



**FOREIGN
AFFAIRS**

Published by the Council on Foreign Relations

December 16, 2013
SNAPSHOT

Is There One Ukraine?

The Problem With Ukrainian Nationalism

Orlando Figes

ORLANDO FIGES is Professor of History at Birkbeck College, University of London. His latest book is Just Send Me Word: A True Story of Love and Survival in the Gulag and his next book, Revolutionary Russia, 1891–1991, will be published in April 2014.

Images of toppled statues notwithstanding, “revolution” has never been the right word to describe recent events in Kiev. Ukraine, after all, has been here before. At the heart of the country’s present struggle is its resistance to any "strategic partnership" with Russia and its understanding of Europe as a potential economic and political savior from corrupt government. But the tensions between East and West -- both psychological and geographic -- are deeply rooted in Ukraine's national identity. Those Ukrainians most concerned about their country’s future would do well to recognize that identity’s inherent fragility. The original generation of Ukrainian nationalists suffered precisely for their failure to do so.

Prior to the twentieth century, there were no “Ukrainians” to speak of -- at least not in an official sense. Tsarist Russia built its national identity on the idea of Slavic unity, of which Ukraine was a fundamental and inseparable part. Russia still traces its Orthodox inheritance to Kievan Rus, the loose confederation of Slavic principalities that fell to the Mongols in the thirteenth century. Dominated by the Lithuanians and the Poles from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, and overrun by Cossacks in the seventeenth, most of the area was integrated into the emerging Russian Empire after 30 years of fighting among Russia, Poland, Turks and Cossacks for control of its fertile lands. But the region to the west of the Dnieper River (which runs through Kiev) remained with the Poles. Upon Poland's partition in the final decades of the eighteenth century, these western lands (where Catholicism had gained some foothold) were divided between Russia and Austria.

The western population under Austrian rule was labeled “Ruthenian” (dog Latin for “Russian”); in the central and eastern lands, the population was categorized as “Little Russian” by the tsarist state (which had made it illegal to print the word "Ukraine"). In many of the territory’s remote rural areas, there was so much ethnic intermingling that it was difficult for anything more than a localized form of identity to take root in the popular

consciousness. "Were one to ask the average peasant in the Ukraine his nationality," observed a British diplomat in 1918, "he would answer that he is Greek Orthodox; if pressed to say whether he is a Great Russian, a Pole, or a Ukrainian, he would probably reply that he is a peasant; and if one insisted on knowing what language he spoke, he would say that he talked 'the local tongue.'"

The country we now call Ukraine was a creation of World War I -- which destroyed the Russian and Austrian empires -- but its people were not called Ukrainians until independence had been won. Internally divided by language and religion throughout the nineteenth century, Ukraine was less a nation than an expression of the geopolitical divisions that erupted in World War I. A Ukrainian nationalist movement did begin to emerge before the war, but it was confined to the urban literate classes seeking to promote their own Ukrainian language in schools and public life through native-language newspapers and books.

The nationalists eventually built up a mass following by combining calls for land reform with demands for native-language and civil rights, enabling the Ukrainians to gain full access to schools, courts, and political representation. But this national revolution, which burst onto the scene in 1917, proved impossible to sustain in the face of Russian resistance. The movement soon came to depend on assistance from foreign powers, including Germany and Austria, that were keen to help the nationalists attain Ukraine's independence in order to control this weak new state and use it in the war against Russia.

Ukraine won its independence from Soviet Russia thanks to Germany's defeat of Soviet Russia and the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. But this was an impoverished form of independence, as it depended heavily on German protection and had a pro-German puppet state that allowed the kaiser's armies to help themselves to its rich food stocks. After the withdrawal of German forces at the end of the war, the country was overrun by Polish forces, the Western-backed White armies, anarchist peasant groups, and the Red Army. Ukraine's nationalists had the weakest hold on the country of them all.

In 1921, the Bolsheviks emerged victorious from the Russian civil war, and Ukraine was forced back into the fold. With the Soviet-Polish Treaty of Riga, Ukraine lost its independence and found itself partitioned between Soviet Russia and Poland. And having sided with the Germans and the Poles against the Soviets, the Ukrainians who remained in Soviet territory were singled out for punishment. Joseph Stalin in particular never forgave the Ukrainians for their independence movement during the civil war: No other Soviet republic suffered so severely from his policies, especially from forcible campaign of agricultural collectivization, which ended in the famine of the early 1930s, now recognized by the United Nations as an act of genocide in all but name against the Ukrainians.

The Ukraine that was later carved out of the Soviet Union in 1991 was little more united or coherent as a nation than the one that had entered the U.S.S.R. as a Soviet socialist republic in 1922. Its boundaries with Russia and Belarus were in many places arbitrary and confusing. The Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev created a further complication when he transferred the Crimea from Russia to Ukraine in 1954. Packaged as a gift of "Soviet friendship" to his native Ukraine, where Khrushchev had presided over much of the terror in the 1930s, the transfer remains a thorn in Moscow's relations with Kiev because the Russian fleet continues to be harbored on this strategic Black Sea peninsula.

Above all, the country is divided between those who look to Europe for their values and ideals -- mainly young

Ukrainian speakers in the west and central regions -- and those older Russian speakers in the industrial eastern regions and Crimea who prefer to retain the old connections with Russia. Consider a November 2013 poll conducted by the Kiev International Institute of Sociology. It showed high levels of support in eastern Ukraine (64 percent) for a customs union between Ukraine and Russia, modest levels of support in central Ukraine (29 percent), and lower levels in the west (16 percent). Support for a referendum on whether the country ought to join the European Union followed the reverse pattern: 66 percent in favor in the west, 43 percent in the center, and only 18 percent in the east.

It would be difficult to argue that Ukraine's future lies east. In the short and medium term, Ukrainians cannot afford to fall out with Russia, which controls their energy supplies, owns most of their debt, and has strong links with their industries. But in the longer term, Europe is the best hope the Ukrainians have for good governance and economic modernization -- for the "normal" way of life that seems to be the guiding inspiration of the opposition on the streets. Russia can only offer nostalgia for the past, not the promise of a better future.

But Ukrainian nationalists would do well to remember that their European dream is just that -- a dream. The European Union is undoubtedly sympathetic to Ukrainian demands for political reform, and that is certainly an important step: Ukraine has been badly served by corrupt politicians for far too long. But Brussels is unlikely to commit to the grander visions of some Ukrainians. There will be no visa-free travel for Ukrainians, let alone EU membership for Ukraine. Ukraine is too big and too poor for the European Union to absorb it. Those Ukrainians who are skeptical of Europe are not wrong to think that Europe mostly has its own interests in mind when supporting the protesters in Kiev.

Given how divided Ukraine is on these issues -- and how incompatible Russia's desires are with the European Union's -- Ukraine ought to consider applying a precedent from elsewhere in eastern Europe: deciding the country's fate by referendum. The 1993 partition of Czechoslovakia, the so-called velvet divorce, was a mostly amicable division that was ratified, and thus legitimized, by the country's own citizens. Ukrainian politicians could similarly allow the public to decide the basic course of the country's foreign policy. It would be a messy process, and there would be many who argue reasonably that Ukrainian identity consists precisely in maintaining some link with both East and West. But foreign policy by referendum would be preferable to the permanent division of Ukraine, which is looking increasingly like a possibility. And given Ukraine's tragic twentieth-century history, it would certainly be preferable to a solution imposed by an outside power.

Copyright © 2002-2012 by the Council on Foreign Relations, Inc.

All rights reserved. To request permission to distribute or reprint this article, please fill out and submit a [Permissions Request Form](#). If you plan to use this article in a coursepack or academic website, visit [Copyright Clearance Center](#) to clear permission.

Return to Article: <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/140560/orlando-figes/is-there-one-ukraine>

[Home](#) > [Snapshot](#) > [Is There One Ukraine?](#)

Published on *Foreign Affairs* (<http://www.foreignaffairs.com>)

Ukraine. Quite the same Wikipedia. Just better. And the official language there is Russian in terms of its top ethnic groups Russians make up 77.7% and other smaller ethnic groups are the tatar Ukrainians Bosch care chuvash Chechen and others when it comes to Ukraine Ukraine is a large country in Eastern Europe known for its Orthodox churches Ukraine features the same sophia's Cathedral which was the first. For Ukrainians fertile land in 1991 Ukraine became independent since that time Ukraine has been facing a number of economic and political Problems. So the national colours that also have religious significance are of huge importance to the people of Ukraine And then I want to look at the official animals of these countries So for Russia, that's the Russian brown bear. Ukrainian officials are attempting to counter the onslaught of belligerency in the Moscow media by announcing Ukraine is ready to meet an enemy attack even if it takes the form of a massive invasion. According to interior ministry advisor Valery Potseluyko, "We [the Ukrainian government] understood there would be a serious response from Moscow to our moves against pro-Russian TV channels and Medvedchuk; but the time to begin a military offensive is wrong"the fields must first dry up. Indeed, the snow is just begging to melt on the East European (Sarmatic) Plain. Ukrainians concerned for their country's future need to acknowledge its inherent fragility. The original generation of Ukrainian nationalists suffered precisely for their failure to do so. Is There One Ukraine? The Problem With Ukrainian Nationalism. By Orlando Figes. December 16, 2013. A protester in Kiev, Ukraine. Courtesy Reuters. Sign in and save to read later.