BOOK REVIEWS/COMPTES RENDUS


This is a *tour de force* of comparative historical-political analysis, relentlessly pursuing the implications of the co-evolution of national-identity and foreign policy in Russia, Poland, and Ukraine over the last three centuries (and more than that in Russia’s case), drawing on richly documented political, social, and cultural discourses. Prizel’s central argument is that the rise of mass society and the transfer of “the custodianship of national identity” from intellectual elites to a popular level key the transition of national identity away from romantic, messianic universalism toward parochial, nativist, ethnic-based pragmatism. Decisionmakers then no longer perceive national identity as a state- and ethnicity-transcending civilization, but associate it with ethnic polity. This transition requires the narrowing and closure of the physical, psychological, and often linguistic and religious gaps between the elites and the general public. The national idea is then shaped less by the collective memories or collective agendas of the elites (a process that, in itself, promotes a more atomized listless society), and more by common culture or national institutions. These processes have momentous implications for foreign relations of states, inducing the abandonment of expansionist, messianic policies.

Thus, in Poland, the legacy of the late-eighteenth-century partitions, the suppression of 1863 nationalist uprising, and the defeat in World War II, as well as the rising urbanization and education levels gradually put to rest the earlier obsessions with resurrecting the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, viewing Ukrainians and Belarusians as “Russified Poles,” classifying the Russians as the Ugro-Finnic (non-Slavic) people, and perceiving Germany as committed to “Teutonic,” anti-Polish designs. The rise of Solidarity and independent Poland was thus part of the process of redefining the concept of Polishness and of Poland’s historic mission, converting the *cordon sanitaire* notion into that of a bridge between Germany and Russia, between the West and the East. Lech Walesa and subsequent governments disengaged emotional nostalgias for Lwow (Lviv), Lithuania, and parts of Germany from grand strategy in the European arena. As Karol Modzelewski of the Labor Union stated in 1993: “Poland will have to live with the understanding that it is not a superpower” (p. 134).

In contrast, the transition from messianic to parochial conceptualization of national identity in Russia has been slower and remains incomplete. Prizel’s book traces the root causes of this divergence between Poland and Russia. The general message—even though not expressed in these terms in the book—is that the timing of institutional change vis-à-vis changes in prevailing ideas and discourses about national identity plays a significant role in the evolution of parochial and nativist conceptualizations of the “nation.” For example, Poland’s territorial expansion promoted divided sovereignty through local land ownership (“‘Hetmans’ and ‘senators’ led Poland ‘from tsardom to princedom, and from princedom to voevodism’” [p. 156]. Con-
versely, the territorial expansion of the Russian Empire since Ivan the Terrible strengthened central autocracy (to quote Kliuchevskii, “whereas the Russian state expanded, the Russian people shrank” [p. 154]. While Poland’s Catholic Church served as a link to the rationalist West, Russia’s Orthodox Church promoted the messianic, anti-Western concept of “Russia as the Third Rome.” At the time of dissident ferment of the 1960s-80s, Soviet political institutions co-opted the nationalist and “nativist” opposition (notably, the “village prose” school). When the Communist Party and the USSR itself rapidly and unexpectedly collapsed in the aftermath of the August 1991 attempted coup, these same genuine Russian voices were discredited by association with the failed communist experiment (which, ironically, the nativists themselves did much to condemn and de-legitimate). The early 1990s’ debates between the pro-Western (“Atlanticist”) and anti-Western (“Eurasianist”) groups further marginalized the nativists. However, socioeconomic and political incentives arising from Russia’s reduced position in the global arena and the increased access of Russia’s educated and urbanized population to the political process gave impetus to the emergence of the “centrist” view, represented by foreign (and then prime) minister Evgenii Primakov and currently by the new president, Vladimir Putin. The centrists want both to remain partners with the West and especially Europe (but without paying the price for the destruction of Chechnya or for arms sales to Iran) and to restore Russia’s economic and political influence in the CIS (but without paying the price of Soviet-style economic subsidies). Appreciation of this motivation is a major non-trivial implication of Prizel’s analysis.

In contrast to Poland and Russia, Ukraine is a case of national identity emerging in a weak state with a weak society, with little politically “usable history.” For prominent figures typically associated today with Ukraine’s independence — such as poets Shevchenko and Franko, historian and one-time president of the short-lived post-World War I Ukrainian state Mykhailo Hrushevskyj, or Ivan Drach of the Rukh popular front in the late 1980s — Ukrainian national identity was “a quest for social justice in a pan-Slavic context, rather than a quest for political independence” (p. 311). Hence, claims to independence arose more as a response to political repression such as the Ems Decree that banned the use of Ukrainian language in the Russian Empire from 1876 to 1905, the Dual Monarchy’s suppression of the Slavic demands for multiculturalism, Stalin’s Great Terror, Khrushchev’s policies of sliianie (merger) of nations into a single Soviet nationality, and the Brezhnev-Suslov embrace of Russian nationalists. The legacy of a “submerged nationality” thus makes foreign policy a national identity-building tool for post-Soviet Ukraine.

This volume is valuable not only for the questions it addresses, but for the puzzles it raises implicitly. For example, if political leaders can draw on diverse identity discourses within their own state, why wouldn’t they draw also on similar discourses elsewhere (e.g., why wouldn’t Moscow learn from Warsaw and Warsaw from London?) More fundamental, if national identity is multifaceted and provides political actors with multiple policy repertoires, then do historical discourses and collective memories really matter, or do other factors — such as economic, geopolitical, and bureaucratic incentives — ultimately drive policy choices and identity construction? Rather than offering schematic, ready-made answers to these questions, this book