

Deconstructing Integration: Ukraine's Postcolonial Subjectivity

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Many probably remember the horrifying footage from a civil war-torn Syria in May 2013: a rebel fighter rips the heart from the body of a state army soldier and eats it.¹ The Russian media unanimously condemned this act as barbaric, and although their western counterparts resisted the immediate temptation to resort to orientalizing tropes and attempted to present a more nuanced picture investigating the personality of the perpetrator and musing about the effect of war on human nature, they also dismissed this “ritual demonstration of cannibalism” as uncivilized.²

[A] man—a man! Oh the gods! The barbarian!—tears out his heart from his palpitating entrails. What do I say? He is avenging himself on a monster.³

Though fitting the circumstances of the Syrian incident, the above quote describes the murder of the intendant of Paris Louis Bénigne François Berthier de Sauvigny, who was hated by the Parisian crowd, on July 22, 1789—less than ten days into the French Revolution, without the exacerbating influence of a long-lasting, brutal civil war or the Bedouin cultural specificity (which supposedly explains the behavior of the “Syrian cannibal”). Just three weeks later, on August 12, an officer, Major Henri de Belsunce, was mutilated by a mob in Caen, in Normandy, and the investigation of the case documented that his heart had been ripped out, then grilled and eaten by a woman.⁴

The parallelism of these atrocities committed in otherwise incomparable situations reveals the hegemonic power of interpretative frames to ascribe meaning to events. Even the critical narrative of the French Revolution (in paranoid fashion, “crediting” all the horrors of the twentieth century to the legacy of the Enlightenment and the revolution) focuses on discourses and ideas rather than the persistent crude street violence. In the discussion of the Syrian crisis, analysis of the implications of grand theories plays a much less prominent role. The French Revolution is viewed as a high point in the history of western civilization, even if perceived with disapproval; the narrative on Syria is one of ultimate “bloodlands” and barbaric rebels fighting an outdated autocratic regime. This is why even gruesome beheadings during the French Revolution are included in the narrative of modern technology and social regimes, guillotine and terror, even though neither of these was in place in 1789,

1. Salma Abdelaziz and Holly Yan, “Video: Syrian Rebel Cuts Out Soldier’s Heart, Eats It,” *CNN*, May 15, 2013, at www.cnn.com/2013/05/15/world/meast/syria-eaten-heart/ (last accessed July 10, 2015).

2. Paul Wood, “Face-to-Face with Abu Sakkar, Syria’s ‘Heart-Eating Cannibal,’” *BBC*, July 5, 2013, at www.bbc.com/news/magazine-23190533 (last accessed July 10, 2015).

3. See “Details of Wednesday, 22 July,” in Philip G. Dwyer and Peter McPhee, eds., *The French Revolution and Napoleon: A Sourcebook* (London, 2002), 20.

4. *Mercure de France* 39 (September 26, 1789): 174–76; Frédéric Vaultier, *Souvenirs de l’insurrection normande dite du fédéralisme, en 1793, publiés pour la première fois avec notes et pièces justificatives par M. Georges Mancel* (Caen, 1858), 302.

whereas decapitation by swords and knives and ripping out hearts (and eating them) have been censored.⁵ The essentially geopolitical historical imagination that ascribes meaning to selectively registered events depending on their “geocultural” localization is not just politically incorrect (from a subaltern point of view) but directly erroneous: the ideologies of the Enlightenment and the Shia-Sunni divide played equally marginal roles in the abovementioned violent incidents. Reconstructing the broader context is essential to a professional historical inquiry. The problem is, who is the subject of contextualization? The protagonists of the study, who manifest their frames of reference explicitly or implicitly in a variety of ways, or the scholar, who frames her case with her own cultural biases and preferences? Any normative historical scheme embedded in one’s analysis immediately raises suspicions that certain empirical data might not have been taken into account because they do not fit into this scheme, and the rest have been interpreted from a vantage point alien to both the protagonists of the events and the conventions of the study’s chosen methodology.

We cannot but express solidarity with Timothy Snyder’s practical analysis of the events in Ukraine, and we commend his intuition, which allowed him to predict the Russian invasion of Ukraine as early as February 2014. At the same time, the profoundly geopolitical framework of his analysis, which contributes to its success with the broader public, lessens its value as a scholarly model. One can find the framework of “integration and disintegration” more or less productive, but the very mental map on which this model is projected makes the derived conclusions hostages to one’s political views rather than the result of substantiated reasoning. We would like to base our interpretation of the events on something more verifiable than ideology, all the more so because, in a nutshell, Snyder’s mental map is not so different from Vladimir Putin’s. What follows is not a critique of Snyder’s interpretation of the Ukrainian events but a discussion of the preexisting geopolitical and ideological frames that we as a community of experts, regardless of our individual ideological preferences, employ to make sense of what we observe in Ukraine.

Not unlike Putin or western intellectuals who understand the Ukrainian situation as a result of global competition between Russia and the United States for regional domination, Snyder sees the Ukrainian revolution as a derivative of the historical standoff between two other global players: Russia and the European Union, each advancing its own historical scenario and embodying a distinctive historical (that is, civilizational) political organization: “the revolution and war in Ukraine only make sense when the country’s history is placed within a global framework and the choices of Ukraine’s revolutionaries understood as a response to a historical predicament.”

It is important to stress that in Snyder’s model, Ukraine’s options are limited to and predetermined by only two preexisting historical scenarios, as history itself is perceived in terms of a single normative teleology (hence his be-

5. For the most recent example of such censorship, see D. M. G. Sutherland, “Urban Violence in 1789,” in David Andres, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the French Revolution* (Oxford, 2015), 278 (in passim mentioning the “ripping out [of] Berthier’s heart” by an unqualified “them”) and 282 (omitting even a mention of Belsunce’s mutilation).

belief that “historical concepts such as fascism, antifascism, the Holocaust, . . . and the Russian empire” make sense only within “their normal settings”). Ukrainians are entitled to the fundamental choice between integration and disintegration, but the content of these two options and the circumstances of the very situation of choice are rigidly predetermined by Ukraine’s geopolitical fates. “No country was shaped more by the accumulating effect of the Nazi and Soviet projects of transformation”—Ukraine is little more than a function of its own history, while this history is a product of contention between several great powers. Snyder believes that Ukraine should choose Europe and freedom, Putin wants Ukraine to choose Russia and empire (“Russia’s anti-Maidan is about propaganda, conspiracy, and empire”), but neither cares about the subjectivity of Ukrainians, because the historical agenda has been outlined for the citizens of Ukraine by somebody or something else.

This historicist stance is literally geopolitical because it treats values and cultures as being spatially and civilizationally defined. There is “Europe,” the champion of normal decolonization and good integration; the “Balkan model” of nationalism, successful in decolonization but failing to provide proper social integration; and “eastern Europe,” which in the 1930s became the space of competing colonial projections and aspirations by regional superpowers—the USSR and Germany. Germany was part of this eastern Europe, and together with the USSR they formed “the two neocolonial systems,” expanding in the lethal bloodlands “between Berlin and Moscow”: “The clash between Germany and the Soviet Union was also a clash between two recolonial ideas, two notions of how to apply colonial knowledge to the center of Europe.” Not unlike the divergent perceptions of beheadings in Syria and France, Balkan nationalism is also viewed as substantially different from “the more celebrated French model” (in itself, a revision of the old distinction between the primitive “ethnic” and civilized “civic” nationalisms by Hans Kohn). “World War I was a direct consequence of the Balkan model of integration, the creation of nation-states from empires. During its course, all of the European land empires were either defeated or succumbed to revolution. This meant the completion of decolonization within Europe as of about 1922.”

We have no intention of discussing the geopolitical discourse of this scheme after all the efforts undertaken during past decades to deconstruct it. Apparently, its persistence is a problem of the field formerly known as Russian studies rather than of the individual scholar. This is the same discourse that makes us see atrocities in Syria and revolutionary France through different interpretative lenses; or localize the universally present genocidal potential, including antisemitism, of the early twentieth-century social sciences and political imagination solely in Germany and radically oppose Russian national and social discourses to this racialized pattern; or ignore the scale of “ethnic cleansings” in medieval and early modern France and England just because they took place before the idea of human rights became well established. It is more significant how the concept of decolonization is rendered in this geopolitical scheme.

Empire and resistance do not separate Europe from the rest of the world, since that dialectic began within Europe itself. . . . Balkan revolutions

against Ottoman rule, usually categorized as national, were the beginning of the decolonial moment. . . . The European nation-state, based on the Balkan model, succeeded as a method of disintegrating land empires but failed as a method of reintegration. As a result, ideas of colonialism found their way back to Europe, not as nostalgia, but as planning. Beginning in about 1930, eastern Europe became the site of attempts at what might be called *recolonization*, the application of colonial knowledge to European neighbors.

As we have argued elsewhere, the main limitation of modern postcolonial theories stems from their genealogical dependence on the phenomenon of colonizing empire and hence the inability to contemplate a truly postcolonial reality that is indifferent to the imperial past (not obeying imperial legacy or constantly struggling with it). Inasmuch as empire is perceived as a monolithic, hegemonic force, the postcolonial future is construed as equally monologic and predetermined.⁶ *Decolonization* and *recolonization* in Snyder's model envision no postcolonial condition but depend equally on the way the initial condition of "empireness" is imagined. To him, *empire* stands for an international superpower that colonizes adjacent territories, and the demise of an empire automatically means "the reconstruction of nations."⁷ Snyder is far from suggesting that the nation remains intact throughout the colonization period: he warns of the need "to avoid seeing these developments as inevitable" and to accept the reality of historical "twists and turns."⁸ Still, the (chronologically) postcolonial nation is a direct reincarnation of the pre-colonial one, insofar as any modification of the original entity results merely from the passage of time, and the role of empire is just the demarcation of the rupture between the two historical stages of national sovereignty. The "reconstructed" nation can follow a flawed ("Balkan") model of nationalization, but, *mutatis mutandis*, this is still a remarkably easily identifiable (practically "primordial") nation: "Ukraine has been near the center of several of the major integrative or disintegrative projects of the European twentieth century. It did not become a nation-state, despite a serious military effort, after World War I; instead, most of the lands of today's Ukraine became part of the Soviet Union. It was the major German European colony of World War I and was meant to be the major German colony in World War II."

In most sophisticated postcolonial historical accounts, the monolithically hegemonic empire is seen as preserving its imprint on the postcolonial nation, even sixty-five years after decolonization, in the form of an inherited structure of domination.⁹ In the version of national history Snyder presents, the colonial power by itself does not affect the nation beyond arresting its sovereignty and thus setting the "right" forms of social integration. What both of these approaches have in common is their shared dependence on the nation-centered worldview that perceives empire and nation as two opposing

6. Ilya Gerasimov, Sergey Glebov, and Marina Mogilner, "The Postimperial Meets the Postcolonial: Russian Historical Experience and the Postcolonial Moment," *Ab Imperio* 14, no. 2 (2013): 97–135.

7. The formula was used as the title of his *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999* (New Haven, 2003).

8. *Ibid.*, 16.

9. Gyan Prakash, *Mumbai Fables* (New Delhi, 2011), esp. 29–30.

ideal types and political regimes. It is precisely this nation-centeredness and a totalizing reading of empire that new imperial history has been concerned with for quite a while, connecting the revision of postcolonial theory with a revision of classic imperial history. The accumulated body of historical scholarship produced within and outside new imperial history has complicated the opposition of empire and nation as archaic versus modern, coercive versus voluntary, expansionist versus preservationist regarding its "organic" borders. Instead, it suggests the only meaningful and clear distinction between empire and nation—the one in their approaches to the conceptualization and organization of human diversity.

The specificity of empire (or rather the imperial situation) reveals itself in sustaining a multidimensional space characterized by the multilayered and unsystematic overlapping of incongruent taxonomies, principles of group affinity, and hierarchies of authority. The meaning and boundaries of any universal category are strictly contextualized here: "Russianness," "nobility," and "populism" do not mean much without clarifications: exactly where, when, and in what type of interaction. "Empireness" is invisible as distinct from the state, the social hierarchy, and the legal or economic regime (equally compatible with a nation-state), except for its role as a structural "switchman" between different contexts and strategies that change the meaning and mode of one's performance and even identity. Then the oppressed anti-imperial rebels transform into colonizers, and the imperial administration can perform as nation builder for minority groups.¹⁰

Nation meaningfully describes a type of horizontal group solidarity with political aspirations, unmediated by direct human contact and sustained through the circulation of public discourses (hence the importance of technologies and social structures accommodating the public sphere: the printing press and TV, salons, cafés, mass schooling, and democracy). As has been noted by representatives of subaltern studies long ago, nation is no less repressive and centralized than empire.¹¹ Nations can dominate other nations (recognized as "minorities") without becoming an empire and certainly without espousing an imperial situation, or they can participate in empire building (just as Cossack and Scottish elites contributed to the formation of the Russian and British empires). Nation-states can be ruled by democratic or authoritarian regimes, be they xenophobic or tolerant. The main distinction of the nation is its unequivocally one-dimensional composition: as an imagined community structured by public discourses, it depends on the universal intelligibility of a bonding "message" that is comprehended identically by every

10. This is how an almost-assimilated former province of Sweden developed into the semisovereign nation-state of Finland, with a constitution, parliament, laws, and economy of its own, and how the Soviet Union offered an institutional framework for the development of the nations that, after the collapse of the "Soviet empire," separated along these institutional lines. Examples of anti-imperial rebels taking up the role of colonizers include Russian sectarian Old Believers exiled to the North Caucasus from inner Russia and revolutionary exiles pursuing evolutionist and ultimately colonialist ethnography in Siberia and the Far East.

11. Cf. Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Historiography," *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 1 (2000): 9–32.

member of that community, in all its spatial and social loci. This bonding code can contain any idea of unity (ethnic, civic, confessional, regional, social, political), but it should come across as unambiguously as possible. Whereas *imperial situation* implies the coexistence of several semiautonomous regimes of hegemony that theoretically leave room for someone to maneuver among them (a persecuted Russian Old Believer transforms into a privileged agent of Russification when exiled to the imperial borderlands), *nation* sustains a single, universally applied hegemony. Therefore, only a nation can offer true equality to its members, and only a nation is capable of real totalitarian control over them.

This brief theoretical outline of a few basic analytical categories is necessary to clarify the structural situation of “decolonization,” as discussed by Snyder. A nation emerging from an empire is thus not just a heavily transformed version of the “precolonial” nation; it is a completely new political community that cannot rely on any preexisting “national” structures to sustain itself. That is, it uses imperial political practices and social institutions, mobilizes ethnocultural traditions, and elaborates a unifying historical narrative in order to integrate its members, but none of this has anything to do with any authentic national legacy.¹² As Snyder observes, the key for a nation’s success is finding a proper mechanism of integration, but the source of integration should be found within the community, not outside—in the good liberal EU or evil imperial Russia. This makes the problem of the nation’s collective subjectivity central to the outcome of its postcolonial transition. Of course, there is no collective body and soul of a nation to embrace any collective subjectivity (although nationalists claim otherwise). In the semiotic model of nation as a space defined through the circulation of a universally recognized “message,” everything is at once simpler and more difficult. There is no need for any transcendental “national spirit,” but the common space has to be built from below as individuals begin acting as self-conscious subjects and exchanging individual ideas. When these individual “statements” correlate and resonate, they begin coalescing into a common message, and the circulation of a common message produces a common national sphere. The trick is how to get enough critically thinking people to exchange their opinions, where to host this exchange initially (establishing a public sphere), and what the chances are that the variety of individual expressions will resonate with each other. This is why postcolonial scholars complain about the persistence of imperial hegemony in societies with underdeveloped individual subjectivity, why the public sphere is required for nation building, and why the existence of common values has been crucial for the success of Euromaidan as the starting point for the new Ukrainian nation.¹³

It is important to stress that no collective national instinct or will led to Euromaidan. On the contrary, it was Euromaidan as an event, a social structure,

12. It is important to remember that “cultural legacies are ‘transmitted’—not ‘received from.’” See Jan Kubik, “Cultural Legacies of State Socialism: History Making and Cultural-Political Entrepreneurship in Postcommunist Poland and Russia,” in Grzegorz Ekiert and Stephen E. Hanson, eds., *Capitalism and Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe: Assessing the Legacy of Communist Rule* (Cambridge, Eng., 2003), 343.

13. Yaroslav Hrytsak, “Ignorance Is Power,” *Ab Imperio* 15, no. 3 (2014): 218–28.

and a political process that stimulated the expression of peoples' individual subjectivities and greatly intensified and accommodated their exchange of ideas and opinions—whereas Ukrainian history's main contribution of the preceding decade had been the elaboration of a set of common values that provided the necessary cumulative effect of community building to the mass-scale exchange of ideas. Snyder supports his model of a self-conscious anti-imperial nation with an argument that in fact points in a different direction when properly verified: “The aspirations of Ukrainians in 2013 and 2014, and in particular the desire for an association agreement with the EU, now come into clearer focus. The Yanukovich regime had the support of much of the population when its policy was to sign the association agreement and lost it when it yielded to Russian pressure not to sign.” According to a comprehensive sociological survey conducted on the eve of Euromaidan (September 13–23, 2013), 40.5 percent of Ukrainians supported integration with the EU, 35 percent wanted to join the Russia-led Customs Union (CU), 13.4 percent were undecided, and 10 percent were ready to accept any decision imposed on them.¹⁴ Not only was there no general “national consensus” on the desired course to be taken (and hence, arguably, no single “nation”), the 10 percent of swing voters guaranteed the support of any decision made by the government by a formal majority (50 percent versus 35 or 45 percent versus 40). (This poll was probably one of the reasons Yanukovich dared to sabotage the EU association procedure in favor of the Russian option.) True, half a year after the beginning of the revolution these figures changed: by June 2014, the number of those interested in integration with the Russian CU had decreased by half, and the share of EU supporters had grown from 40.5 percent to 52.7 percent.¹⁵ But this dynamic only proves that the change in public opinion was a result of the Euromaidan revolution, not its cause.¹⁶ The emerging broad consensus on a number of key topics manifested the formation of a collective national subjectivity and the new Ukrainian nation. This new nation was capable of elaborating a future agenda for itself, based on its own interests formulated in the process of broad discussion, within the framework of common values, and largely ignoring any “historical scenarios” as represented by the EU or Russia. This is what makes the Euromaidan a unique example of a truly postcolonial revolution—in contrast to the familiar type of anticolonial revolutions. The latter established the sovereignty of the nation but failed to conceptualize this sovereignty as a value in its own right, unmediated by opposition to the former colonizer or integration with a new benevolent superpower. Judging by the public discourse, Ukrainians have few illusions about the merits of the European bureaucracy, the efficiency of the EU economy, or the record of intercultural tolerance in western Europe. “The European choice” is used

14. “Bolee 40% ukraintsev khotiat v ES, 35%—za soiuz Putina,—opros,” Tsenzor.net, October 3, 2013, at censor.net.ua/n255282 (last accessed June 30, 2015).

15. “V Ukraine rekordno vyroslo chislo storonnikov evrointegratsii i protivnikov TS,—opros,” Tsenzor.net, July 4, 2014, at censor.net.ua/news/292570 (last accessed June 30, 2015).

16. Volodymyr Kulyk, “Ukrainian Nationalism since the Outbreak of Euromaidan,” *Ab Imperio* 15, no. 3 (2014): 94–122; “Interview with Viacheslav Likhachev: Maidan Will Attract Scholars Even One Hundred Years from Now,” *Ab Imperio* 15, no. 3 (2014): 63–74.

as a metaphor, shorthand for the set of common values elaborated in the course of public debates over the past years.¹⁷ Only Ukrainians can produce for themselves a viable scenario of integration, because, structurally, there is no difference between the EU and Russia (as depicted by Snyder) as an “integrating”/“disintegrating” external force.

Likewise, the difference between Russia and Ukraine is not that of empire versus nation. Although there is no room here for any detailed analysis of modern Russia, it is important to stress that it is as postcolonial as Ukraine and faces the same challenge of “nationalization” and self-reinvention as a nation as Ukraine does. The fact that it took a different path (anticolonial of sorts—nominating the west to the role of the colonial hegemon) better explains the policy of the late Putin regime than the hypothesis of the “imperial legacy.” In the case of the post-1991 Russian Federation, we see an inverse correlation between the magnitude of state violence (and its popular support) and the public discourse of national homogeneity—for example, vis-à-vis Chechnia. For the first time since the collapse of the USSR, we are witnessing the triumph of the nation-centered social imagination in Russia, accompanied, not surprisingly, by all the attributes of the discourse of the wholesome national body (be it antigay propaganda, the cult of sports, antifeminism, xenophobia, or the rhetoric of “ancestral territories”). For the first time in its history, Russia is finally turning into a classic nation-state—something that has been advocated by countless social scientists and historians, from Valery Tishkov to Geoffrey Hosking, as a precondition for a “normal” democratic society. The ugly face of Russian nation-statehood should not come as a surprise: in the absence of the kind of collective effort undertaken by Ukrainian society in debating and elaborating the common (“national”) agenda and in a different economic situation, Russian society has to seek the foundation of its national unity in structural factors: territory, history, religion, and ethnicity. We could call this the Balkan model of nationality, but a geopolitical explanation is no more useful here than attempts to explain Nazism through German *Sonderweg*, or to differentiate between beheadings in Syria and in revolutionary France.

17. Ilya Gerasimov, “Ukraine 2014: The First Postcolonial Revolution. Introduction to the Forum,” *Ab Imperio* 15, no. 3 (2014): 22–44.