the Truce of Vilna, the tsar agreed on terms that the Cossacks deemed unsatisfactory enough for their leader, Hetman Ivan Vyhovsky, successor to Khmelnytsky, to negotiate his own Treaty of Hadiach with the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1658. The Cossack Hetmanate was to become a fully enfranchised member of that polity, which would then constitute a Polish-Lithuanian-Ruthenian Commonwealth.

Over a decade of warfare with Russia ensued, however, leading to the 1667 Treaty of Andrusovo between Poland and Russia. The Hetmanate was now once more under the Tsar, although as an autonomous entity. There would be yet more conflict with Russia, leading to the abdication of Hetman Petro Doroshenko in 1676.

Some historians see Cossack national development as having effectively ended on this date, whereas others emphasize the various structures that endured thereafter. It should also be noted that until 1686, local Orthodox clergy was organized under the Metropolitan of Kyiv, who only now came under the Patriarch of Moscow. Thereafter, following Vyhovsky, Cossack leaders would be occasionally disloyal to their tsar, as in 1708, when Ivan Mazepa took the side of the Swedes during their war with Russia.

Later stumbling blocks to building organic unity and trust between Rus-descended polities involved linguistic policy, as Solzhenitsyn writes in *Rebuilding Russia*:

It is indeed painful and humiliating to recall the directives issued during the reign of Alexander II (in 1863 and 1876), when the use of the Ukrainian language was banned, first in journalism and then in belles-lettres as well.

He adds, however, that Alexander II's measures were short lived. (In his 2021 essay *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*, Vladimir Putin actually condemns these as well.)

Apart from these and other attempts at linguistic homogenization, the suppression of the Hetman state in 1764, in the context of the Russian government bringing Serbian and Romanian colonists into the *Novorossiya* region, and the 1775 destruction of the *Zaporozhian Sich*, a semi-autonomous Cossack polity, must be counted as the flashpoint of this unfortunate trajectory.

In the second part of this exploration, to be published on Sunday, May 1st, we will look at the construction of Ukrainian nationalism before drawing a conclusion.