**Antiquity and plural identities in *The New Europe* before and after the First World War: the example of Ukraine**

Hans Kohn, one of the fathers of the study of nationalism in the last century, concisely and insightfully describes the nationalist movements of Eastern Europe, as opposed to Western Europe, in the following terms: “Nationalism in the West arose in an effort to build a nation in the political reality and the struggles of the present without too much sentimental regard for the past; nationalists in Central and Eastern Europe created often, out of the myths of the past and the dreams of the future, an ideal fatherland, closely linked with the past, devoid of any immediate connection with the present, and expected to become sometime a political reality” (A. Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism: A Study of Its Origins and Background*, New York 1944, p. 330).

*The New Europe*, to use the term coined by Tomas Masaryk, first President of the newly independent state of Czechoslovakia in 1918, arose from a strongly felt need among people who had been subjects of multinational empires to meld the myths of the past with their legitimate and grand expectations for the future. The political symbolism which the Czech President resurrected, for example in the classic restoration of Prague Castle, demonstrates a pronounced vein of sentimentality and a hunger for the past in the nations born in the wake of the demise of the great empires of Central Europe.

In countries with an Orthodox Christian tradition, marked by Byzantine formalism, the attitude described by Kohn was able to assume an even greater character of wistful atavism along lines astutely identified by the Byzantinist Georg Ostrogrosky: “No one could show more contempt for facts when they contradicted theory than the Byzantines. When facts and beliefs contradicted each other, beliefs prevailed” (G. Ostrogorsky, *The Byzantine Emperor and the Hierarchical World Order*, «The Slavonic and East European Review», 35.84, 1956, pp. 1-14, in part. p. 8). An echo of this mode of thinking can be detected in the Ukrainian context where it exploded in complexity following the outbreak of the Russian Revolution. The history of this country between the end of the 19th century and the period following World War One is a good example of a particular route to national rebirth in which nostalgia for antiquity, in various forms, was employed as a foundational and cultural paradigm. The national identity of what was then called “Little Russia” was rather fluid owing to centuries of linguistic, cultural and political domination by Russia and because speakers of Ukrainian were politically fragmented between the Tsarist and the Hapsburg Empires.

In this study I aim to describe how Greco-Roman, but also Byzantine and Slavic, antiquity were reinterpreted and redeployed to define the contentious Ukrainian identity during the eventful historical period which saw the constitution of independent Ukrainian states, however short-lived they would prove to be.

Of note in the area of classical philology is the figure of Fëdor Miščenko (1844-1906), whose brilliant career started at the University of Kyiv, where he conducted studies on Sophocles under the guidance of Modestov, and was interrupted in 1884 because of his liberal ideas and his association with the pro-Ukraine movement. Forced to move to the University of Kazan, he continued his intense research activity producing works on Aristotle’s *Athenian Constitution*,which have recently been rediscovered, as well as on federalism in the Hellenistic period, all of which presented alternatives to Muscovite centralism.

Working in the more strictly historical and political field, the most prominent figure in the Ukrainian scene at the start of the 20th Century was Mykhailo Hrushevsky, Head of Ukraine's revolutionary parliament, the *Tsentral’na rada*,in Kyiv in 1917. Hrushevsky, author of the monumental ten-volume *History of Ukraine-Rus’*, devoted himself to the defence of Ukrainian independence. This took the form of a historiography positing Slavic, as opposed to Norman, origins for the nation of Rus’. He also was active in journalism at various points during his life. His time as Head of the *Tsentral’na rada*, for example, was a prolific period for the historian, as well as one of his happiest. His *Illustrated History of Ukraine* saw its fourth edition, *Old Times in Ukraine*, aimed at a peasant audience published in 1907, had three print runs. His intention to rekindle a national consciousness both within Ukraine and in the eyes of rest of the world is clear from the title of his *Who the Ukrainians are and what they want?* and *On the Ukrainian Language and the Ukrainian School*. The content of these works reveal the ability of Hrushevsky, historian first, politician second, to identify nodes of Ukrainian identity in appeals to the past, originally Slavic and non-Norman, later Greco-Byzantine, and Cossack in the modern period. A recurring theme in this impassioned search for models and an identity is the role of the ancient Greek colonies on the Black Sea coast and, more generally, the idea of Greek liberty, so close to the heart of 19th century European historiography. Before the publication of the well-known book by Rostovcev, *Iranians and Greeks in South Russia* (1922), which introduced a euroasiatic approach and re-evaluated Iranian and Scythian influences in the early history of southern Russia, offering a perspective very distant from facile regional rivalries, an assumption of continuity between Greek liberty and the institutions of the first political formations of Western Slavs had, for some time, characterized the study of antiquity and journalism in Ukraine. This had the effect of ennobling the origins of the Kyivan State and the subsequent activities of the Steppe Cossacks. An important testament to this notion, which was quite commonplace before the Revolution, comes from none other than Alexander Kerensky, a key figure in the Russian Provisional Government of 1917.

“Professor Michail Ivanovic Rostovec, still very young at the time, offered us an excellent education in the field of Roman history. We were literally enthralled by his tales of the lives of the Greek cities which blossomed on the shores of the Black Sea long before the birth of Rus’. His lessons on pre-Russian civilization in the south of Russia confirmed the conclusion that the roots of democracy in old Rus’ had origins in deep antiquity, far older than we thought, and that there existed certain links between the primordial Russian state and the republics of ancient Greece (A. Kerenskij, *Rossija na istoričeskom povorote. Memuary*, Moskva 1993, English translation of author’s Italian translation. p. 21).

However, Rostovec too would experience a sort of patriotic blindness during the war years and would underestimate the importance of the independence movements of the various nationalities under the Tsarist Empire, favouring instead an economic reading which, in his case, was detached and not based in fact.

A review of historiographical and journalistic sources from the period therefore demonstrates that a studied rediscovery of the past at different levels functioned, to an extent, as an “invention of tradition” (Hobsbawm) to help forge a Ukrainian identity. This identity was pluralistic by necessity being made up of a diversity of mechanisms which, to lesser or greater extents, contributed to a process of identity building which was extremely problematic and which remains incomplete to this day.