

Democratic Developments in Nineteenth-Century Ukraine

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I estimate that in 1815 about 90 percent of those who used the Ukrainian language in their daily life were enserfed peasants. They were also the only ones who retained and continued to creatively develop traditional folkways. The Ukrainian elite in the Russian empire - mainly descendents of the former cossack officer class - was assimilating to Russian culture and adopting French and English fashions and codes of conduct. In Galicia in the Habsburg empire, educated priests were primarily Polish-speaking and looked to the Polish gentry as models of conduct. A culture that was relegated to the lowest stratum of society seemed to have little chance to survive.

But the nineteenth century brought several democratizing developments that lifted this culture and its creators out of the depths. One was the abolition of serfdom. This occurred in Russia in 1861, two years before the emancipation of the slaves in the United States. For Ukrainians living in Galicia, a region taken by the Habsburg monarchy during the partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, emancipation came earlier, in the midst of the revolutions of 1848. In the Austrian part of Ukrainian-inhabited territories, a system of public education was introduced as well, and the schools used Ukrainian as the language of instruction. Ukrainians in the Russian empire did not enjoy this educational advantage - Russia's school system was poorly funded and undeveloped, and the Ukrainian language was prohibited from use in the classroom.

There was another important development: the rise of nationalism. Given how nationalism has evolved since, it is often difficult today to recall what a democratizing force this was originally. Numerous cultures that had been in the shadow of more dominant nations, that had not entered into universal human culture, were now coming into the light. Finns, Latvians, Slovaks, Ukrainians, and others not only made themselves heard, but representatives of the high cultures became interested in them. On Ukrainian territories, educated people - be they ethnic Ukrainians, Poles, or Russians - descended on the villages to record the songs of blind minstrels and ordinary peasants, to write down the tales they told their children, to sketch their fashions, to examine their musical instruments, to learn their dialects, and even to transcribe their smutty jokes. In Habsburg Galicia particularly active in these researches were priests and their sons. In the Russian empire, Polish landlords and intellectuals explored the folkways and songs of their peasants in Right-Bank Ukraine, while on the Left Bank (that is, east of the Dnipro River) the same was undertaken by the Ukrainian gentry, descendents of the cossack officer class. Polish romantics would dress their serfs up as cossacks or compose poetry in imitation of the songs of Ukrainian blind minstrels.

Symbolic of the age was the figure of the unsurpassed Ukrainian national poet, Taras Shevchenko. He was born a serf but wrote poetry that captivated intellectuals and men of letters throughout the Russian empire. His admirer Turgenev, for example, wrote a short memoir about him. Shevchenko's language and sentiments came straight from the heart of the Ukrainian peasantry. To contemporaries, a serf writing powerful poetry was a marvel. I think the reception of Shevchenko

has been most eloquently captured by the historian Mykola Kostomarov: “I saw that Shevchenko’s muse ripped the curtain from the life of the people. And it was frightening, and sweet, and painful, and intoxicating to peek within.”

Of course, the transformation of a vernacular culture into a national culture had problematic aspects. As many analysts have pointed out, the national culture, in the case of Ukrainians and other emerging nations, actually replaced, rather than reproduced, traditional culture. Also, the national movement can be seen as a promotion of subaltern elites rather than the peasantry. The national Ukrainian intelligentsia was composed largely of descendants of priests and of cossack gentry, with representatives of the peasantry slowly infiltrating its ranks. I often think of the national movements in terms of the intelligentsia saying “You are our people,” and thinking “We are your leaders.”

Nonetheless, the Ukrainian national awakening was certainly a progressive movement. In the years preceding World War I, Ukrainians found themselves aligned with the democratic and leftist movements in the states they lived in. The outstanding theorist of the Ukrainian movement, the political thinker Mykhailo Drahomanov argued that Ukrainians, as a plebeian nation, had to strive for social liberation. He made critical alliances with the Russian and Polish socialist movements and himself espoused socialism and anarchism. He also argued that Russian and Polish socialists working in Ukrainian-inhabited territories had to use the Ukrainian language and ukrainianize themselves. In the early twentieth century, all Ukrainian political parties in the Russian empire declared themselves revolutionary or socialist. The Ukrainian movement in Russia was allied with other persecuted minorities, particularly the Jews, and with Russian democratic and socialist forces. In Habsburg Galicia, the two major Ukrainian parties were the Radicals, who were agrarian socialists influenced by Drahomanov, and the National Democrats, in whose leadership were many former Radicals who still espoused social liberation and anticlericalism.

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