

The “European” Dimension of Nation-Building

Discursive Strategies of Polish and Ukrainian Historians in Galicia

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“Europe” in Past and Present

After the collapse of the Eastern Bloc in 1989, both Poland and Ukraine had to re-think their cultural and geopolitical situation within Europe. Slogans like “The Return to Europe” were characteristic of the revival of identity debates about the new position between the European Community/Union and the Russian Federation. Today – more than twenty years later – discussions about the role of Poland and Ukraine in Europe are still a significant political and societal issue. To better understand these controversies, it might be useful to trace the origins of these debates and analyze their role in the context of nation-building processes in the 19th century.

Research Question

This thesis is based on the assumption that debates about “Europe” constituted an integral part of nation-building processes in the 19th century. I posit that national elites employed images of “Europe”, the “West” and the “East” to construct national consciousness. Historians especially played an important role as nation-builders because they were able to “invent” a nation’s tradition, proving its existence from time immemorial and claiming cultural and even political autonomy. Moreover, historians could deliver historical arguments for the “European” character of their nation. Which images of “Europe” did historians implement in their historical narratives and how did they utilize these images as discursive strategies to promote national goals?

Focus on Discourse in Galicia

In my study, I focus on intellectual discourses on “Europe” in the Habsburg province Galicia. Being situated on the Eastern periphery of the Habsburg Empire, Galicia was often perceived as a borderland between “East” and “West” and even called “Half-Asia”. At the same time, this Austrian crown land was the place where Ukrainian and Polish nation-building projects fiercely competed and national master narratives clashed. Therefore, an investigation of historical debates on “Europe” in this region is well suited for studying images of “Europe” and their significance for constructing national identity.

Historiographical Strategies for Constructing “Europe”

Challenging “Eastern Backwardness”

The enlightenment paradigm of “progress and backwardness” expresses the teleological and Eurocentric understanding of historical process. Comparing the nation’s evolution with the development of other European nations, historians were able to either place their national history within the context of a general European scheme or propose “Eastern” alternatives of historical success.



The Ukrainian people in Europe (V. Kushnir)



Symbols of Civilization:
Copernicus (l.) and the
Union of Lublin (r.)
(paintings by J. Matejko)



Spreading “Western Civilization”

The concept of the “civilizing mission” propagates the historical task to spread “European civilization” and “Western” values to the “East”. Pointing at major achievements in expanding cultural borders of “Europe”, historians were able to put forward important arguments why the own nation belonged to the European community and could claim the same rights as other European nations.

Defending “Europe”

The “antemurale” topos implies the belief of one’s nation being a bulwark of “Europe” and Christianity. Emphasizing the nation’s important historical role as a martyr, protecting “Europe” from invasions of “barbarian” peoples such as Tatars, Turks and also Russians, historians created “Asia” and the “East” as the constituting other and defined their “Europeanness”.



l.: Ukrainian Cossacks defending Vienna in 1683 (monument in the Türkenschanzpark)
r.: Poles dying for Europe in the battle of Warona 1444 (J. Matejko)



“It becomes clear from the facts of the historical past that the sense and the soul of the Ukrainian nation strives for the West to earn a worthy and honorable place within the European community of the Western cultural peoples.”

Oleksander Barvinsky

(Politychni i kulturni vzaiemyny Ukraintsiv iz zakhidnoi Evropei, in: Narodnyi kaliendar tovarystva Prosvita. Lviv 1916, p. 88.)

Text Corpus

The project explores both academic, popular and official discourse, drawing on:

1. scientific monographs, surveys, articles and reviews in historical journals
2. popular booklets, brochures, pamphlets and newspaper articles
3. school books, primers with historical topics and official history text books.

Apart from texts published by Polish and Ukrainian authors from Galicia between 1830 and 1918, I also consider selected sources from German and Austrian historiography as well as works of Polish, Russian and Ukrainian historians in the Russian Empire and in the Polish and Ukrainian diaspora.

