

# Ukrainian nationalists protest against the New Yalta

by Vasyl Kolomatsky

President Clinton's visit to Moscow in January was devoted to geopolitical problems and further development of the April 1993 Vancouver agreements, in the light of the new political situation in eastern Europe, after Boris Yeltsin's dissolution and physical destruction of the Parliament in September-October 1993, and the Russian elections in December, when Russian nationalists expressed their aspirations to gain power. The superpowers, no doubt, are ready again to divide the world into spheres of influence by turning the East European countries into "a buffer zone," while consigning the former Soviet republics to the sphere of Russian influence.

Two weeks before Clinton's Moscow meeting with Yeltsin, Russian newspapers changed their tone from "non-interference" to a stress on "vital Russian interests in the near abroad" (former Soviet republics), while international mass media intensified their propaganda for the "Partnership for Peace" plan. I can imagine how much effort it took the President to convince the East Europeans to accept this plan. Populist actions in the style of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, like playing the saxophone in a Prague jazz bar, could hardly sweeten the bitterness and disappointment of the Vishegrad group countries, which are still in the unblinking gaze of the Kremlin boa.

But obviously, Washington's most important international move was the signing of the American-Russian-Ukrainian agreement on the dismantling of nuclear weapons located in Ukraine. Having adopted the principle of nonproliferation as a higher axiom of foreign policy, and exploiting the catastrophic state of the Ukrainian economy, Washington exerted unprecedented pressure on the Ukrainian authorities around the question of nuclear disarmament.

## Three hundred years of colonial rule

We have had 300 years of colonial rule by Moscow, two instances in this century of declaring independence (1918, 1941) and of rapidly losing it under blows from the Kremlin, an attempt to become part of western society met with rejection by the egotistical West, and, finally, nuclear weapons as a means of restraining Russian nationalists, while the whole world fails to understand these Ukrainian defensive con-

cerns. The Ukrainians have never in their history waged wars of conquest, never had colonies, but were often used as a tool in somebody else's game.

To understand the thinking of contemporary Ukrainians, one has to look into the past. The original version of the Pereyaslovsky Treaty of 1654 has been lost, and many historians consider it a military alliance between Russia and Ukraine, signed only for the lifetime of hetman Bogdan Khmelnytsky. It was extended by Russia, however, for an indefinite period of time without any negotiations. And with time, the rights of Ukrainians were limited more and more. First, the electoral prerogatives of the Ukrainian troops were eliminated, then Ukrainians were not allowed to elect the [church] metropolitan, and ever greater political power was gradually concentrated in the hands of czarist officials.

Hetman Mazepa decided to end this dependency on Russia, at the beginning of the 18th century. During the northern war between Russia and Sweden on Ukrainian territory, he joined forces with Charles XII of Sweden and attempted to destroy the army of the Russian Czar Peter I. But Charles XII and Mazepa were defeated in the battle of Poltava, which decided the fate of Ukraine for many years. Such acts of vandalism as the destruction of Baturin and the annihilation of all its 6,000 inhabitants became a symbol of the cruel lot of Ukrainians in the Russian Empire.

Then came the rule of Catherine II (1762-96), a period of so-called enlightened absolutism, which Russian historians like to give as an example of wise statecraft. Catherine II corresponded with Voltaire and was considered to be a rather enlightened figure of her age. It was she, however, who destroyed Zaporozhskaya Sech, the stronghold of the Ukrainian national army. She suppressed an anti-Polish uprising called the Koliivshina in the right bank Ukraine. She introduced serfdom in Ukraine, and distributed huge estates to Petersburg officials and court titles to Cossack elders, which started the process that became known as Russification.

Ukraine experienced persecution as a nation under all the czars. The "reactionary" Czar Nicholas I smashed the Brotherhood of Kirill and Methodius and sent the Ukrainian genius Taras Shevchenko into the Army for ten years. The

“progressive” Czar Alexander II, for his part, issued two edicts banning the Ukrainian language (1863, 1876) and systematically persecuted the Ukrainian cultural association Gromada, which united the best Ukrainian forces in St. Petersburg. Another “soft” czar, Nicholas II, again banned Ukrainian as a language. Then, both the Bolsheviks and the White Army under Denikin fought against the troops of the Directory. Lenin was the author of the words, “Ukraine can be free only in union with Russia,” while Denikin said, “No Russia will ever recognize the independence of Ukraine! Never! There is no Ukraine, there is only the Southwest Territory [of Russia].” Thus there was no great difference between those antipodes.

Eventually the pacifist “left” government of Vinnichenko refused to accept the military services of the “rightist” Skoropadsky and, as a result, lost Ukrainian statehood under the armed blows of the Bolsheviks. This military defeat during the Civil War was one of the most important events, which forced Ukrainians to think hard about the role of the army in the existence of a state.

Soviet rule brought enormous suffering to Ukraine. The famine of 1932-33 alone cost the lives of 4-6 million people. The famine was caused artificially by the Bolsheviks, in order to drive stubborn peasants into collective farms.

When fascist troops entered West Ukraine on June 30, 1941, Yaroslav Stetsko in Lviv [Lvov] proclaimed the independence of the Ukrainian state. Within a few weeks, all the members of the Ukrainian government were imprisoned in camps. At that point, Ukrainian patriots founded the Ukrainian Insurrection Army (UPA) and fought on two fronts—simultaneously against the Communists and against the fascists. Once again, military victory eluded the Ukrainians.

### **Since the fall of communism**

On Dec. 1, 1991 in a referendum on independence, 92% of the votes expressed the will of Ukrainians to live in a sovereign country. But then new difficulties arose in relations with Russia. These included Russian claims on Sevastopol in the Crimean Peninsula and on the Black Sea fleet, and demands for immediate removal of the nuclear weapons.

Meanwhile, the Russian press fanned tension around Ukraine by creating an image of Ukraine as a hostile country. There have been many articles painting the situation in darker colors than reality. As a member of the Ukrainian community in Russia, I can say with certainty that it is absolutely impossible to publish or broadcast a point of view treating Ukraine’s independence as the natural result of its people’s fight for independence. We have a paradoxical situation, where two peoples who lived in one country for 300 years have completely contrary notions about their common history and stress completely different aspects of that history. A Russian would not be able to tell you who Hetman Vygovsky was and what was his greatest victory, although he defeated a 150,000-strong army under Aleksei Trubetskoy and de-

stroyed the Russian cavalry. This historical ignorance feeds into an explosive ideological potential of enormous force, which may be detonated in time.

The question naturally arises: When will Russian society put on the agenda the question of political unification of the “fraternal republics” and eliminating the delusions of those dangerous and crazy Ukrainian nationalists? I think this will depend on many factors. First of all, if the crisis in Ukraine becomes a full-scale economic collapse, Russia will not so much aspire to take over its territory, but will resort to the strategy of making Ukraine a colony abroad.

Second, it will greatly depend on who succeeds Yeltsin. Third, the West will have a say. When Peter I trampled Ukraine after the battle of Poltava, the West could only express its sympathy in the press. The world has changed since then, and the West has more substantial influence on Russia. But when “President Zhirinovskiy” sees before him a Ukraine without nuclear weapons, Russia will take the offensive for sure. He would then earn in Ukraine the same fame that Peter I did, expressed by the Ukrainian word “*kat*” (butcher).

This excursion into history, recent and remote, helps us explain the feelings of Ukrainians as they watched President Kravchuk promise to ship all the nuclear weapons to Russia. Almost all the political parties in Ukraine protested, nor did the idea have support among the citizens.

There was even a protest action in Moscow. Four members of the Organization of the Ukrainian National Movement (Rukh), which is officially registered as a public organization by the Moscow authorities, approached the American Embassy with Ukrainian emblems and a poster: “Clinton! By disarming Ukraine you are arming fascism!” The protesters delivered to the embassy a letter addressed to President Clinton, which included the following: We “wish to express our concern and protest about the unprecedented pressure exerted by your administration on the leadership of Ukraine, on the question of nuclear disarmament.” The letter ended with the words: “Considering also that nuclear weapons have a good record as a reliable military deterrent, we ask you to postpone the question of nuclear disarmament of Ukraine until it can be said with all certainty, that there is no further threat from Russia to the sovereignty of the young Ukrainian state.”

The participants in the demonstration were arrested by the police, detained for nine hours, and then released until trial. The hearing took place on Jan. 20 and ended in a warning to three participants: Viktor Gumenyuk, Miroslav Chmelik, and the author of this article. Pyotr Kostik was acquitted. This event once again demonstrated the uneasiness of thinking people in the present political situation, as well as the undemocratic behavior of the Russian authorities and an attempt to suppress by force the peaceful expression of opinion. Is this not a metaphor for what may happen to Ukraine when the last warhead leaves its territory?

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