

Western views of Ukraine prone to misconceptions

By Taras Kuzio

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Ten years on from independence, Western views on Ukraine continue to be shaped by ignorance, prejudice and misunderstanding. These misperceptions, which have a long history pre-dating the Soviet era, permeate the media, academia and governments.

In the standard Western view, Ukrainian history has always been seen completely through Russian eyes. Western historiography of the Russian empire treated it as a nation-state in the making, ignoring its multi-national nature and treating Ukrainians and Belarusians as wayward “Russians.” In any Western history of “Russia,” Ukraine will be found to feature in only a few pages dealing with Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky’s rebellion against Polish rule in the mid-17th century and with the formation of the Central Rada in 1917.

Under the influence of Russian emigre historians 20th-century Western historians wholeheartedly adopted this framework of 19th-century imperial history. It came to be seen as “objective” history, and henceforth Ukrainians and Belarusians were depicted as regional branches of the “Russian” nation.

After briefly being allowed to develop freely in the 1920s, Ukrainian national historiography was banned in the Soviet Union. In the 1930s, Stalinism infused Russian imperial nationalism with Marxism-Leninism and re-introduced many aspects of Russian imperial history. Though Ukrainians were treated as a separate people within the USSR, they were slated for “re-unification” with Russia, which was seen as a natural development.

In the USSR and in the West, Ukrainian national historiography that challenged these views was dismissed as “nationalist” and, therefore, “not objective.” Meanwhile, Russian history writing that denied the

existence of Ukrainians as a separate ethnic group was seen as “objective.” Ukrainian emigre historians, including the doyen of Ukrainian historiography and president of the central Rada, Mykhailo Hrushevsky, were not accepted as bona fide scholars because their viewpoint was seen as “nationalist.”

The effects of these views were felt in many areas of government policy where Sovietologists worked. Western Sovietology followed Western historiography of Russia in ignoring the nationality question. Sovietologists studied the USSR through the eyes of Moscow, tended not to know languages other than Russian, rarely visited the non-Russian republics, and until the mid-1980s accepted the Soviet premise that the nationality question was resolved. Arguments that the national question was still alive were viewed with suspicion and dismissed as the ravings of unscholarly and wishful-thinking emigres.

After the USSR disintegrated in 1991, the overwhelming majority of Sovietologists became Russianists and continued to dominate post-Soviet and East European studies. The heads of centers for Russian and East European Studies in Western universities or the heads of the divisions within think tanks that deal with “Eurasia” or the “Newly Independent States” are still likely to be Russianists. It is assumed that, unlike Russianists, experts on the non-Russian regions of the former USSR will not have the breadth or objectivity to teach and research the entire region. Meanwhile, Western historians continued to write their histories of “Russia” as though nothing had happened.

The effect of these stereotypes on policy making was seen most clearly in Western views of Ukraine in the first half of the 1990s. When President Leonid Kravchuk visited a Western European country in 1992, he was reportedly asked at a cocktail party, “Oh, and which part of Russia is Ukraine in?” And the former French President Giscard D’Estaing said in 1993 that Ukraine separating from Russia was as ridiculous as the Rhones-Alpes region separating from France.

It was not until 1994 that Ukraine was finally seen, at least in North America, as a state separate from Russia. Since the mid-1990s there has

been a visible change in North American attitudes toward Ukraine. This has been most clearly reflected in the recognition given to Ukraine's geopolitical importance and in NATO support for Ukraine. The evolution in North American attitudes was helped by the impact of Canadian historians such as Orest Subtelny, whose "Ukraine. A History" has gone through many editions since it was first published in 1989 and has sold more than a million copies in Ukraine.

There have been fewer changes in Western Europe and old stereotypes persist. To most members of the EU, particularly traditionally Russophile France, the CIS should not be treated as part of "Europe" and Ukraine's fate is tied to Russia's. Ukraine's membership in the EU and WTO are thought of as issues to be resolved at the same time as Russia's. In the mid-1990s, the then Ukrainian Ambassador to the Benelux countries Borys Tarasiuk (now a member of Our Ukraine) was told by an EU official that Ukraine could only be expected to join the EU at the same time as Russia.

The tying of Ukraine's fate to Russia's by Western Europe is compounded by the foreign policy of President Leonid Kuchma, which only serves to reinforce stereotypes of Ukraine as a "Little Russia." Ukraine – according to the official view – can only "re-join Europe" together with Russia.

Western stereotypes of Ukraine are also seen in the discussion of ethnic issues. Nationalism and nationalists allegedly exist – as they did in the Soviet era – only in Western Ukraine. Nationalists are thought to speak only Ukrainian and support center-right national democrats such as Rukh. After the 1994 presidential elections, it also became fashionable for Western scholars to depict Ukraine as divided into mutually antagonistic groups of Ukrainophones and Russophones. The revival of Ukrainian national historiography continued to be negatively defined as "nationalist" and was considered likely to be rejected by Russophones.

These stereotypes of Ukraine are demonstrably false. In western Ukraine, an increase in Ukrainian national consciousness and reduced exposure to Soviet/Russian influences has led to a more vibrant civil

society and not to growth in support for the extreme right. Western and central Ukrainians are the main bulwark against the communists and oligarchs.

Nationalism and intolerance exist in regions of Ukraine other than in the West. How else can we define the hostility to everything Ukrainian that one sees in Donbas and Crimea, something that is generally ignored in the West. The traditional views of national minorities promoted by the OSCE and other organizations fail to register the possibility that the Ukrainian titular nation may be discriminated against in its own country.

Western political scientists who depicted Ukraine as being divided between hostile linguistic groups were wrongly pigeon-holing the population of a country where identity is fluid and where most people outside Halychyna, Donbas and Crimea are bilingual. Significantly, Russian nationalist groups campaigning in defense of Russophones, and Russian language and culture (such as SLON and Soyuz in 1998 and the Russian Bloc now) receive no public support.

The rise of Viktor Yushchenko and the Our Ukraine bloc has conclusively demonstrated the falseness of the Western stereotypes where Rukh and other national democrats were depicted as “nationalists.” These traditional views led historians to argue that “nationalism” had to be, in the title of Andrew Wilson’s well-known 1997 book, by default a “minority faith” appealing only to Ukrainophones. Now, though, Our Ukraine is the most popular election bloc and is attracting full halls even in Russian-speaking regions. Our Ukraine includes Tatars, Russians and Ukrainians within its ranks and is supporting Eduard Hurvits, the Jewish former mayor of Odesa, in his bid to unseat his successor, Ruslan Bodelan.

It now appears that both Russophones and Ukrainophones are attracted by a patriotic, anti-corruption and reformist platform. The Yushchenko phenomenon has shown how wrong many Western scholars were about Ukraine and how their stereotypes were influenced by traditional

Russophile and Sovietophile views. It is time to drop stereotypes and see Ukraine as it really is.

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