

Ukraine and Russia

ukraine & Russia

A fraternal Rivalry

Anatol Lieven



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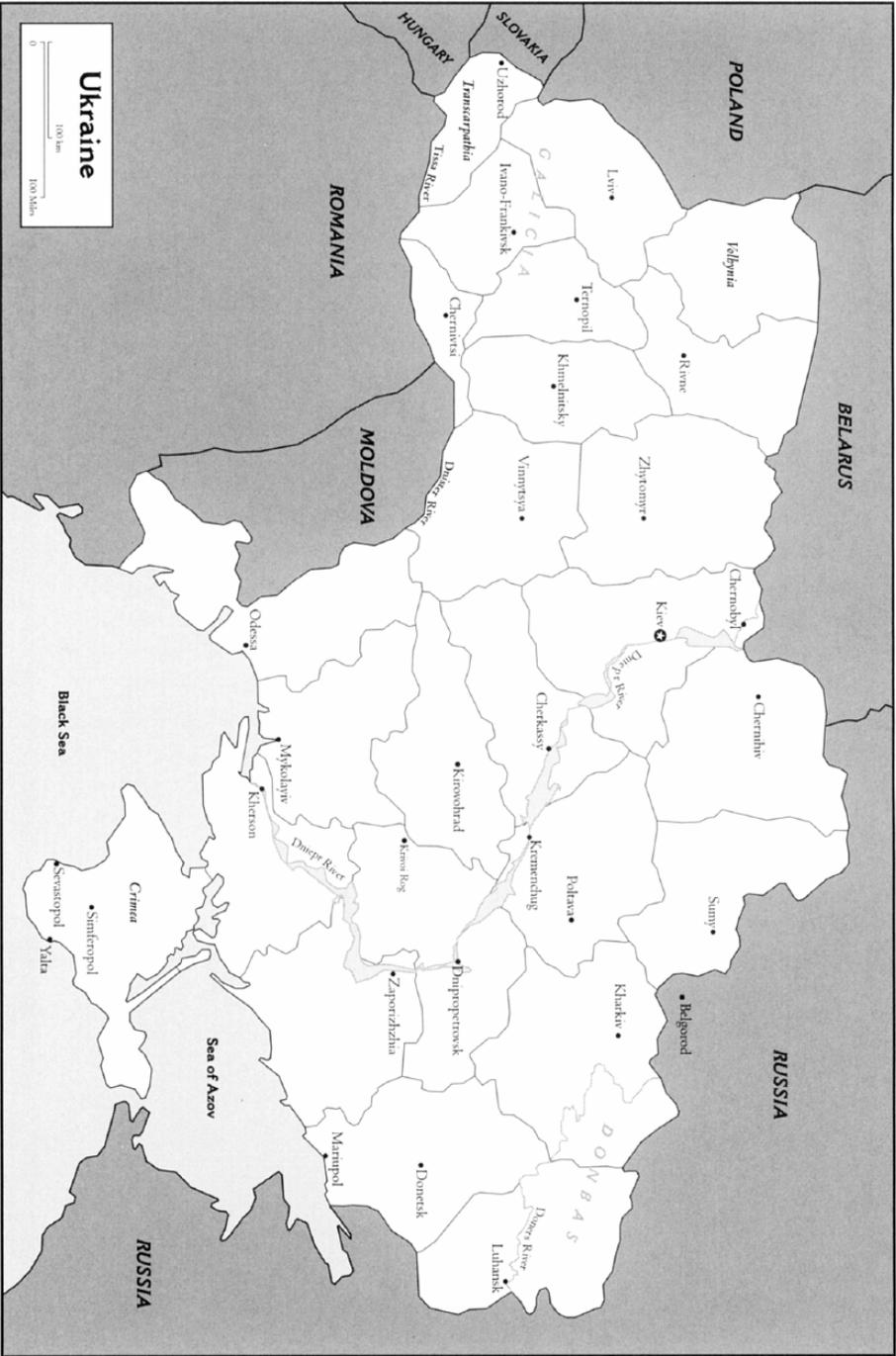
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*To my wife, Saba,
with my dearest love*

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FOREWORD

In the near future, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) will address the question of further enlarging its membership beyond the most recent additions of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. The politics of incorporating former adversaries into the Atlantic Alliance has raised considerable controversy, but as NATO's borders stretch eastward from East-Central Europe toward the former republics of the Soviet Union, subsequent rounds of deciding on new members will undoubtedly prove even more divisive.

The logic of NATO enlargement inevitably brings up the issue of Ukraine. In turn, because of its history and demography, it is well-nigh impossible to speak of Ukraine's membership in any Western organization without serious consideration of Russian sentiments. Ukraine already has a special agreement with NATO, much along the lines of the alliance's special agreement with Russia. However, Ukraine has not actively pursued NATO membership, perhaps reflecting its special relationship among other Soviet successor states with the Russian Federation. Nevertheless, Ukraine's foreign minister recently stated that his country's membership in both NATO and the European Union would contribute to the expansion of democracy and stability in Europe.

As recently as mid-1998, Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott declared that "should Ukraine one day decide to seek entry into the alliance, the door will remain open." Underlying such reassurances by the West's foreign policy establishments is the view of Ukraine as occupying a crucial position in the geopolitics of Eurasia—a country that can serve as a buffer between the new democracies of Eastern Europe

and a Russia with an uncertain democratic future. To be sure, Ukraine's very size and position in the Eurasian political landscape make it, in Sherman Garnett's phrase, "the keystone in the arch" of the transatlantic security architecture. Moreover, besides the concern over a former Soviet republic that still possessed a threatening arsenal of Soviet nuclear weapons, Western observers believed that this was the Soviet successor state among those with sizable ethnic Russian minorities that faced the most violent future.

As Anatol Lieven explains in *Ukraine and Russia: A Fraternal Rivalry*, Russia's objections to the transformation of Ukraine into a "buffer state" that once again demarcates the Eurasian political space go beyond the extension of NATO up to its borders. He argues that a concerted effort on the part of the West to make Ukraine a member of the Atlantic Alliance while excluding Russia would seem to unravel perforce the historical, political, and social bonds that have been forged between the two countries over the course of centuries. Such an effort, he explains, attempts to counter a Russian threat to the independence and security of Ukraine—and Europe—that is more hypothetical than extant.

In fact, Lieven contends, Ukraine's acceptance of a Western policy of actively pulling Ukraine into NATO would surely sharpen the appearance of an anti-Russian ideology on the part of the Ukrainian government, thereby severely threatening relations not only between Russia and Ukraine, but also between Russians and Ukrainians in Ukraine. In other words, as Lieven concludes, if Ukraine's value to transatlantic security lies in the country's continued internal stability, such an assertive policy of NATO enlargement in this direction would lead to exactly the kind of result the West wishes most to avoid.

Before conducting the initial research for this book as a 1996 senior fellow in the Institute's Jennings Randolph Program for International Peace, the author spent many years as a journalist for *The Times* of London, covering the democratic revolutions in the former Soviet Baltic republics and the turmoil of transition in the former communist states of East-Central Europe. In *Ukraine and Russia*, Lieven employs the same kind of insightful reportage and a skillful analysis of the region's convoluted history and politics to examine the relationship of these two intertwined Slavic countries. As he explains, the ethnic relationship between Russia and Ukraine is complex: An ethnographic map of Ukraine would indicate distinct Russian- and Ukrainian-speaking areas of settlement, yet it would also show a pervasive intermingling—and intermarriage—of both groups throughout much of the country. Centuries

of Russian influence and decades of Soviet rule have established a significant Russian community in Ukraine. However, the ethnic closeness of these two groups has allowed the Russification of much of the country. Moreover, as Lieven points out, most of the “Russian” community’s members in Ukraine can be more aptly described as “Soviet” immigrants. As such, they have more identification with the Russian *people* than with any sort of state-centric Russian nationalism.

Such a portrait of ethnic tolerance is bound to differ markedly from the image of Ukraine held by most Western policymakers. Certainly, it is a different image than U.S. national security officials held at the time of the Soviet Union’s dissolution. Many of these officials steeled themselves for a violent clash soon after Ukraine’s independence, as Soviet controls suddenly disappeared. In his 1991 visit to Kiev, just shortly before Ukraine’s independence, President Bush urged Ukrainians to work against “suicidal nationalism,” seemingly telling the country to exercise its post-Soviet independence cautiously, lest Moscow destabilize Ukraine by mobilizing a putative “fifth column” of ethnic Russians in Ukraine’s eastern and southern regions.

That scenario is exaggerated, Lieven argues—especially now, given the Russian government’s apparent lack of will to exert its influence in the major Russian-speaking regions of the country. Although he acknowledges a certain lassitude in Russian officialdom to try to exert much influence at all following its debacle in Chechnya and the economy’s steady deterioration, one of Lieven’s central themes in this work is that the closeness of “Russians” and Ukrainians works against such a scenario of ethnic polarization and political extremism in Ukraine. Although there are strains of nationalist sentiment among the country’s major ethnic groups, the concept of a “nation” for both of them is still somewhat undefined.

This is not to say, however, that Ukraine does not face serious domestic problems that could increase tensions between its two major ethnic groups. As Lieven concludes, the most serious threats to Ukraine’s stability come from within. Indeed, despite the affinity between the two countries, Lieven emphasizes that Ukraine and Russia are also distinct rivals. In the post-Soviet experience, Ukraine is exercising its independence in various ways, and Ukrainians are realizing their own national identity, including a resurgence of the Ukrainian language in education and government. As the Ukrainian state begins the arduous process of identifying its nation, Lieven argues, it should realize that maintaining such a level of ethnic tolerance will require nation-building programs

that integrate the country's major Russian-speaking population. In other words, the task of nation-building in post-Soviet Ukraine must embrace a civic nationalism that aims toward inclusiveness, not an exclusive ethnic nationalism that could also very well provoke a reaction from Ukraine's much larger neighbor to the east.

As the author of this work explains, however, there are formidable challenges to such a civic nation-building project. Ukraine's economy continues on a downward slope, a trend that is accelerated by pervasive corruption and half-hearted attempts at economic reform. The Kuchma administration clearly has not fulfilled its promises of economic growth and prosperity, and the recent rise in popularity of the country's leftist parties means that if Kuchma is defeated in the 1999 presidential elections, the Ukrainian economy probably will fare no better under any of his likely successors. Furthermore, Ukraine's political geography is distinguished by regional fiefdoms that compete for central power in Kiev. These two factors have contributed to a strong regionalism and regional loyalties in Ukraine. While such loyalties dampen the prospect of a Ukraine rent by ethnic nationalism, this does not mean that the country is not vulnerable to ethnopolitical manipulation on a mass scale. In fact, as Lieven points out, as Ukraine's economic problems grow more acute, some of the country's regional political clans could resort to ethnic scapegoating to increase their political capital.

Yet the area of Ukraine that poses the greatest potential danger is one that means a great deal to both governments and that has served for centuries as a nationalist rallying cry for Russian politicians—the Crimean Peninsula. Crimea has a high concentration of ethnic Russians, but unlike members of the Russian-speaking population in the country's east, those of southern Ukraine are not that close to their Ukrainian neighbors. In fact, Crimea is the one region of Ukraine where one can speak of a Russian secessionist movement. Crimea also has a controversial administrative legacy, stemming from Khrushchev's transfer of the peninsula from Russian to Ukrainian jurisdiction in 1954. The headquarters of the former Soviet Black Sea Fleet remains in the Crimean port of Sevastopol, and dividing up the fleet under the agreement that accompanied the 1997 Russian-Ukrainian Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership (the "basic treaty") leaves open the possibility of removing this military stronghold from Russia's control twenty years hence. The reversion of the fleet's base to Ukrainian control could spell the end to a major source of employment for this region's ethnic Russians—at a time when Kiev must also accommodate thousands of

Crimean Tatars who are returning to their homeland after the forced relocation of the Stalinist era. The Russian government is loath to relinquish control of the fleet and its base, which have served as a defensive outpost against Turkey, Russia's historic rival; the Russian people themselves have an equally strong attachment to the peninsula.

Although both the Russian and Ukrainian legislatures have ratified the basic treaty, Russia's Federation Council (the legislature's upper house) conditioned its approval on Ukraine's ratification of the agreement on the disposition of the Black Sea Fleet and leasing arrangements for its Sevastopol base. As this book goes to press, Ukraine is expected to approve the agreement, but it is not unreasonable also to expect that the treaty and the terms of the agreement on Sevastopol and the Black Sea Fleet will continue to serve as a campaign issue in Ukraine's October 1999 presidential elections and Russia's presidential polls, scheduled for the following year. Already, some Russian politicians campaigning to succeed President Boris Yeltsin have seized upon the issue of the treaties. Ukraine's entry into NATO's ranks obviously would have grave consequences for the Russia-Ukraine basic treaty, the author notes, as well as for the future of conflict avoidance on the Crimean Peninsula.

Ukraine and Russia: A Fraternal Rivalry is the latest product of the Institute's ongoing examination of the Soviet Union's dissolution and the resulting problems of sovereignty and national identity. The case of Ukraine has also been addressed in the Institute's Series on Religion, Nationalism, and Intolerance in senior scholar David Little's *Ukraine: The Legacy of Intolerance* (United States Institute of Peace Press, 1991). On Russia's relations with former Soviet republics in general, the Institute has also published the late Galina Starovoitova's Peaceworks report *Sovereignty after Empire: Self-Determination Movements in the Former Soviet Union* (No. 19, October 1997), and Martha Brill Olcott's *Central Asia's New States: Independence, Foreign Policy, and Regional Security* (United States Institute of Peace Press, 1996). On security issues, among the titles the Institute has recently published are James Goodby's *Europe Undivided: The New Logic of Peace in U.S.-Russian Relations* and David Yost's *NATO Transformed: The Alliance's New Roles in International Security*, both published by the United States Institute of Peace Press in 1998. In late 1999, the Press will feature among its distinguished authors former Institute fellow Peter Reddaway and his analysis of Russia's economic reforms and their effect on the country's democratization and political stability.

The Institute also expects to publish former fellow Igor Zevelev's forthcoming study of the Russian Federation's policies toward major Russian communities in the "near abroad." In the cases of the Baltic states and Kazakstan, the history of the Russian communities in these former Soviet republics has been relatively brief, compared to that of the Ukrainian-Russian relationship. Ukraine and Russia, as Anatol Lieven masterfully explains in the following pages, have had a much longer and much more complex coexistence. Foreign policymakers should understand the multifaceted and enduring nature of their relationship as they ponder the future of European security and the roles these two countries will play in it.

Richard H. Solomon
President
United States Institute of Peace

PREFACE

This work is based on material gathered during nine visits I made to Ukraine as a correspondent for *The Times* of London between 1993 and 1995, and on a three-month research trip to Ukraine in the summer and autumn of 1995, which was funded by grants from the Leverhulme Trust and Nuffield Foundation. It was written during my time in Washington, D.C., from January 1996 to January 1997 as a senior fellow at the United States Institute of Peace. I am grateful to all these institutions for their generous support. The opinions expressed in this work are naturally my own, and none of these bodies bears any responsibility for them.

My analysis of the Ukrainian-Russian relationship is rooted in a reading of this region's history. However, while I hope it is academically respectable, this is not primarily an academic work; rather, it is a personal view based on my experience and observations of the region. In particular, the amount of space I have given to direct quotations from people I have interviewed may seem unusual. For this I make no apology. The citizens of Ukraine today are after all not inhabitants of ancient Egypt, whose opinions and beliefs must be pieced together from archaeological evidence. They are living people with voices of their own and things to say that are often more interesting than the views of distant analysts.

The people in both Ukraine and Russia who extended their hospitality or helped my wife and me in other ways during our stay are too numerous to list. Among Western correspondents, however, Anna Reid of the *Daily Telegraph*, Matthew Kaminski of the *Financial Times*, and Alexis Rowell of the British Broadcasting Corporation deserve special

thanks. I would also like to thank Sherman Garnett of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Dominique Arel of Brown University, and Andrew Wilson of London University for their helpful advice.

NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

In this work I have used, as a rule, the Ukrainian form of the names of people and places in Ukraine, except in rare cases where another form (Latinate, Polish, or Russian) has had a long-standing presence in English, as with "Kiev" or "Galicia." In these cases I have put the Ukrainian form in parentheses where appropriate. I have made an exception where individuals are clearly identified as members of the Russian, Jewish, or Tatar minorities; for these cases I have used their individual forms, with the Ukrainian form in parentheses where appropriate. In quotations of reported speech, I have followed the forms used in the source itself.