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Why Are Southern and Eastern Ukraine Rebelling?

Alexander DONETSKY

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The popular protest in the southeastern regions of Ukraine against the nationalists who carried out an armed coup d'état in Kiev is being linked - at the instigation of the U.S. State Department - with Russia's interference in the internal affairs of a neighboring country. In fact, the outbreak of the civil protest movement in these industrial regions has nothing to do with the supposed schemes of Russian intelligence agencies. The immediate impetus for current events came from the seizure of power in Kiev by interest groups with an aggressive anti-Russian ideology; the deeper cause of the movement is rooted in the ethnic composition of the population and the history of the settlement and development of these lands...



After Batu Khan routed the early Russian state in 1238-1240, the lands south and east of Kiev turned into a deserted wilderness, as noted by Hungarian monk John of Plano Carpini in his account of his travels to Karakorum. In Russian chronicles of the 13th-15th centuries, the lands stretching southeast from the Ryazan-Tula-Bryansk-Chernigov-Kiev-Vinnitsa line, including 2/3 of the modern territory of Ukraine, were called the «Wild Field». The area in which modern-day Zaporozhye, Dnepropetrovsk, Poltava, Kharkov and even Sumy are located were the personal lands of the family of Mamai, the Khan of the Golden Horde, who suffered a terrible defeat at the hands of the Russians in 1380 on the river Don near Tula.



After the collapse of the Golden Horde in the late 15th century the Russians began advancing to the south and east to protect their state from the yearly raids of nomads from the Crimean Khanate and the Nogai Horde. Russia advanced the most into the «Wild Field» in the years of the reign of Ivan the Terrible, expanding its borders to the Caspian Sea and the Sea of Azov. The southwestern border of the Muscovite Tsardom at this time ran further west than the modern-day cities of Chernigov, Sumy, Kharkov and Donetsk. To guard this border, many cities and fortresses were built on the uninhabited steppes which were settled by volunteers from the northern and central regions of Russia.



Incidentally, during the time of Ivan the Terrible, the «Wild Field» was not completely uninhabited either. At that time the sub-ethnos known to the entire world as the Don Cossacks had already been living along the valleys of the Don and the Northern Donets, as well as their tributaries, for 200 years. It is known that Prince Dmitry of Moscow, who after his victory over Khan Mamai in 1380 was given the nickname Donskoi, received one of the most venerated icons in Russia today, the Don icon of the Mother of God, as a gift from the Cossacks of the Sirotinskaya Stanitsa, and the Cossacks swore to protect the Russian lands from raids by the nomads.

The Cossacks initially arose as an international community of free cavalymen who recognized no rulers over themselves and joined the military campaigns of various armies for profit. During peacetime they grew grain and engaged in crafts, but due to the proximity of the nomads they were ready to become warriors again at any moment. All important issues in the life of the stanitsa settlement were decided at a general meeting at which each Cossack had the right to state his opinion and vote equally with others. The Cossacks elected commanders and officials from among themselves either for a specified term or for the duration of a campaign. To decide issues which concerned a group of stanitsas or the entire Cossack region, representatives were elected by all the people. At the end of their term in office, such representatives went back to being ordinary citizens.

Personal slavery never existed among the Cossacks. Enemies who were taken prisoner had to work for their masters for a specified term (no more than 6 years), after which they were given a choice: either to freely return to their homeland or to become Cossacks and receive the same equal rights and obligations as everyone else. Anyone, no matter who he had been previously, could become a free Cossack by declaring himself one, and after that no one had the right to enslave him. Runaway serfs from the Polish Rzeczpospolita and Russia often took advantage of this, and the Cossack community guaranteed them freedom, even if their former masters sought them out. This rule sounded like a categorical imperative: «The Don surrenders no one.»

The lands of the Don Cossacks were located in the territories along the border between the modern-day Russian Federation and Ukraine. They included all of the modern Lugansk region, half of the Donets region and part of the Kharkov region. The western border of the Don Cossack Host ran along the Kalmius river, which runs through the city of Donetsk.

After the remainder of the «Wild Field» had been won from the Crimean Khanate and the Ottoman Empire in the late 18th century, Russia, having already settled the Urals and Siberia, catastrophically lacked the population to settle the immense expanses of steppe in the south of modern-day Ukraine. That is why Catherine the Great and subsequent Russian emperors invited residents from European countries to settle in the space from Odessa to Rostov. In Novorossiia, as these lands came to be called after the center of the province, the city of Novorossiysk (now Dnepropetrovsk), in addition to Russian villages and towns there appeared many Polish, Bulgarian, Greek, German, Serbian, Jewish, Moldovan and even Swiss settlements.

The industrial boom which began in the mid-19th century in the southeast of the Russian Empire further confused the ethnic map of the former «Wild Field». Along with Russian capital, industry in Novorossiia was advanced by businessmen and specialists from all over Europe. For example,

before 1920 Donetsk was called Yuzovka after English entrepreneur John Hughes, who founded the city. But Russians remained the region's most numerous and unifying ethnic group.

The turning point came after the revolution of 1917, when the Central Rada in Kiev, which had not been elected by anyone, declared not only the territory populated mostly by Ukrainians, but all the lands where noticeable numbers of ethnic Ukrainians lived, including Kuban, the Northern Caucasus and the Lower Volga, to be «Ukraine». Since the Bolsheviks were interested in creating a Soviet Ukraine, they supported the alternative government in Kharkov. And in order to increase the number of their supporters in the republic, they made the Donets Basin, which had never had any relation to Ukraine, part of the Ukrainian SSR.

As part of the «localization» policy, that is, the recruitment of representatives of national minorities to government offices, during the 1926 census massive falsifications were made. On Moscow's instructions, instead of their true ethnicity, Russians, Bulgarians, Greeks, Jews and Poles were recorded as «Ukrainians» simply because they lived in the Ukrainian SSR. The same thing happened in the 1930s when passports were issued, and in those years such an entry was impossible to change. As a result, the number of «Ukrainians» in the former «Wild Field», settled by a primarily Russian population, increased to such an extent that Novorossiya's belonging to Ukraine no longer seemed to raise any questions.

Throughout the years of Ukraine's independence, the residents of its southern and eastern regions have mostly taken an ironic attitude toward the historical myths created by nationalistically inclined pseudo-historians. After all, here in the southeast of modern Ukraine, the great majority of people remember about their Russian ancestors and the settling of the «Wild Field». And since the new Kiev regime has already declared them «second class» people who are subject to harsh discrimination, if not extermination, they are gravitating toward the place where their ancestors came from and where they are considered equal - Russia.