

A Survey of Developments in Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine by the  
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UKRAINE'S 'PERIASLAV COMPLEX.'

By Taras Kuzio

On 13 March, President Leonid Kuchma issued a decree to commemorate the 350th anniversary of the Periaslav Treaty of 8 January 1654 between Ruthenia/Ukraine and Muscovy/Russia. Kuchma ends his second term in office in October 2004, so the commemoration would therefore be one of his final acts before leaving office. It would follow two years of "Ukraine in Russia" and "Russia in Ukraine" celebrations in 2002 and 2003.

The decree appointed Volodymyr Lytvyn, the head of the presidential administration and the For a United Ukraine election bloc, as the head of the organizing committee. Other members of the committee were drawn from the government, Academy of Sciences, parliament, state administration, and cultural sphere. The activities planned during the commemoration include academic conferences, roundtables, publication of books and brochures, cultural events, competitions for students, exhibitions, and television and radio programs. The Ukrainian and Crimean governments, and the State Committee on Information, Television, and Radio were instructed to ensure that all of these events were financed and efficiently organized.

In the Soviet era the Periaslav Treaty was commemorated as the "reunion" of two "brotherly peoples" who were united in the medieval state of Kyiv Rus and later torn apart by foreign intrigue but fated to be always in union. This was to buttress the argument of Soviet nationality policy that Russia was the "elder brother" and the sole inheritor of the Kyivan legacy. An association of equals with Ukrainians was therefore out of the question as they were "younger brothers" and junior partners. As "union" was the natural state of affairs, the desire of post-Soviet Belarus to reunite with Russia is understood as normal while Ukrainian independence is confusing, abnormal, and unlikely to last. A view still held by the majority of Russian citizens asserts that Ukraine was never an independent state and Ukrainians are not a separate nation to Russians.

A small group of Russophiles in Ukraine has continued to promote such a historiography. Former Crimean President Yuriy Meshkov celebrated the anniversary of the Periaslav Treaty in January 1994,

the same month he was elected. This year the Russian Movement of Ukraine appealed to President Kuchma to make 8 January "the day of Russian-Ukrainian union." The Communist Party of Ukraine also continues to hold similar views.

Only political forces that oppose Ukrainian statehood continue to subscribe to this Russophile and Sovietophile historiography, which makes Kuchma's decree on commemorating the Periaslav Treaty even more baffling. In post-Soviet Ukraine, historiography is dominated by the statist school that discusses the Cossacks within the framework of national-liberation terminology and refers to the 1648 uprising led by Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky as a "Ukrainian national revolution."

Historiography in Russia, coupled with historiography of Russia in the West, has not changed its views on the Periaslav Treaty. In contrast, Ukrainian historiography has undergone a radical rewriting since the late Soviet era on such issues as the Periaslav Treaty. Just after being elected president and the holding of the referendum on independence on 1 December 1991, Leonid Kravchuk said the empire that had existed since 1654 had ended because of Ukraine's independence. "For me this is a source of great personal pride," Kravchuk added. On the 400th anniversary of Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky's birth in 1995, Kuchma defined the Periaslav Treaty as giving birth to a new state, Ukraine, which was independent of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. In other words, not submission to, or "reunion" with Russia as the treaty was traditionally understood.

Post-Soviet Ukrainian historiography defines the Periaslav Treaty as a "confederal military alliance" undertaken with Muscovy as the lesser of two evils, a treaty between two states that were very different in language, culture, and ethnicity. The treaty was not, therefore, unilateral submission, as the tsars understood it, or "reunion" as it was defined in the USSR, but a contractual relationship of two equals between Ukraine and the Muscovite monarchy. Hetman Khmelnytsky demanded that the Muscovite tsar take an oath to them, in the same manner as had Polish kings, a step rejected by the tsar. Ukrainian historiography also now stresses that the treaty provided for a great deal of autonomy. In Ukrainian eyes, therefore, the treaty was similar to the 1707 treaty between Scotland and England; the major difference being that England respected the contractual arrangement of two equals and Muscovy/Russia reneged on it.

Kuchma's decree is especially confusing because of the widely shared view among the intelligentsia and the elite that the Periaslav Treaty was a disaster for Ukraine. In contrast, Russian/Soviet historiography lauded the Periaslav Treaty as Ukraine's salvation from Polish Catholic assimilation. This viewpoint of the treaty as a disaster influences Ukraine's foreign policy because of the fear that too close a relationship with Russia, as in the case of Belarus, would be again harmful to Ukraine. Yevhen Marchuk, the secretary of the National Security and Defense Council, saw the treaty as a complete disaster that led to a decline in Ukraine's national consciousness. The treaty led to the transfer of the jurisdiction of the Kyiv Orthodox Metropolitan to

Moscow in 1686, a factor that has contemporary relevance because the largest of Ukraine's three Orthodox Churches is still subordinated to the Moscow Patriarchate.

Over a century after the treaty, Ukraine's autonomy was completely destroyed. In the 1830s its system of city self-government based on the Magdeburg law was abolished and the Ukrainian Catholic (Uniate) Church was made illegal in central Ukraine. A few decades later any publication in the Ukrainian language was banned, a step that was not applied to any other language in the tsarist empire.

Kravchuk, Marchuk, and the Ukrainian intelligentsia must be therefore baffled as to what there is in the Periaslav Treaty to commemorate. Its commemoration is a sad reflection of the schizophrenia found in Kuchma and some sections of the former Soviet Ukrainian elite, a disposition that negatively impacts their ability to decide, once and for all, whether Ukraine belongs to Europe, Eurasia, or straddles both as a "bridge." The Periaslav Treaty removed Ukraine from the European family of nations, the newspaper "Ukrayina moloda" argued, and its commemoration at the state level "signifies that in the near future [Ukraine] will not return to this family." This is certainly true as long as the current elite remain in power.

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