

Ukraine in the Russian imagination

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War is quite an unfavorable environment for the critical deconstruction of historical mythology or for the examination of uncomfortable pages in Ukrainian history. But what will happen if we put this discussion on hold?

Here is the development of a thread from my twitter account.

Since 2022, many (pro-)Ukrainian intellectuals rushed to demonstrate that this war is a part of a broader pattern of Russian relation toward Ukraine. Me too, I share the view that it is truly an important aspect to explore if we want to understand the present war. Especially, because there are still a lot of renowned western academics who continue to insist that Putin's apparent obsession with history is just a manipulation for internal audience and that Russian foreign policy is purely pragmatic: "Russian officials just want Ukraine out of NATO". When they say they want to destroy Ukrainian sovereignty in any form... well, let's just ignore this strange discourse because it does not fit into our analysis. In other words, they tend to dismiss the role of ideology. I believe, on the contrary, that we cannot ignore that Ukraine is playing a very important role in the Russian political imagination. And historians could and should provide the public with the knowledge about the origins of this obsession, contributing to the ongoing effort to make sense of this war.

But too often a supposedly historical approach becomes unhistorical or even anti-historical. It takes form of a following narrative: Russia wants to exterminate Ukraine today because that's what it was always doing, from time immemorial. A method is to pick the examples of anti-Ukrainian discourses and practices from the past, without contextualizing them. So the general public may make a conclusion that a hate toward Ukraine is somehow a part of a Russian DNA and will persist independently of any historical change.

It is impossible to deny that there is a strong continuity of ideas that shape the attitudes of Russians toward Ukraine. But could it be explained without eventually falling into a trap of an essentialist anachronistic unhistorical thinking?

History is about analyzing the change.

If we examine how Russian policies toward Ukraine were actually changing in time, we can see that at numerous historical junctures Russian society could have opted for a different path (for example for a path where the West is not seen as an unavoidable point of reference or where Ukraine is not imagined as a part of the Russian "national" body). Choosing another path was, is and always an option. Russian ideas about Ukraine are a product of specific material realities of the past. And precisely because they are historically situated means that they are not eternal, but constructed and thus can and should be de-constructed - a (very) basic idea that is still not articulated enough. A nation-centered essentialist framework in history-writing, used consciously or unconsciously by cultural entrepreneurs, especially historians, to "unite the nation" in face of a deadly threat, tends to obscure the historical dynamics in the past, thus becoming an obstacle for seeing any potential for a

change in the future.

The line between the (necessary) amplifying of former subalterns' voices and being uncritical to their narratives is very thin. What happens when a (pro-)Ukrainian scholar is spreading essentialist narratives about Russian-Ukrainian history? If it is criticized by academics who are strongly affiliated personally and scientifically with Russia, even if there may be good intentions behind, the objective power inequalities make a productive dialog between the two basically impossible (it's difficult to deny that a lot of researchers in what we call Slavic studies are genuinely influenced by the perspective of the imperial center and are clearly uncomfortable with their hegemonic position in the field being challenged). As for those scholars who sympathize with the Ukrainian society in the current political context, they tend not to argue. If expressed by a Ukrainian scholar, an essentialist analysis is put within the realm of "victim's testimony". And the victim's voice, as you may know, should not be challenged.

But what will happen if we put (self-)criticism on hold? We will obtain a Ukrainian public space monopolized by ethnoprimordialist discourses harboring a strong anti-democratic potential. As academics whose research and often personal lives are connected to this country, we are not interested to see Ukraine, that is currently fighting the authoritarian and ultraconservative state, to become just like its opponent in the process of this battle. Promoting critical reassessment of established narratives should be a part of a broader effort of preserving the democratic future of Ukraine.

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