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Russia's Part in Shaping Modern Ukraine

Ukraine is a country that has seen major turmoil throughout its history before and after obtaining its statehood. Russia in the modern day will say that Ukraine isn't its own country, and that Ukraine is a Russian territory that broke away from them after the fall of the Soviet Union. But Ukraine isn't a Russian territory and Ukraine has its own distinctive identity separate to that of the Russians. Ukrainian history shows that it struggled through adversity with many different political entities dictating the future of the country. A large portion of Ukrainian history was spent under the control of more powerful countries. Despite Ukraine being similar to Russia culturally, it still has its own developed national identity. After the Soviet Union fell and Ukraine gained independence, Russia in the modern era has targeted Ukraine ever since, trying to get Ukraine to be a satellite state once again. Despite Ukraine being its own sovereign entity that has developed its own national identity, Russia has played a major role in how Ukraine was shaped and how it got its statehood, seeing themselves as rightful owners of Ukraine through years of bloodshed that created lasting effects in the modern era.

Ukrainian history, as described by Rajan Menon and Eugene B. Rumer, "unfolded outside Russia: non-Russian empires and states ruled large chunks of Ukrainian-populated territories for centuries" (Menon and Rumer, 1). This describes how Ukraine developed largely outside of the Russian sphere of influence for a long time. The modern regions of Ukraine were once part of a larger political entity called the Kyivan Rus, which was a federation comprised of

modern-day Ukraine, Belarus and parts of Western Russia. Russia claims that the capital city of Ukraine, Kyiv, is the “mother of Russian cities” and the cultural heart of Russia. This claim by Russia is one of the driving factors and justifications for the modern involvement with Ukraine and is one reason as to why Russia wants to obtain Ukrainian land. Although Russia and Ukraine have similar cultures, history shows that Ukraine always had a national identity separate from the Russians. While Ukrainian culture was heavily influenced by Russian influence, other influences such as Poland also helped define the culture of Ukraine. Despite not always having its own statehood, this separate national identity was always present. After the fall of the Kyivan Rus, Ukraine no longer had its statehood and territories of modern-day Ukraine were mostly given to the Polish, with some going to the Russians, Ottomans, and the Habsburg (Menon and Rumer, 5).

Most Ukrainian territories were dominated by the Polish until a war between Russia and Poland broke out. This war between Russia and Poland brought thirteen years of war. When the war finally ended in a treaty, many territories of Ukraine were given to the Russians. “It [the Adrusovo Treaty] brought an end to over 13 years of war, which began in 1654 when the two regional superpowers clashed over the vast territories between them, in modern Ukraine and Belarus . . . The West of Ukraine was handed to Poland, while Russia was given Kyiv, too, which it agreed to rule for just two years, but in 1686 the deal became permanent when Muscovy paid the Poles 146,000 roubles. The truce continues to resonate in modern geopolitics. Ukrainians see it as the devouring of their Cossack Hetmanate state by their two larger neighbours, the first of that country's many divisions. Poles view it as the moment when their then large and powerful state was usurped by the emerging Russian Empire as the region's dominant player. Russian nationalists regard it as a blueprint and justification for future

expansion, as evidenced by the recent annexation of Crimea” (History Today, 9). This treaty brought great hardship to the Ukrainian people. The Andusovo treaty tore Ukraine into two pieces with the eastern portion going to the Russians and the western going towards the Polish with both halves being split by the Dnipro River. Russia was given the larger populated regions of Ukraine and was also given the capital city of Kyiv. But this wasn’t the end of Ukrainian fragmentation. Another major fragmentation of Ukraine was to come following the large-scale and disastrous European conflicts within the first and second world wars in the twentieth century.

During the first world war, Russia had a heightened sense of nationalism. Russia was ramping up for war and had many enemies both within their borders as well as with their neighbors. The Polish and the Jewish were seen as people that the Russian people were not able to trust. A quote by Gatrell explains the impact of Russia’s multiculturalism by saying, “Long before the war Russia’s multinational empire had raised issues about the place of non-Russian minorities within the polity and about the extent to which greater freedom of self-expression could be permitted. The variety of ethnic groups reflected the history of imperial expansion and conquest. Although the most numerous group, with a population of 56 million, ethnic Russians fell some way short of half the total population. They were followed by other ‘Great Russians’ (22 million Ukrainians and 6 million Belorussians). Eight million Poles, 5 million Jews, four million Kirgiz, four million Tatars, and a multitude of other national groups made up the remaining population” (Gatrell 176). Russia, during the war, had placed a lot of mistrust into those who were not of the ‘Great Russians’ and many acts of violence and aggression were committed against the Jewish and the Polish. While mistrust was placed into other parts of the Russian Empire, Ukrainians weren’t targeted by anti-Ukrainian sympathies to any large extent.

Ukraine was considered by Russia to be part of their 'Great Russians' and this idea feeds into the belief by Russia that Ukraine is a part of the greater Russian whole. After World War One ended Russia was weakened, a large part because ethnic backlash towards the Russian and because of the future reorganization of Russia into the Soviet Union.

An effort for statehood was attempted by Ukraine after World War One, which eventually ended up failing. Many attempts were made to get Ukraine its statehood, but due to the turbulent time in Europe at that time, the attempts were unsuccessful. Eastern Ukraine, while still being identifiably Ukrainian, were much more approving of Russia than Western Ukraine. This caused friction between East and West Ukraine as they could not unite to gain statehood in the turbulent era between the first and second world war. (Menon and Rumer 9-11)

Ukraine was once again divvied up after World World One had ended. With the collapse of both the Habsburg and the Ottoman Empire, and Russia weakened, Ukraine was portioned out to numerous countries. Regions of Ukraine known at the time as Eastern Galicia (western Ukraine) were given to the Polish, Czechoslovakia obtained the then Transcarpathia region (today Zakarpattia), and Romania was given the region of modern-day Chernivtsi. (Menon and Rumer 6). But with World War 2, Ukraine's future was once again being decided by two larger political entities. Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler and the then Soviet Union under Stalin, had a non-aggression pact between both governments. "The non-aggression treaty signed on 23 August 1939 between Nazi leader Adolf Hitler and communist leader Stalin aiming at dividing the spheres of influence in the geopolitical space located between Germany and the USSR from the Baltic to the Danube, is the act which led to the outbreak of World War II." (Ghisha 1) Germany invaded Poland, with Soviet Russia joining in.

Ukrainians largely supported Russia during the campaign against Poland. They saw the Soviet Union invading as a good thing as the Ukrainians did not want to be under Polish rule. Ukrainians believed that this would grant them independence and allow them statehood, but their hopes would be diminished as Soviet Russia would only allow for Ukraine to be absorbed into the USSR (Menon and Rumer 7). Soviet Russia's involvement in the war and its early relationship with Nazi Germany to be a means to obtain land that was lost after the First World War. This desire to obtain land saw Ukraine being swallowed up by Russia. War between Ukraine and Russia did eventually break out. This then led to the shaky alliance with the Allied Powers to the West. After the war had ended, Ukraine saw itself being controlled solely by the USSR. With the war ended, the Iron Curtain fell.

The Iron Curtain separated Eastern and Western Europe and split Germany in two. This was the start of the Cold War. Winston Churchill saw the end of the war as an opportunity to let democracy thrive in the west. Churchill had a strong disapproval of Soviet Russia. In 1988 Harbutt writes, "...two central elements of Churchill's political outlook... his deep longing for some form of transcendent Anglo-American intimacy and his persistent hostility toward Soviet communism" (Harbutt 184). This 'intimate' relationship between America and Great Britain, perpetuated distrust between both the Eastern and Western spheres of influence. Capitalism and Communism are opposing ideologies and tensions between the Capitalist West and the Communist East were high. The West had created NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization which was a treaty put in place to prevent more conflict within Europe. While the West created NATO, the East created the Warsaw Pact a coalition of Eastern European states that fell under the Soviet Union's sphere of influence. With the threat of nuclear war hanging above both spheres of influence, the opposing sides were at a stalemate.

Although Ukraine was a country within the USSR and within the Warsaw Pact, the Ukrainian relationship with Soviet Russia were still tenuous. Despite, Ukraine being 'taken back' by Soviet Russia during World War Two, it was still distinctly a Ukrainian cultural identity and not just Russian. Ukraine had always been similar in many ways to Russia (for instance: similar language and alphabet) Ukraine was always majorly influenced by Russia. However, because Ukraine was always being controlled by different political entities and cultures, it also allowed for their culture to develop independently from Russia. Different parts of Ukraine had cultures that were more similar to Russian cultures than others. For instance, Eastern Ukraine had been under Russian rule for longer and was more like the Russians than Western Ukraine. "Ukrainians in the west were well governed by the Habsburgs and, from the 1920s, less well by Poland, and lived very different lives from those of their Russian-ruled eastern kin . . . Under the Habsburgs, and to a lesser extent under Poland, Ukrainians had their schools, publications, civic organizations, and political parties, and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church was recognized. In a word, the political world was liberal by the standards of the time." (Menon and Rumer 9). Ukrainian culture was incredibly diverse and had many different subsections to its culture.

Russia had helped take back a country they saw as a part of their own cultural heritage. Russia traced its roots back to Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine. They saw Kyiv as the heart of Russia and wished to bring that heart back into Russia. But Ukraine didn't welcome back Russia with open arms. After The Russian Red Army pushed the Nazi's out of Ukraine, they were met with Ukrainian Resistance fighter's who opposed Stalin and the Soviet Union's rule over Ukraine. The resistance was eventually crushed under the Soviet Union, where it then slowly died out.

Eastern Ukraine had much more Russian influence, and at this point had become starkly different to those in the West. While they were both culturally Ukrainian, those in the East wanted to stay with Russia, and those in the West did not. Despite the two halves of Ukraine disagreeing, they were able to have relations, albeit a tenuous one. With Ukraine joining the Soviet Union, it was given Crimea by Soviet Russia as an attempt to mend the uneasy relationship between Ukraine and Russia. After the Soviet Union fell in the 1990's Ukraine finally became its own independent state. Ukrainians were finally able to have a national identity and be within their own state independent of any larger foreign powers' puppeteering them.

However Ukraine's statehood was the start of much more conflict. Ukraine's gifted region of Crimea is still seen as Russian by many Russians despite it being a gift years ago. Along with this, many Eastern Ukrainians want to return to living under Russian rule with Crimea following. Most Ukrainian people still oppose the idea of going back to Russia. But within the last ten years, Russia has annexed Crimea, claiming that it was a mistake to give to Ukraine and that it is Russian and not Ukrainian. Today, Ukraine is being invaded by Russia under the presidency of Vladimir Putin. "Like Hitler eighty-five years ago, Putin falls back upon imperialist chauvinism, asserting that a smaller state has no right to exist." (Connelly et al. 20)

Ukraine was shaped by Russian Imperialism and Dominance. There is no denying the fact that Russia had a large part in shaping the way Ukraine is today. Ukraine has always been pushed and pulled apart by foreign powers much stronger than itself. The history of Ukraine is interesting as it shows how a group of people who were able to maintain their cultural identity, despite being denied their ability to form a statehood whilst being forced to live under the rule of a people they don't see as their own. Russia has always seen Ukraine as a Russian people,

despite adamant pushback from Ukrainians. Throughout history, Ukraine has been split up, then pieced back together multiple times. Ukraine is its own people and despite the East and West being split on how they see the relationship with Russia, there may be a stronger sense of Ukrainian unity against Russia due to Putin's invasion. Ukraine was split in more recent years because of Russia. Russian dominance and influence over Ukraine were what perpetuated Ukrainian pushback, both in terms of how Eastern Ukraine views Russia and how Western Ukraine views Russia. Ukraine is much stronger now because of Russia than they ever were before. Russia is one of the sole reasons responsible for Ukraine gaining its independence. Through a major series of events, Russia has inadvertently set up Ukraine to develop its own cultural identity separate from Russia that was able to obtain its statehood after the fall of the Soviet Union. Due to Russian influence, Ukraine gained and lost territory for hundreds of years. Russia is the reason why Ukraine was able to become independent and have the borders that it has today, but they are also the ones who can take their independence away. Hopefully, we will see an end to this conflict where we see a lasting peace for Ukraine.

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