

## CHILDREN OF RUS'<sup>1</sup>

Faith Hillis. *Children of Rus': Right-Bank Ukraine and the Invention of a Russian Nation*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013. Illustrations. 348 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-5219-2.

It may not be immediately apparent from the title, but this is an interesting book about the evolution of Ukraine into a modern nation in the context of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century imperial Russia. It is a history of the ideological and political differentiation that occurred *within* Ukrainian educated society during its long engagement with the empire and ethnic Russians. The book, which starts with the 1830s, shows how Ukrainians gradually wrested cultural control over their ethnic territory through historical and ethnographic research that established their uniqueness and primacy among the East Slavs as direct descendants of Kyivan Rus'. This empowering vision would inspire some Ukrainians toward separatism, while others would embrace East Slavic unity in a single Rus' nation. Faith Hillis focuses primarily, although not exclusively, on the latter ideological orientation, investigating the conversion of certain Right-Bank Ukrainian patriots into Russian imperial nationalists who pursued a populist social agenda designed to save Ukrainian peasants and workers, with the help of the state, from domination and exploitation by «alien» minorities in their midst.

The preceding summary is not the way the book is actually advertised on the cover, amazon.com, and library catalogues, where it is presented as an exploration of «why and how» the «southwestern borderland» «generated ... [the] most organized and politically successful Russian nationalist movement» in the empire, a characterization that echoes Hillis's introduction. While not untrue, this account, regrettably, leaves out that the book also demonstrates, largely in undertones, that the competing Ukrainian nationalist movement was ultimately (although not inevitably) triumphant, while the Russian nationalist movement, following a dizzying but short-lived success, collapsed in ignominy along with the empire it supported. In other words, the «invention of a Russian nation» that allegedly took place on Ukrainian soil was, in the final analysis, a complete failure (p. 16). Hillis, nonetheless, deserves much credit for fleshing out this historical phenomenon and for making the reasonable argument that the victorious Ukrainian narrative did have a tendency to marginalize its rival and erase the memory of their common origins and interests, which were considerable. In short, she helpfully problematizes «the Ukrainian national project» while offering a comprehensive analysis of a curious «Russian nationalism» – invented by Ukrainians («Little Russians») (p. 10). In this respect, hers is an important achievement. In some others, it is less convincing.

Hillis writes from an «imperial» vantage point, relying on nineteenth-century terminology. The book approaches Ukrainians first and foremost as Orthodox residents

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of the empire's southwest borderland. Most Ukrainian names are transliterated from the Russian; only «Ukrainophiles» or Ukrainian nationalists, in other words, people who unambiguously rejected the empire, have their names rendered from Ukrainian (p. xiii). Thus, we have, for example, «T. G. Shevchenko» (not T. H.), «Dragomanov» (not Drahomanov), and «Vladimir Antonovich» (not Volodymyr Antonovych); «Mykhailo Hrushevs'kyi» is spared from becoming «Mikhail Grushevskii» When Ukrainians are not Orthodox East Slavs or members of an estate (Right-Bank gentry and intellectuals), they are «Little Russians» facing off against Roman Catholic Poles and Jews. All these peoples of the Right Bank are governed by imperial administrators, intent on preserving the integrity and power of the state, ironically, by frequently appeasing the Little Russians and their local patriotism to keep the Southwest from Polish rebellious hands. Hillis shows that Ukrainians benefited in a «national» sense by acting as allies of an empire that feared Polish separatism – and this partially explains why some Ukrainians came to look on the empire as a guardian of Ukrainian interests. The «nationalizing» tendencies that emerged in Ukraine (in the form of a local ethnonational patriotism and as East Slavic or Russian nationalism) are shown to undermine the estate system and the service ethos on which the empire rested. The policies of imperial officials and bureaucrats toward national developments in Ukraine proved to be inconsistent and ambivalent, ranging from suppression to support.

Although Hillis claims that her «book reconstructs the dynamic and contingent process through which national ideas took root in the borderlands» (which to a certain degree it does), the largest and most original part of her work is in fact dedicated to «the emergence of a Russian nation-building project on the right bank» a project linked to what she calls the «Little Russian idea» a «constellation of beliefs» effective from the 1800s to 1917 (and slightly beyond), produced through the collaboration of Right-Bank and Left-Bank Ukrainian nobles and intellectuals (pp. 11, 12). This idea, as described by Hillis, was promoted by the «Little Russian lobby» or «Little Russian activists» who treated «Little Russian peasants» as principal defenders of an Orthodox Rus'. Crucially, says Hillis, this idea defined the Right Bank as a distinct cultural and historical region as well as the «homeland of all the East Slavs» (p. 13). Hillis's argument is that this lobby of «Little Russian patriots» (pp. 16, 17), armed with their idea, invented an «East Slavic nation» (p. 12), that is, a «Russian nation» (p. 12), also known as a «Rus' nation» (p. 16), and, possibly, even an «Orthodox» one. (She notes that the word «Russians» was a «frequently used short-hand for 'Orthodox East Slavs'» [p. 2]). The Little Russian idea is said to «marshal local culture in defense of the empire and East Slavic unity» (p. 89). «The southwest's [Little Russian] Russian nationalists ... reimagined the empire as the creation of the East Slavs» (p. 9). In a word, Right-Bank Ukraine became the «unlikely locale to give rise to a Russian nationalist imagination» (p. 2). As one can see, there are quite a few distinct terms at play here (East Slavic, Russian, Rus', Orthodoxy, empire) that lead to a variously named nation, but Hillis never really explains why she settles on subsuming these various concepts (and the complex notions behind them) under the heading «Russian nation-building project» «East Slavic» and «East Slavic unity» are major ideas in her book, but, surprisingly, there is virtually no discussion or examples of actual Ukrainian-Great Russian interaction (let alone Belarusian). The Little Russian lobby's relationship is shown to be primarily with imperial officials rather than with Great

Russian culture. One also has to wonder why the word «Rus'ian» never appears in the text, given the prominence of «Rus»' throughout the book. How is that the «Children of Rus',» dedicated to a Rus' nation, ended up imagining a «Russian» rather than a «Rus'ian» nation?

According to Hillis, the Little Russian idea played especially well in the empire after the Polish uprisings of 1830–1831 and 1863, notwithstanding the fact that in the interim (in 1847, 1863, and 1876), Little Russian cultural activities were seriously curtailed by imperial edicts, arrests, and exile. Following each setback, however, the Little Russian movement sprang back. The reason for this is that the Little Russian idea sometimes had a salutary and sometimes subversive interpretation among imperial officials. Some bureaucrats actively supported Ukrainian (Little Russian) activity as a bulwark against Polish claims to the Southwest and because they saw it reinforcing East Slavic unity, in other words, a single Rus' nation. On the other hand, the sense of Ukrainian exceptionalism that this very idea nurtured (given the pride it took in local culture, history, and society) raised fears that this phenomenon was laying the foundation for a specifically Ukrainian patriotism and nationalism, which ought to be restrained. Hillis shows that some issues were universally dear to all Ukrainian activists, regardless of where they stood on the question of East Slavic unity: liberating and empowering peasants was one; Ukrainian Sunday schools was another; even Ukrainian-language publications and reverence for Taras Shevchenko were common enough concerns, at least for a time. In other words, it was not always easy to separate the «Little Russian» from the «Ukrainophile» – an interesting point in the book. This state of affairs did not last, however. Those who defended Ukrainian particularism in the name of a «Russian» (Rus') nation and East Slavic unity gradually came to see their fellow countrymen, the Ukrainophiles, as dangerous nationalists, imperiling a unitary Slavic nation and the tsarist state. Some would eventually denounce any support for Ukrainian culture, calling the fostering of national difference in the Southwest the root cause of Ukrainian separatism. By the early twentieth century, the Ukrainian Russophiles (a term Hillis does not use) condemned Shevchenko and convinced imperial authorities to forbid erecting a statue in his honor, something they had earlier supported.

Hillis illustrates that from the 1860s onward the Little Russian idea acquired added features, becoming a critique of the new capitalist order and cosmopolitanism. As the «mercantile elite transformed Kiev into Russia's capitalist Wild West,» deepening the «gulf between the privileged and the struggling working classes,» the Little Russian lobby positioned itself even more strongly as a defender of East Slavic peasants and workers against Polish and Jewish capital, which became very powerful and influential, according to Hillis (pp. 122, 128). The lobby explicitly fought against civic equality for Poles and Jews, who, they feared, would overwhelm the Orthodox population. The lobby saw all social problems through the lens of ethnonational, not economic, conflict. Between 1905 and 1917, the Little Russian idea became the «truly Russian» movement, to use Hillis's expression: in other words, a full-fledged imperial nationalism, still masquerading as pan-East Slavicism, and conspicuous for its virulent anti-Semitism, stoked also by the state (Hillis weaves in nicely the Beilis case). This nationalism now became a major force in Kyiv politics and even achieved pan-imperial significance thanks to backing from government officials and Russian far-right parties. At this point of the book, the phrase «Little Russian idea/lobby» begins to wane and is replaced with reference to (southwest) «Russian nationalists,»

although Hillis still draws the occasional intellectual connection between the two, emphasizing the consistency of the Little Russian idea over time (in terms of East Slavic unity and anti-Polish sentiments). Now she speaks of a struggle between «liberationists» and «antiliberationists» in the empire, with the «Russian nationalists» prominent members of the latter camp. Hillis provides a long and excellent exposition of the success this antiliberationist movement had in the various local (Kyiv) and national Duma elections after 1905. The political triumph of the Russian nationalists in Kyiv and on the Right Bank as a whole was made possible by support from broad segments of society, the Orthodox Church (for example, Pochaiv monks), and, most importantly, imperial officials both in Kyiv and St. Petersburg, who saw this form of Russian nationalism as a force for stability at a time of rampant anti-state and anti-monarchist activity. The growing Ukrainophile and Ukrainian nationalist camp at this time sided mostly with the liberationist movement in the empire, even as it pursued its own agenda. Writes Hillis: «these activists would play a key role in formulating the nascent Ukrainian national project, using the ideas and tools that they had acquired in the Little Russian lobby to promote liberal and radical political projects that explicitly opposed the autocratic regime» (p. 89). In this context, Hrushevs'kyi becomes preeminent in Hillis's narrative, but many other Ukrainian activists are also mentioned, for example, Evhen Chykalenko.

As noted, Hillis operates with a historical and traditional terminology that acknowledges two types of Ukrainians: the Little Russian «who saw local traditions as compatible with imperial rule» and the much later Ukrainian (or Ukrainophile) «who questioned the unity of the East Slavs and the authority of the imperial state» (p. xiii)—a distinction made symbolic through the transliteration of names (respectively from Russian and Ukrainian). Hillis, of course, is not the only scholar to adhere to such a dualism. Transliteration, ultimately, would not have been a serious problem were it not for the fact that it creates the impression that the Little Russian idea (as East Slavic unity and Russian nationalism) was an unbroken, consistent ideology spanning more than a century, different, perhaps, in degree but not in essence. Despite some acknowledgment of «internal contradictions» (p. 44), Hillis includes pretty much the who's who of Ukrainian culture in the Little Russian category and idea. In the book (note the transliteration), I. Kotliarevskii, N. Gogol, T. G. Shevchenko, M. Maksimovich, N. Kostomarov, P. Kulish, M. Dragomanov, V. Antonovich, A. Kistiakovskii (and his son «Bogdan») are all Little Russians, but so are M. V. Iuzyfovich, Vitalii Iakovlevich Shulgin, A. I. Savenko, and D. I. Pikhno (major proponents of Russian nationalism). (This is not a complete list.) In other words, the category embraces both those who were seminal creators of Ukrainian culture and those who opposed it. Hillis maintains that her book «allows us to see how local patriots (among them, men typically seen as key players in the Ukrainian national awakening) helped to *invent a Russian nation that reinforced rather than challenged the integrity of the empire*» (p. 11, emphasis added). All these names come across as part of «an ambitious effort to mobilize a nation in defense of the Russian empire» (p. 2). In trying to show that Ukrainian nation building was contested from within (it was), Hillis, unfortunately, misses the opportunity to make relevant ideological and practical distinctions among her «Little Russians» which leads to confusion. It is a tall order indeed to impute to the first nine names above (the selection is mine, not Hillis's) the invention of a Russian nation or the reinforcement of the empire's integrity. Individuals who popularized

Ukrainian themes, experimented with the vernacular, wrote local histories, published chronicles and folksongs, and gave dignity to the common people were instrumental in laying the foundations for Ukraine not Russian nationalism—even if their activity took place within some ideological framework that recognized or conceded the unity of the East Slavs. Given the information provided by Hillis, even Iuzyfovich and the Shulgins made modest contributions to Ukraine, although, clearly, they do represent a different category of activists. The Russian nationalist position, ultimately, was a rejection of the specificity of Ukrainian culture and its right to autonomy, a point Hillis makes but rather weakly. The trademark of the Little Russian movement, especially before the middle of the nineteenth century, was cultural and scholarly production that defined a distinct nationality, not East Slavic unification (although it was always in the background thanks to ethnic Russian sensitivities about Ukrainian separatism); in fact, establishing Ukrainian cultural *difference* was the overriding achievement. It is certainly interesting, as Hillis demonstrates, that Drahomanov (Dragomanov) thought in terms of East Slavic unity at some point in his career, but this hardly makes him into a Little Russian in the sense of V. I. Shulgin, even if the two did cooperate on projects (p. 77). On a different note, we might also recall that Nikolai Gogol explicitly spoke of «two Rus' states (*gosudarstva*)» one in the North and one in the South and went out of his way to emphasize that they were completely dissimilar. In preparing to write a history of Little Russia, he focused on the southern Rus' (see his essay «Vzgliad na sostavlenie Malorossii» [1832]). And in the 1842 version of *Taras Bul'ba*, Gogol almost prefigures Hrushevs'kyi's «Ukraine-Rus'» using *Ukraina* and *russkaia zemlia* interchangeably as synonyms, with the main hero prophesying that his land will have «its own tsar.» Gogol and his relationship to Ukraine is a clearly debatable issue and I have expressed my view elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> The point, however, is that, regardless of whether we want to see in his statements East Slavic unity or Ukrainian separatism, they at least indicate that the Little Russian idea (if that's the terminology we insist on using) was quite diverse both as ideology and as social practice, reflecting the variety of people who were engaged in it. This is a point that is easily lost in Hillis's book. The Ukrainian «national project» was, by definition, full of contradictions, losses, betrayals, embarrassments, and detours. Some Ukrainians clearly rejected Ukrainian nationalism from «within» so to speak. Hillis's thesis that Ukraine (that is, «this newly acquired region» of the empire) «generated a powerful Russian nationalist movement» (words used on the cover) is therefore a distortion; *the East Slavic unity principle* no doubt did generate Russian (imperial) nationalism before and after the 1860s, but *the Little Russian idea and lobby* (and the cultural practices they represented, I emphasize) was broader; the idea appealed to many contemporaries not because it espoused Russian and Ukrainian unity but because it opened the door for asserting cultural differences and uniqueness of a people.

There is another questionable aspect to the book. Not only does it claim that the Little Russian idea and the efforts of Little Russian patriots played a key role in the «imagination

<sup>1</sup> Oleh S. Ilnytskyj, «Is Gogol's 1842 Version of *Taras Bul'ba* really 'Russified'?» in «Confronting the Past: Ukraine and Its History: A Festschrift in Honour of John-Paul Himka on the Occasion of His Sixtieth Birthday,» ed. Andrew Colin Gow, Roman Senkus, and Serhy Yekelchuk, *Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 35–36 (2010–2011): 51–68.

of a Russian nation that unified the East Slavs» (p. 17), but it also states that both the former and latter «unwittingly facilitated the emergence of a rival Ukrainian national project» (p. 17, emphasis added). The book never really entertains the possibility that the Ukrainian national project might actually have been self-driven or self-generating, inspired, say, by the ideas of romanticism, and cloaked within the Little Russian idea. Hillis portrays the Little Russian «Russian nationalists» as people who remained «loyal to the Little Russian idea,» whereas Ukrainian nationalists (described as «alumni of the Little Russian lobby») are those who did not maintain solidarity with the idea (p. 16). It appears that Hillis reads the Little Russian idea (the unity idea) as foundational and dominant, representing the status quo among Ukrainians until it was disturbed by the Ukrainian national project. The effect of narrating the Little Russian idea as a single continuous thread from the 1800s to 1917 (along with the symbolic transliteration system) means that Hillis presents the Ukrainian Russian nationalist movement (1860s onward) as a logical extension of the early nineteenth century, whereas it was something *sui generis*. This conservative «invention of a Russian nation» by some Ukrainians is best understood in the temporal and social context in which it took place. It was a defensive *response* to the ever-increasing importance of cultural and political autonomy (and/or separatism) in the Little Russian idea, a theme that was always there but remained muted. Between the 1840s and 1860s, there were clear signs that Ukrainian (Little Russian) cultural activity was evolving from the expression of local particularism in an imperial setting into an independent Ukrainian institution based on the vernacular. This development clearly alarmed not only the imperial authorities but also many Ukrainians (Little Russians) who were more comfortable with the early nineteenth-century manifestations of Ukrainian culture as an imperial phenomenon. At the same time, the secret police and the tsar were cracking down on the Cyril-Methodian Brotherhood, fearing separatism. Ethnic Russian society was becoming more and more reliant on the «all-Russian» (actually, all-Rus') idea, stridently embracing it as a «national» definition (see the writings of Vissarion Belinskii and Mikhail Katkov). The confluence of imperial political pressure, the East Slavic self-identification of ethnic Russians, the rise of Ukrainian culture all had some bearing on the development of a Ukrainian branded Russian nationalism. As always, Ukrainians were «particularist» even in respect to Russian nationalism, complementing imperial and ethnic Russian trends with their own concerns (that is, anxiety over the influence of foreign capital and culture in Ukraine).

*Children of Rus'* is excellent microhistory, giving readers a detailed picture of Russian nationalism among Ukrainians after the 1860s. It is definitely wanting in terms of giving the «big picture» of Ukrainian national evolution in the empire.

Reviewed by Oleh S. Ilnytskyj  
(University of Alberta)