

## UKRAINIAN-RUSSIAN HISTORICAL COMMISSION RAISES STORM

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The creation of an intergovernmental commission of Ukrainian and Russian historians on 24 May in Moscow has aroused a storm. Deputy Prime Minister for the Humanities Volodymyr Semynozhenko, who oversaw the establishment of the commission from the Ukrainian side, is no stranger to controversy. His openly Russophilic views fit in well with the reorientation of Ukrainian foreign policy according to the "To Europe with Russia!" drift that gathered speed after 2000, when the West began to shun President Leonid Kuchma. Not surprisingly, Semynozhenko is behind the decree to commemorate the 350th anniversary of the 1654 Pereyaslav Treaty (see "RFE/RL Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine Report," 7 May 2002) as Kuchma's parting gift to Ukraine in 2004. Semynozhenko is also heavily involved in the 2002 "Year of Ukraine in Russia" and 2003 "Year of Russia in Ukraine" festivities.

It was Russia that suggested the idea of a joint commission of historians. Two historical episodes are covered negatively in Ukrainian historiography, the Russian side complained to Semynozhenko at the Moscow meeting. These deal with the 1932-33 artificial famine in Ukraine which left between 5 million and 10 million dead (see "RFE/RL Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine Report," 12 June 2002), and the war between Bolshevik and White Russian armies and the independent Ukrainian People's Republic in 1917-21.

This attempt at agreeing on joint Russian-Ukrainian historical interpretations is not a new development. Two years ago, a special issue of the Moscow-based illustrated historical journal "Rodina" entitled "Rossiya i Ukraina: Vekhi istorii" was published with a congratulatory preface by Kuchma. The issue had 150 A4 pages divided into three sections: "Kyiv Rus and Novgorod Rus," "Russia + Little Russia = Empire," and "Ukrainian SSR-Russian SFSR, Ukraine-Russian Federation." All three sections of this special issue of "Rodina" fall in line with the "To Europe with Russia!" foreign-policy ideology favored by Kuchma and oligarchic centrists. That is, Russia and Ukraine were always together in the past and therefore should continue to be in the future.

Opposition soon grew to the joint Russian-Ukrainian historical commission from the cultural intelligentsia, academics, national democratic parties (Republican Party Sobor, a member of the Yuliya Tymoshenko Bloc), parliamentary factions (Our Ukraine), and women and youth NGOs. An open letter was addressed to government ministers and the president attacking the very idea of a historians commission with Russia. A Committee in Defense of Ukrainian History was set up to coordinate the protests led by well-known historian Yaroslav Dashkevych.

Young people have been particularly active in the protests, as they were in the "Kuchmagate" crisis of 2000-2001. The maidan.org.ua website, which grew on the strength of youth activists within the Ukraine Without Kuchma movement, actively promoted the campaign. Government e-mail addresses were flooded with

standardized electronic protest letters. Young Rukh, headed by Our Ukraine deputy Vyacheslav Kyrylenko, launched pickets of the Kyiv government building from 11 June.

Ukraine already has two intergovernmental commissions of historians with Poland and Romania. Of these two, the Polish-Ukrainian has been by far the more successful. One of the products of this research is the publication of large volumes of documents on Polish-Ukrainian relations in the 1930s and 1940s, such as "Polskie Podziemie 1939-1941. Lwow, Kolomyja, Stryj, Zloczow." These hitherto unpublished archives are taken from both countries' Interior ministries and security services.

The Polish-Ukrainian commission has built on a process of normalization between Poles and Ukrainians that began in the late 1940s in the diaspora. This process was supported by Pope John Paul II and by Solidarity and the Polish anticommunist opposition during the 1980s. Nobody has therefore complained about the very idea of the Polish-Ukrainian historians commission because there is evidence on both sides of the desire to overcome past problems.

In principle, there is nothing wrong with coordinating the revision of national histories. Such a process has been taking place in Europe since 1926, when the League of Nations established a voluntary committee of historians. Since 1951, such a coordinating committee has functioned at the Brunswick International Schoolbook Institute.

Nevertheless, the Russian-Ukrainian commission is problematic because it talks of "harmonization" of historical facts at a time when Ukrainian-Russian reconciliation and normalization remains decades behind that undertaken by Poles and Ukrainians. Ukrainian opponents of the commission are well aware that Russia has avidly supported Belarus and Moldova in reintroducing Soviet-era textbooks. "Harmonization," Ukrainians opposed to the commission believe, seems to indicate reintroducing the Russian imperial viewpoint.

In addition, Dr. Stephen Velychenko, a historian and Toronto-based expert on Russian and Polish historiography of Ukraine, pointedly asked, "What is the point of involving the state in history writing? There is no CPSU any more to whom historians have to make petitions."

The creation of the Russian-Ukrainian historians commission will also be challenged by a growing body of Russian historians who are more willing than Kuchma or Semynozhenko to move away from "harmonization" toward the reconciliation and normalization work undertaken by Poles and Ukrainians. Writing in the April issue of the journal "Nations and Nationalism," Professor Vera Tolz surveys the decline in attempts by Russian historians to associate the Russian tsarist empire or the USSR with "Russia," or to see Kyiv Rus as the first "Russian" state. Kyiv Rus is now portrayed with three capitals (Kyiv, Novgorod, and Lagoda), while Ukraine and Russia signing the Pereyaslav Treaty in the 17th century are described as different in culture, language, political traditions, and customs.

This development is the first attempt, Tolz believes, whereby Russian historians are in the "process of inventing a truly national tradition" outside the imperial past. Attitudes toward Ukraine are evolving from the pure derision

aimed at the very idea of an independent Ukraine to gradual acceptance, particularly after the signing of the Russian-Ukrainian treaty in 1997.

After less than two weeks of protests, Semynozhenko backed down, claiming that no joint Russian-Ukrainian textbooks will be published. He passed the buck by claiming that textbooks lie within the competency of the Ministry of Education. The problem is unlikely to go away anytime soon, however. Education Minister Vasyl Kremen, a member of the oligarchic Social Democratic Party-united, supports the creation of the joint commission.

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