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‘New Russia’ and the Legacies of Settler Colonialism in Southern Ukraine

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Abstract

Russia's conquest of the northern shores of the Black Sea in the late eighteenth century and their renaming as 'New Russia' contributed to a wider movement of colonisation, settlement, and re-signification of territories worldwide under the aegis of imperial ideology. The adoption of the new name was also a way to erase the memory of the former inhabitants of the region—in the case of Southern Ukraine, its Tatar and Cossack populations, as well as its Greek and Jewish minorities. However, the colonality of 'New Russia' was always up for debate in Russian official discourse: because the conquests happened in contiguous territories, Southern Ukraine was both an object of colonisation and an agent of further conquest, especially in the direction of the Caucasus. Inventing 'New Russia' thus asserted the colonial and 'oriental' significance of the Black Sea steppes, while entrenching Russia's own imperial status and suggesting a place where Russia's future might be.

Keywords

Ukraine – colonisation – Russian Empire – Black Sea – Odessa – New Russia – Tatars – settler colonialism

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... What was called Novorossiia back in the tsarist days—Kharkov, Lugansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Nikolayev and Odessa—were not part of Ukraine back then. [...] Russia lost these territories for various reasons, but the people remained.¹

VLADIMIR PUTIN, 17 April 2014

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In the eighteenth century, the lands of the Black Sea littoral, incorporated into Russia as a result of wars with the Ottoman Empire, were given the name of Novorossiia (New Russia). Now attempts are being made to condemn these landmarks of history to oblivion... without [which] modern Ukraine would not have many big cities or even access to the Black Sea.²

VLADIMIR PUTIN, 21 February 2022

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Where days bend and straighten
in a city that belongs to no nation
but all nations of wind,
she spoke the speech of poplar trees...

ILYA KAMINSKY, 'In Praise of Laughter', *Dancing in Odessa* (2004)

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Since 2014, Russia's claims to Southern Ukraine and the Ukrainian past have invoked historical arguments reaching back to the imperial conquests of the eighteenth and nineteenth century—using past wars to justify current conflicts. Russia's historical advance towards the northern shores of the Black Sea was completed in the last decades of the eighteenth century, with Catherine II (1762–1796) fulfilling the vision first put forward under the reign of Peter I

1 "Direct Line with Vladimir Putin." Kremlin.ru, April 17, 2014.

2 "Address by the President of the Russian Federation." Kremlin.ru, February 21, 2022.

(1782–1725). These lands, of course, had an extensive history prior to Russian conquest. Formally, they were divided between the competing rules of the Ottoman Empire and the Crimean Khanate, but they had long boasted diverse populations, both settled and nomadic. The act of renaming the northern Black Sea ‘New Russia’ was an ideological transformation that emphasized the modern character of Russia’s southward imperial expansion; the triad of conquest, renaming, and narrative erasure was a rehearsed model that could be observed across contemporary empires on the rise.³ Russia, like some other European states, used land annexation, settlement, and the re-signification of territories to expand its realm, under the aegis of imperial ideology.⁴ The renaming of an area that had been known previously as ‘Khan Ukraine’ (*Khans’ka Ukraina*) or ‘Tombasar Mukataasi’, was a conscious semantic erasure of the memory of the previous inhabitants—many of them Tatar and Muslim—and plotted a Russian narrative onto the northern shores of the Black Sea.⁵ Since the occupation of the Black Sea littoral established for the first time a shared border with the Ottoman Empire, imperial authorities actively replaced the existing Turkic nomenclature with ancient Greek placenames—associating the Crimean Peninsula to Ovid’s Tauris, or referring to the Dniepr River as the old Borys-thenes. This strategy provided Russia with a classical ‘European’ heritage that it had the duty to preserve, while undermining the legacies of the Ottoman and Tatar rulers, cast as temporary and unfit ‘oriental’ custodians.⁶ Over two hundred years later, Putin’s retrieval of ‘Novorossiia’ in reference to the historical borders of the Russian Empire in its age of expansion has become a political

3 ‘New Russia’ was coined in 1764, later extended as the administrative name of the new ‘gubernia’ (governmental) district which was annexed by the Russian empire after 1783 and administered by Grigorii Potemkin. The use of this administrative name varied across the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with two different *Novorossiia guberniia* (provinces) in 1764–1802 and 1822–1874.

4 The Black Sea littoral was also a military border, with the permanent concentration of regular troops. J.P. LeDonne, “The Southern Borderlands.” In *Ruling Russia: Politics and Administration in the Age of Absolutism, 1762–1796* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 291–315; J.P. LeDonne, “Geopolitics, Logistics, and Grain: Russia’s Ambitions in the Black Sea Basin, 1737–1834.” *International History Review* 28, (1) (2006), 1–41; G.A. Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire, 1552–1917* (Harvard University Press, 1997).

5 J. Malitska, *Negotiating Imperial Rule: Colonists and Marriage in the Nineteenth-century Black Sea Steppe*, Thesis, (2017), 32–33. Additionally, the Black Sea shores hosted sizeable Greek diasporic communities and had small pockets of Jewish population even before the inclusion of the region of Russia’s Pale of Settlement. Cossack Hosts had also lived in close vicinity.

6 S. Dickinson, “Russia’s First “orient”: Characterizing the Crimea in 1787.” *Kritika* 3 (1) (2002), 3–25. The discursive orientalisation and otherisation of the Crimea and Black Sea shores also pushed back against Western orientalist representations of Russia.

tool more useful than previous references to the Soviet past. This historical discourse similarly side-lines contemporary politics to justify the annexation of Crimea, giving fuel to the fighting in Donbas and putting port cities like Odesa,⁷ Mariupol, Kherson, and Mykolaiv on the map of an extended Greater Russia.

However, the coloniality of 'New Russia' had always been up for debate in Russian official discourse, the lines between homeland and empire blurred. Because these conquests happened in contiguous territories, Southern Ukraine was both an object of colonisation and an agent of further conquest, particularly in the direction of the Caucasus. Inventing 'New Russia' thus asserted the colonial significance of the Black Sea steppes, entrenching Russia's own imperial status and suggesting a place where Russia's future might unfold.⁸ These three ideological aspects of Russia's historical colonisation of Southern Ukraine have resurfaced in contemporary discourses—from the calls in the 1990s and early 2000s to form a self-governing 'Novorossiyan' state within Ukraine,⁹ to Vladimir Putin's rhetoric of expansion in 2014,¹⁰ and the civic debate on how this region might welcome Russian military and political intervention.¹¹ This paper calls into question the hegemonic Russian narrative imposed on Southern Ukraine to highlight the historical, cultural, and demographic affinity that

7 In this essay, I will be using the Ukrainian spelling Odesa when writing about the 21st century, and the Russian spelling Odessa when writing about the imperial and Soviet periods.

8 W. Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe* (New York, 2004), 69–70, 89.

9 Oleksii Surylov, a professor at the Odesa State University, led the new Democratic Union of Novorossiia, which was founded in August 1990 and called for an autonomous status within a federated Ukraine. The movement did not gain a mass following; its dedicated newspaper, *Novorossiiskii telegraf*, closed soon after starting publishing. In 2004, protestors threatened the separation of all southern and eastern regions from Ukraine and the creation of an Assembly of Representatives to rule a 'New Russian Territory,' independent from both Ukraine and Russia. Some 3,000 protestors had adopted the resolution, proposing the separation of Odessa and its region from Ukraine if Viktor Yushchenko became president. A similar text had been approved in the Russian-speaking Donetsk region, and both resolutions prompted an extraordinary session of the Kyiv Parliament to diffuse the crisis. See R. Solchanyk, "The Politics of State Building: Centre-periphery Relations in Post-Soviet Ukraine." *Europe-Asia Studies* 46 (1) (1994), 60; J. O'Loughlin, G. Toal, and V. Kolosov, "The Rise and Fall of 'Novorossiia': Examining Support for a Separatist Geopolitical Imaginary in Southeast Ukraine." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33 (2) (2017), 124–144; T. Richardson, "The Regional Life of Geopolitical Conflict: The Case of Odes(s)a Oblast." *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 2019 (3) (2019), 263–303; O. Durand, "The Statue of Catherine II 'the Great' or the Monument to the Odessa Founders." *Contested Histories Occasional Paper*, 10 (2022).

10 "Direct Line with Vladimir Putin", 2014.

11 Richardson, 2019, 263–303.

existed and subsisted between the northern Black Sea and the Ukrainian interior. Little (*Malorossiya*¹²) and New Russia alike had populations made of various ethnic backgrounds, locally embedded through the territorial unity of Ukraine's riverine networks. These connections established a lasting shared history and developed more kinship than between New and 'Great' imperial Russia. The call for a postcolonial reading of Ukrainian history—with its legacies of domination, intricate relationship with close neighbours, and cultural suppression—is equally urgent in the case of its Black Sea shores, ideologically ensnared in Russian cultural imperialism and narrative authority.¹³ Despite Russian expansion and official rule, Southern Ukraine remained a region consistently caught in the overlapping legacies of multi-national empires, with a geography extending more often towards the Black Sea than into the Russian world. The dominant Russian narrative flattens the historical diversity and complexity of the Black Sea space and imposes a chronology that uses imperial conquest as the starting date for the historical record.

1 Inventing the Russian Steppe

Controlling the mobility of internal populations framed early Russian expansionism. While sending settlers to the east was driven by economic motivations (such as the profitable fur trade), expansion to the south, particularly towards the Black Sea steppes, was dominated and limited by defence imperatives.¹⁴ Far from being conceptualized as the natural extension of the Russian realm, the Black Sea region was perceived as an external environment—an “alien and empty frontier” with enemies to contain: the Zaporizhian Sich, the Nogai Hord, and the Crimean Khanate with Ottoman encroachments to the south.¹⁵ In offi-

12 The official terms Little Russia (*Malorossiya*) and Little Russians (*malorossy*) were used from the nineteenth century for Russian-ruled parts of (Left-Bank) Ukraine and its inhabitants.

13 M. Von Hagen, “Does Ukraine have a history?” *Slavic Review* 54 (3) (1995), 658–673; C. Vitaly, “Postcolonialism, Russia and Ukraine.” *Urbandus Review* 7 (2003), 32–62; A. Morrison, “Russian Settler Colonialism.” In *The Routledge Handbook of the History of Settler Colonialism*, eds. Lorenzo Veracini and Ed Cavanagh (Abingdon: Routledge 2016), 313–326; Y. Hrytsak, “The Postcolonial Is Not Enough.” *Slavic Review* 74 (4) (2015), 732–737.

14 G.V. Lantzeff and R.A. Pierce, *Eastward to Empire—Exploration and Conquest on the Russian Open Frontier, to 1750*, (Montreal, 1973); A. Morrison, “What is Colonisation? An Alternative View of Taming the Wild Field.” *Forum for Anthropology and Culture* 4 (2007), 404–415; A. Ètkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience* (Cambridge, UK, 2011).

15 Sunderland, 2004, 53.

cial discourses, as in the Russian mindset, the southern steppes were known as the 'wild field' (*dikoe pole*). To Russia, they represented both a *terra nullius* and a *tabula rasa*—uncontrolled and empty spaces.¹⁶ The negative connotations disseminated by the Russian state meant that, for centuries, the northern Black Sea was not conceived as a desirable space, this antagonism thus reframing Russia's proactive entanglements with the steppe to a relatively recent historical timeline.¹⁷

For centuries, the steppe-land was seen as dangerous because of the mobility of its nomadic populations. Chains of fortification lines (*Zasechnaia cherta*) were developed and maintained to defend Muscovy's southern borders from Crimean Tatar raids, creating a heavily militarized border. After the founding of the Russian Empire in 1721, a specific 'Ukrainian' border line still cordoned off the southern steppes, built with the labour of tens of thousands of Ukrainian Cossacks and peasants.¹⁸ Over the centuries, the Ukrainian 'wild fields' had also embodied an escape route to relative freedom. Since the northern Black Sea steppes remained outside of stately jurisdictions, runaway serfs from both the Russian Empire and the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth would cross the defence lines and eventually feed into the populations of the Cossack Hosts.¹⁹

The idea that the steppes were empty spaces to be colonised owes more to *post facto* imperial mythmaking than historical evidence. In addition to Cossacks (in this area, the Zaporizhian Sich), this vast territory was shared with the Nogai Tatar Hord (vassal of the Crimean *qurmlar* Khanate, itself also straddling the steppe), each trying to shed the sway of their own imperial neighbours: the Russian and Ottoman empires.²⁰ It was thus a dynamic frontier

16 This is not true of the whole territory of *Novorossiia*: Crimea sat outside of the 'wild field'. The peninsula was very urbanized, with the large city of Jaffa sometimes called the second Istanbul. The idea of *Novorossiia* as a wasteland was instrumental to the propaganda and myth-making that accompanied Russian territorial expansion.

17 R. Szporluk, "Ukraine: From an Imperial Periphery to a Sovereign State." *Daedalus* 126 (3) (1997), 85.

18 B.J. Boeck, "Containment vs. Colonization: Muscovite Approaches to Settling the Steppe." In *Peopling the Russian Periphery: Borderland colonization in Eurasian History*, eds. N. B. Breyfogle, A. Schraderand, and W. Sunderland, (Oxford, 2007), 43. The Ukrainian Line began at Iziium on the Northern Donets, and followed the course of the Bereka, the Orchik, and the Orel. It was closed in 1764, when New Serbia became the *guberniya* of New Russia. LeDonne, "The Southern Borderlands", 301.

19 O. Schmidtke and S. Yekelchik, *Europe's Last Frontier? Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine between Russia and the European Union* (New York, 2008), 6.

20 'Russian Crimea' only formally existed from the Crimean War defeat of 1856 to the cession of Crimea to Ukraine in 1954, a rule that entailed the deportation and mass extermination

with a distinct culture that was for a long time removed from Russian settler influence—producing, in the words of Alexander Kratochvil, a ‘Slavia Islamica’ of intertwined histories, equally shaped by settlement coming from the north and south.²¹

In the early eighteenth century, the potential offered by access to the coast and Mediterranean trade transformed the perception of the area, enticing Peter I to establish a short-lived colony on the Azov Sea.²² Official incorporation was eventually completed under Catherine II through the successive Treaties of Küçük Kaynarca (1774) and Jassy (1792). The treaties entrenched the land concessions obtained from the Ottomans and the progressive subjugation of the Pontic region’s populations, with Crimea’s purported autonomy as a Russian ‘protectorate’ soon rescinded through formal annexation in 1783.²³ The territorial gains extended southwest when Bessarabia was taken over in 1812, bringing two-thirds of modern-day Ukraine (and Moldova) under Russian rule.²⁴

Brian J. Boeck argues that the steppes “need[ed] to be re-imagined as a place of opportunity for the Russian state, rather than a threat to its existence.”²⁵ Grafting ‘New Russia’ onto the Russian Empire required re-imagining this space

of the Tatar population. Crimean Tatars had lived on the peninsula for over a thousand years prior to Russia’s 1783 annexation: at this point, they still made up 80% of the population. In 1850, on the eve of the Crimean War, the figure was still 77.8% while the Russian population was only 6.6%. S. Kul’chyts’kyi and L. Yakubova, *Krymskyi vuzol* (Kyiv: Klio, 2019), 60, 72, figures quoted in A. Wilson, “Imagining Crimean Tatar History since 2014: Indigenous Rights, Russian Recolonisation and the New Ukrainian Narrative of Cooperation.” *Europe-Asia Studies* 73 (5) (2021), 840.

21 A. Kratochvil, “Considering Slavia Islamica and Ukraine.” *Euxeinus*, 9 (28) (2019); Wilson, 2021, 858.

22 This initial project was abandoned as early as 1711; most colonists died of disease, others fled and joined the Cossack Host.

23 The Zaporizhian Cossacks, who had initially lent their swords to the Russian armies, were taken down in 1775 and stripped of their lands. The Crimean Khanate was defeated by the Russian Empire in 1783. The whole region was successfully subdued in 1792 after one more decade of warfare against the Ottoman Empire, an ally of the Tatars in the region. This defeat followed the subjugation and conquest of the Khanate of Astrakhan in 1558, the Nogai Tatars in 1634, and the Khanate of Kazan in 1681. Despite these appellations, no unitary Kazakh Khanate ever existed. The extension of Russian influence and control over the three Kazakh hordes was a lengthy process that began in 1731 and only really concluded with the steppe statute of 1868. See also: M. Khodarkovsky, *Russia’s Steppe Frontier: The Making of a Colonial Empire, 1500–1800* (Bloomington, Ind., 2002).

24 The three partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1772, 1793, 1795), also completed during the reign of Catherine II, resulted in additional extensive land gains, with the seizure of Podolia, the wide area between Kyiv and Galicia (the latter falling under Austro-Hungarian rule).

25 Boeck in Breyfogle et al., 2007, 41.

as Russian, and the consolidation of tsarist authority relied on settlement. From its former designation as *ukraina* ['borderland' in Russian], the northern Black Sea was rebranded in the second half of the eighteenth century as *Novorossiia*, a 'new' Russia with endless promises, with semantics turning the steppe-land into the logical offspring of its northern motherland—just as the reference to the Black Sea's Greek past claimed that space for Russian Orthodoxy.²⁶ To re-envision the steppe as a space for opportunity, demographic, cultural, and political transformation of the lands into neo-Russian domains had to accompany formal annexation. A distinct Russian formula of settler colonialism emerged that sought the immigration of foreign colonists to Southern Ukraine. This policy was supported by a complex fiscal regime that accommodated the demographic diversity of the territory through a relative religious tolerance, and the delayed introduction of serfdom.²⁷ While imperial terminology has been reactivated in contemporary discourses about Ukraine as an essentializing label, such an approach obscures the fact that 'New Russia' was only one name among others, imposed as an administrative and teleological affirmation of conquest. From the end of the nineteenth century onwards, 'Southern Ukraine' and 'Steppe Ukraine' were much more commonly used in scholarly works devoted to this region, while before the Russian conquest, maps and administrative sources from various countries generally referred to the region as 'Khan Ukraine' and 'Tombasar Mukataasi.'²⁸ *Novorossiia* was never descriptive nor representative of the complex social and cultural landscape of the northern Black Sea, even after Russian conquest; as a bureaucratic designation, it was fundamentally an expression of power and intent.

2 Settling 'New Russia' with Foreigners

Colonial 'New Russia' officially received its name in 1764, but its territorial control remained uncertain with only military garrisons stationed in the region.²⁹

26 'Ukraina' was used to designate the steppe spaces because they bore the transition from woodland areas to arid steppe lands, with scarce water and non-sedentary populations.

27 "The trend of Imperial tax legislation in New Russia pointed to the extension in the region, not of laws in force in Great Russia, but of those recently introduced in Little Russia." J.P. LeDonne, "The Southern Borderlands." In *Ruling Russia: Politics and Administration in the Age of Absolutism, 1762–1796* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 304–305; G.A. Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire, 1552–1917* (Harvard University Press, 1997), 106–107.

28 Malitska, 2017, 32–33; Wilson, (2021, 858).

29 Most of the region was conquered by 1792, apart from Bessarabia (1812), which became

The practical solution was the creation of settlements, but such a process faced practical challenges: as Russia grew territorially, the ratio between available land and potential settlers became increasingly imbalanced, a disproportion exacerbated by the effects of serfdom. The mobility of the nomadic populations that inhabited the recently conquered 'New Russia' contrasted with the forced immobility of the Russian peasantry.³⁰ The serf populations were bound to the lands they worked on, trapped in the central areas of Russia, or along its former defensive borders where military officers had obtained domains.³¹ Possessing too much land and not enough people, Russian state policies became favourable to foreign settlement.³² These external settlers—who would be made loyal to tsarist rule through land grants, financial help, and legal advantages—were tasked with populating, harvesting, and integrating the new regions into the imperial system.³³ In practice, these agricultural settlers not only took over the land, but also quickly displaced the culture, social institutions, and state structures of the previous inhabitants, who through economic destitution and political erasure, were forcibly assimilated into the Russian Empire.

Following the 1774 Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, which ended six years of Russo-Turkish war, the recruitment of foreign settlers focused almost exclusively on the southern region. Settlement was an urgent task: the southern 'wild fields' were, as all lands targeted by settler colonialism, described as a demographic and cultural desert that had to be cultivated and civilised through settlement.³⁴ Fortunately, these steppes were more attractive to foreigners than

a shared border with the Ottoman empire. A peacetime force of about 32,000 men, not including the hussars and lancers, provides an idea of the force permanently stationed in New Russia. LeDonne, "The Southern Borderlands", 303.

30 The Muscovite state's relationship with the Black Sea region developed in tension between either enforcing migration restrictions, tied to the consolidation of serfdom, or expanding settlement to the south. The idea of the Black Sea steppes as a quintessentially non-Russian environment had been from the start at the heart of the Russian state's settlement policies in the region, because of the strain between free movement and bound labour. See Boeck in Breyfogle et al., 2007, 41–60.

31 The army constituted the front line of imperial power, establishing garrisons ahead of settlement, and promoting military law. W.H. McNeill, *Europe's Steppe Frontier: 1500–1800* (Chicago, Ill., 2011), 182.

32 R. Bartlett, "Foreign Settlement in Russia under Catherine II." *New Zealand Slavonic Journal* 1 (1974), 1–22. Several 'Imperial Manifestos' were published in the early 1760s, prompting large-scale and state-sponsored programmes of recruitment, colonization, and settlement, which relied on Russian diplomats abroad and professional recruiters.

33 J. Burbank and M. Von Hagen, "Coming into the territory: uncertainty and empire." In *Russian Empire*, eds. Burbank et al. (2007), 1–29.

34 The term 'wild field' featured regularly in historical maps. Beauplan's 1648 map of Ukraine

the lands east of the Ural Mountains: they were deemed closer to the Russian interior; and their southern location made them more promising for both agriculture and cattle-raising. The territory was immense—some 400,000 km²—but in half a century its population grew from 200,000 in the 1760s to 1.6 million by the end of the Napoleonic wars, essentially through the settlement of foreign colonists.³⁵ Advertisements posted across Europe promised each family housing, a plough, a pair of oxen, a cow, and financial support during their first year of settlement.³⁶ Settlers would become full owners of their holdings after 10 years of cultivation, they had 14 years to repay the initial grant, and they were exempted from military service for at least 25 years.³⁷ While Catherine II focused on West European settlers (French, Dutch, English, and Mennonite German), her grandson Alexander I (1801–1825) also recruited Transdanubian political dissidents from the Ottoman Empire (Greeks, Bulgarians, Moldavians, Serbs, and others), in a further attempt to secure 'New Russia' against its neighbour's ambitions.³⁸

Although the steppes were re-invented as a Russian frontier territory, in practice they became increasingly inhabited by non-Russians. Settlement transformed the northern shores of the Black Sea into a hybrid society: a neo-Europe made of villages of cultivators, often grouped by nationality, living alongside the steppe's centuries-old populations. But nowhere was the demographic diversity of this imperial space more visible than in the series of port cities that were founded in the aftermath of Russian conquest: Kherson (1778), Mariupol (1778), Mykolaiv (originally Nikolaev, founded in 1789), and, finally, Odesa (Odessa, 1794), the last major urban settlement of Catherine II's reign.³⁹

Odesa was founded on the site of the old Tatar fortress of Khadjibey, following Russia's victory over the Ottomans at Yeni-Dunai in 1789. The city soon took precedence over the other Black Sea ports, becoming the main hub for settle-

was titled "Delineatio Generalis Camporum Desertorum vulgo Ukraina. Cum adjacentibus Provinciis" (trs: General plan of the Wild Fields, simply put, Ukraine. With adjacent provinces); the use of *desertorum* ('deserted') indicated the expectation that the wild fields were empty spaces.

35 S. Ghervas, *Odessa et les confins de l'Europe: un éclairage historique*. Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme (2008), 22.

36 L. Ignatieff, *French émigrés in Russia, 1789–1825: The interactions of cultures in time of stress*, (Ph.D. Thesis University of Michigan, 1963), 100–104.

37 This exemption was for life for Mennonite émigrés.

38 P. Herlihy, *Odessa: A History, 1794–1914* (Cambridge, Mass. 1986); and P. Herlihy, *Odessa Recollected* (Boston, MA, 2019).

39 I will be using the historical spelling of 'Odessa' when writing about the city during the Russian imperial era; this choice, however, does not reflect any personal views on current issues.

ment as well as the economic and political centre of Southern Russia, hosting the general-government of Novorossiysk-Bessarabia from 1822 to 1874.⁴⁰ Urban settlers in Odessa were of a different mix, and understanding Southern Ukraine requires addressing the steep contrast created by the divide between urban and rural settlement, as well as the uniquely multicultural nature of New Russia's settler society.⁴¹

3 Cosmopolitanism and the Question of Nationality

Whilst *Novorossiya* was a frontier territory, characterized by a staple-based economy and small towns, the rise of Odessa was fundamental to the development of the region as a whole. A fishing village counting some 2,000 residents in 1795, it became the third-largest city of the Russian Empire by the end of the Crimean War, with a population of over 100,000 (Figure 1). Odessa was a boomtown with growth on par with what could be observed in the same century in the American West.

Odessa's early settler communities had been historical travellers to the region who often came from maritime nations: Italians and Greeks were among the port city's first residents. They came to the city initially to establish commercial houses and ensure that they would have an easy interface to trade in the Black Sea region, and benefit from the grain outlet that Odessa was promising to become. *Novorossiya* also became an extension of the 'Pale of Settlement'—circumscribed areas of western Russia, Belarus, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine where Jews could reside.⁴² This prompted long-range travel within the Pale, with large numbers settling in Odessa.⁴³ Other early residents of the port-city included Poles looking to sell grain from their estates in the hinterland, and Frenchmen in exile during the revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars—including one of Odessa's most significant governors, the Duke of Richelieu. A relative

40 The New Russia governorate was officially created in 1764, dissolved in 1783, and then re-established under Paul I from 1796 to 1802. After that date, the region was divided into three governorates, Yekaterinoslav, Kherson (where Odesa was located), and Taurida (which included Crimea), all supervised by one Governor-General of New Russia. From 1822, Odessa became the political centre of the southern government.

41 Ignatieff, 1963, 123.

42 Catherine II's manifestos officially excluded foreign Jews, but she allowed the settlement of some Jewish traders in Riga. It was that population that financed the further settlement of Jewish communities in South Russia.

43 The 1897 census reported 700,000 Jewish residents across 'New Russia', in lands where only a few Jewish settlements had existed at the end of the eighteenth century.

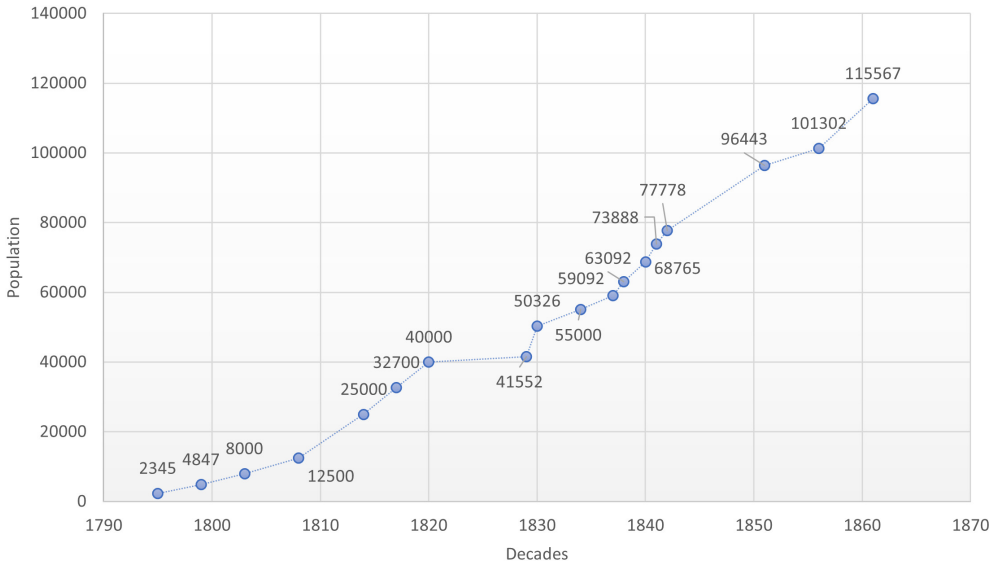


FIGURE 1 Growth of the population of Odessa, 1795–1861

Note: The numbers in this graph are derived from various sources: the *Journal d'Odessa* (1830, 1834, 1837, 1838), Skal'kovskii (1840, 1841, 1842, 1851), Olberg (1856), Kovbas'uk (1799, 1808, 1817), Herlihy (1795, 1814, 1820).

religious tolerance, novel economic opportunities, and financial backing from the Russian government attracted diverse populations to the northern Black Sea's new metropolis, and with the establishment of a free port in 1819, Odessa soon dominated the region.

Odessa was a Russian city made of foreigners; however, population statistics often obscured the full extent of the port's national diversity and un-Russianness. Foreigners working in commerce were sometimes only recorded in the merchant category, while some ethnic and linguistic groups associated with the Russian Empire (such as Poles, Ukrainians, Moldovans, or Jews) were regularly categorized as internal migrants, and did not count as foreigners. The lack of clarity in the figures suggests that the number of non-Russians residing in Odessa was in fact larger than the nineteenth-century statistics reveal; a situation that made "so-called patriots" uneasy.⁴⁴ Contemporary Russian "national

44 Odessa National Scientific Library (ONSL) 971, 1845 n. 28, 6/18 April, quoting statistician and historian A.A. Skal'kovskii. According to Patricia Herlihy, as late as 1892, only 45% of the urban population had been born in Odessa, suggesting an important adult work migration, both from within Russia—since serfdom had been abolished—and from abroad. Herlihy, 2019, 34.

writers” assured “that Odessa [was] a city completely foreign, outside of the great Russian unity ... the boundary of the freeport [creating] a border between the city and the empire.”⁴⁵ Local authorities had a vested interest in downplaying the number of foreign nationals living in Odessa—as the main urban centre of *Novorossiya* was the least Russian city of all.

4 *Novorossiya's Un-Russian Settler Societies*

The debatable ‘Russianness’ of New Russia, and especially of Odessa, seeped into contemporary demographic surveys. The 1897 census was the first comprehensive population count of the Russian empire, and it was the only all-Russian census until 1920. Most of Odessa’s early foreign settlers were by this date recorded as Russian subjects, as many had acquired a Russian passport. Census taking strictly followed nationality lines; consequently, by 1897, the foreign non-subjects living in Odessa officially amounted to only 7 percent (19,422).⁴⁶ However, if native language (or mother tongue) is used as a proxy for nationality, as Patricia Herlihy’s research suggests, at the end of the nineteenth century at least 58 percent of Odessa’s 403,815 inhabitants were ethnically non-Russian (Figure 2).⁴⁷ This approach fuelled further scholarship about the unique demographic composition of Russia’s Black Sea port cities, with a particular focus on Odesa’s diasporic communities.⁴⁸

45 ONSL 971, 1845, n. 28, 6/18 April. The author added that the total number of foreigners only made up a sixth of Odessa’s population, an effect of the pressure by the authorities to take up Russian nationality throughout the 1820s and 1830s.

46 Even with 7%, Odessa’s share of foreign population was still much larger than in the two major Russian cities, landlocked Moscow (0.75%) and capital city St Petersburg (2.35%). A.A.A. Skal’kovskii, *Pervoe Tsidtsatiletie Istoriii Goroda Odessy, 1793–1823* (Ukraine: V Gorodskoï Tipografii, 1837).

47 Soviet-era historian Gozulov wrote on the intersection between nationality and mother-tongue in 1970: “The formulation of the question of nationality in the USSR was adopted in the first census program of 1920 ... The 1897 census bypassed this issue, which was mainly due to the fear of the manifestation of centrifugal national forces in Russia and the desire to conceal data on the number of each nation.” in A.I. Gozulov, *Perepisi Naseleniia Zemnogo Shara: khronologicheskie Tablitsy* (Moskva: Statistika, 1970). For a detailed discussion of the census and of Odesa’s various ethnic groups, see P. Herlihy, “The Ethnic Composition of the City of Odessa in the Nineteenth Century.” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 1 (1) (1977), 53–78.

48 E. Sifneos, “Rentiers, Teachers and Workers: Greek Women in Late Nineteenth-century Odessa.” *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 34 (2) (2010), 182–200; J.A. Mazis, *The Greeks of Odessa: Diaspora Leadership in Late Imperial Russia*, (Boulder, Colo. 2004); A. Makolkin,

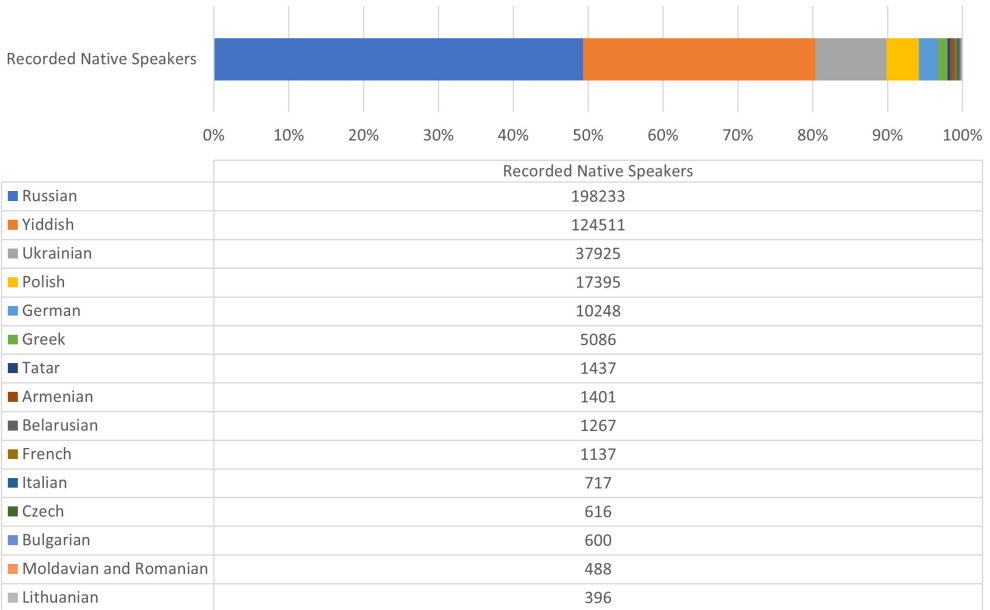


FIGURE 2 The fifteen largest groups by native language in Odessa, 1897
 Note: Data taken from N.A. Troinitskii, *Pervaia Vseobshchaia Perepis' Naseleniia Rossiiskoi Imperii 1897 g*, vol 47 (Leningrad, 1897) and "Demoscop Weekly", published online by the Vishnevsky Institute of Demography at the National Research University 'Higher School of Economics' (accessed 25 June 2022). Smaller language groups are not represented in this table.

And indeed, Odessa's geographical remoteness, some 1,500 km from the centres of Russian power, was exacerbated by its cultural diversity, which constructed the space as a social and demographic enclave that diverged from its own hinterland. Despite Odessa's command over 'New Russia', the imperial-era city embodied divergence from Russianness, a deviation that was framed negatively because the port's connectivity enhanced the work of transnational political networks, earning it the reputation of being "the refuge and the asylum of the worst of society from the neighbouring countries."⁴⁹ Therefore, the

The Nineteenth Century in Odessa: One Hundred Years of Italian Culture on the Shores of the Black Sea (1794–1894), (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2007); O. Fedenko, "The Activity of the Italian Merchants in Odessa during the XIXth Century." *Danubius* 34 (2) (2016), 31–42; S.J. Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa: A cultural history, 1794–1881* (Stanford, 1985); J. Tanny, *City of Rogues and Schnorrers: Russia's Jews and the Myth of Old Odessa* (Bloomington, Ind. 2011).

49 E. Morton, *Travels in Russia and a Residence at St. Petersburg and Odessa, in the Years 1827–1829* (New York, 1830), 185. These societies included Russian Decembrists plotting

historical discourse about the northern Black Sea has generally been framed by an enduring binary: the construction of the territory as Russian, and of its maritime centres as contrasting foreign hubs.

In the current debate on Southern Ukraine's historical identity, such a discourse solely emphasizes the divide between Russians and (widely-defined) foreigners, leaving little room for a Ukrainian narrative. At first glance, Ukrainian speakers were a modest linguistic group in Odessa's urban landscape, accounting for less than one tenth of the city's population. However, this understanding would only be valid if mother tongue strictly correlated with ethnic nationality (as opposed to imperial nationality). Indeed, by 1897 the practice and teaching of Ukrainian had been increasingly curtailed, with an intensification of Russification policies from 1874, and several bans on publication in Ukrainian.⁵⁰ Ukrainian language was therefore a fraught identifier, since it was seldom taught and closely policed, only revitalised by the cultural work of Odessa's *Hromada*.⁵¹ In the urban space alone, the share of 'ethnic' Ukrainians would thus extend to Russian-speakers and provide a larger number than language or official nationality-based statistics would suggest. So, if Odessa was cast as a non-Russian city, how did the cosmopolitanism of the urban spaces contrast with the more rural realities of 'New Russia'? And how can we locate the steppes' settler colonial past within Ukrainian history?

against tsarist autocracy, Polish revolutionaries, clandestine *hromady* (communities nurturing Ukrainian culture and language), Greek and Bulgarian independentists, and Zionist ideologues. In 1825, Tsar Nicholas I (1825–1855) also called Odessa a “nest of conspirators” following the failed Decembrist revolt against his succession to the throne as the heir to his late brother, Alexander I (1801–1825). This phrase by Nicholas II can be found in Kovbasiuk (1957,30). Kovbasiuk provides an extensive list of the Odessa-based Decembrists and the connections that they had with the city.

50 J. Remy, “The Ukrainian Alphabet as a Political Question in the Russian Empire before 1876.” *Ab Imperio* 2005, 2 (2005), 167–190; A. Danylenko and H. Naienko, “Linguistic Russification in Russian Ukraine: Languages, Imperial Models, and Policies.” *Russian Linguistics* 43 (1) (2018), 19–39.

51 Ukrainian *Hromady* were clandestine societies of Ukrainian intelligentsia that started appearing after the Crimean War, as one of the manifestations of the wider reform movement that developed in the Russian Empire. They flourished in the late 19th century to defend and sustain the growth of Ukrainian national consciousness within the Russian Empire. Odessa's *hromada* was particularly active, with up to 100 members at its peak (all double nominated and screened). This *hromada* financially supported publications in Ukrainian in Austro-Hungarian controlled Galicia (since such papers were forbidden in the Russian Empire) and used the port to circulate banned publications. O. Boldyriev, *Odes'ka hromada: Istorychnyi narys pro ukrains'ke natsional'ne vidrozhennia v Odesi u 70-i rr. XIX–pochat. XX st.* (Odesa 1994).

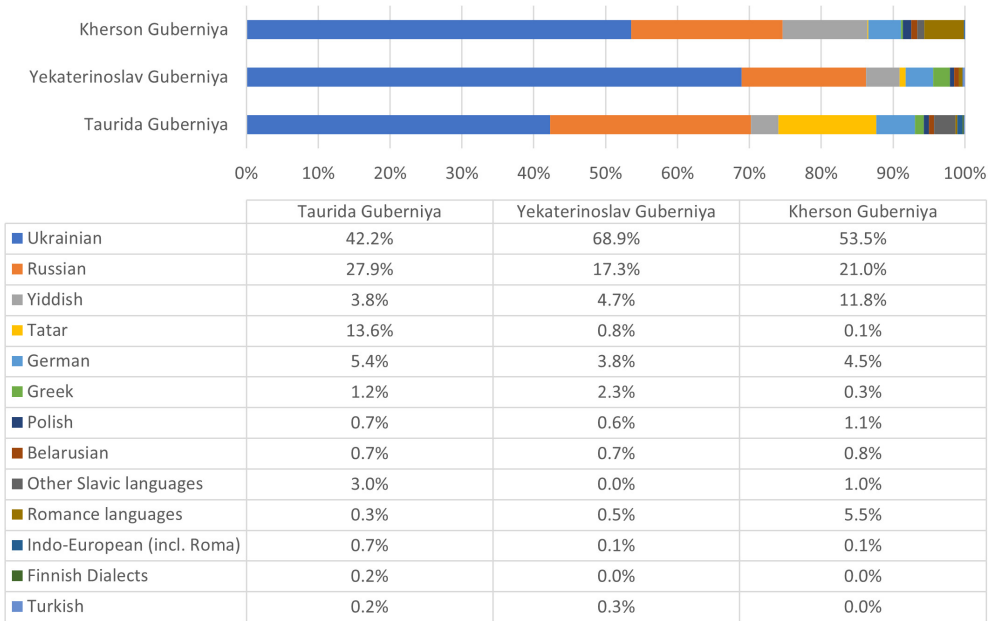


FIGURE 3 Linguistic identification across the three provinces of 'New Russia' (1897)
 Note: Data taken from N.A. Troinitskii, *Pervaia Vseobshchaia Perepis' Naseleniia Rossiiskoi Imperii 1897 g*, vol 47 (Leningrad, 1897) and "Demoscop Weekly", published online by the Vishnevsky Institute of Demography at the National Research University 'Higher School of Economics' (accessed 25 June 2022)

The 1897 census data provide a starkly different picture if we look at the demographic composition of each southern *guberniia* as a whole (Kherson, Ekaterinoslav, and Taurida), a picture in which self-identifying Ukrainians are a majority (Figure 3). The traditional divide between urban and rural life in Ukrainian society meant that until the twentieth century, most Ukrainians lived outside cities. Throughout the nineteenth century, Ukrainians remained a minority urban group, while cities turned into "Russifying machines" through the work of Russia's imperial administration and universities.⁵²

Prior to Russian expansion southward, Ukrainians had already been settling in the 'wild fields' since the seventeenth century, taking advantage of

52 Even Odessa eventually became monolingual. By the 1980s, Odessa, which had been so multicultural and plurilingual, became a city where three-quarters of the population spoke Russian as a native language, and showed cultural and class prejudice towards Ukrainian. J. Delwaide, "Identity and Geopolitics: Ukraine's Grappling with Imperial Legacies." *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 32/33, (1-4) (2011), 190; G.A. Hosking, *Rulers and Victims: The Russians in the Soviet Union*. (Cambridge, MA, 2006), 322-324.

the relative freedom of the steppe and its shifting imperial borders. Roman Szporluk views Russia's conquest of the Black Sea steppes as a process that provided the logistical framework for "a Ukrainian colonization [coming] from the Ukrainian peripheries"—the southern areas of Russia and Poland.⁵³ The movement of Ukrainians towards the Black Sea is thus part of Ukrainian history, and their settlement nationalized a steppe that was 'New Russian' only by name. The Ukrainian population shares highlighted in Figure 3 (53.5% in the Kherson governorate, where Odessa was located, 68.9% in the Yekaterinoslav governorate, and 42.2% in Taurida, which had retained a large Tatar community) confirm that, prior to the creation of the Ukrainian Soviet Republic in 1920 and the independence of Ukraine in 1991, the lands that were colonised by Russia a century earlier were already mostly inhabited by both Ukrainians and foreigners.

Ukrainians intersected with rural life more often than with cities, and their lack of visibility in the centres of Russian imperial administration erased their overall historical presence in the southern territories. The onslaught on Ukrainian language also exacerbated the manufacture of the Russian language as high culture in opposition with Ukrainian. The cosmopolitan and foreign character of cities like Odesa was constructed not just in contrast with Russian identities, but also to distinguish this imperial metropolis from the Ukrainian peasantry of the interior.⁵⁴ The history of Ukraine's Black Sea steppes, a space that witnessed centuries under Islamic rule followed by the multi-ethnic colonial settlement of non-Russians, refuses narratives of cultural homogeneity deployed by nationalising states.⁵⁵

5 Southern Ukraine's Postcolonial Crucible

Southern Ukraine was marked and transformed by the successive rules of multinational empires, while at the same time exhibiting features of spaces durably altered by the effects of settler colonialism. The narrative and practical erasure of its previous semi-nomadic populations already reshaped the northern shores of the Black Sea into a contested space between competing national sovereignties in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Since the 1990s, the

53 Szporluk, 1997: 101, 106–107.

54 T. Richardson, *Kaleidoscopic Odessa: History and Place in Contemporary Ukraine* (Toronto, 2008); V. Chernetsky, "Postcolonialism, Russia and Ukraine." *Urbandus Review* 7 (2003), 32–62.

55 Delwaide, 2011, 193.

resurrection of the term 'Novorossiia' by both Ukrainian irredentist groups and the Kremlin brings forward a particularly narrow view of the steppe's history, one that values conquest over the slower, complex, creolization and hybridization of Ukrainian identities in this multicultural space.⁵⁶ Claiming Southern Ukraine as historically and uniquely Russian is not only factually inaccurate, it is a completely modern assertion that serves recolonizing purposes.⁵⁷ The resurgence of a centuries-old imperial terminology in the context of current warfare should be a prompt to reassess the history of the region on its own terms—a postcolonial survey of a place that was equally constitutive to the histories of the Crimean Tatars, the Cossack Hosts, the Ottoman Empire, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Russian Empire, and whose hybridity comes together in today's Ukrainian multi-national state.

56 "In August 1990, a political movement in Odesa sought to revive the imperial territory of Novorossiia." J. O'Loughlin, G. Toal, and V. Kolosov, "The Rise and Fall of 'Novorossiia': Examining Support for a Separatist Geopolitical Imaginary in Southeast Ukraine." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33 (2) (2017), 126–127; R. Solchanyk, "The Politics of State Building: Centre-Periphery Relations in Post-Soviet Ukraine." *Europe-Asia Studies* 46 (1) (1994), 47–68; M. Laruelle, "Back from Utopia: How Donbas Fighters Reinvent Themselves in a Post-Novorossiia Russia." *Nationalities Papers* 47 (5) (2019), 719–733.

57 P. D'Anieri, "Magical Realism: Assumptions, Evidence and Prescriptions in the Ukraine Conflict." *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 60 (1) (2019), 97–117.