

## **Rebuilding Russia** *Reflections and Tentative Proposals by Aleksander Solzhenitsyn*

By Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

I am well-nigh half Ukrainian by birth, and I grew up to the sound of Ukrainian speech. And I spent the greater part of my front-line service in sorrowful Belorussia, where I became poignantly attached to its melancholy, sparse landscape and its gentle people.

Thus, I am addressing both nations not as an outsider but as one of their own.

And, in any case, our people came to be divided into three branches by the terrible calamity of the Mongol invasion, and by Polish colonization.<sup>9</sup> All the talk of a separate Ukrainian people existing since something like the ninth century and possessing its own non-Russian language is a recently invented falsehood. We all sprang from precious Kiev, from which "the Russian land took its beginning" (as Nestor puts it in his chronicle),<sup>10</sup> and from which we received the light of Christianity. The same princes ruled over all of us: Yaroslav the Wise apportioned Kiev, Novgorod, and the entire expanse stretching from Chernigov to Ryazan, Murom, and Beloozero among his sons; Vladimir Monomakh was simultaneously Prince of Kiev and Prince of Rostov and Suzdal;<sup>11</sup> the administration of the Church exhibited the same kind of unity. The Muscovite state was of course created by the same people who made up Kievan Rus. And the Ukrainians and Belorussians in Poland and Lithuania considered themselves Russian and resisted Polonization and conversion to Catholicism. The return of these lands to Russia was at the time universally perceived as an act of reunification.

It is indeed painful and humiliating to recall the directives issued during the reign of Alexander II (in 1863 and 1876), when the use of the Ukrainian language was banned, first in journalism and then in belles-lettres as well. But this prohibition did not remain in force for long, and it was an example of the unenlightened rigidity in questions of administrative and Church policy that prepared the ground for the collapse of the Russian state structure.

However, it is also true that the fussily socialistic Ukrainian Rada of 1917 was created by an agreement among politicians and was not elected by popular vote.<sup>12</sup> And when the Rada broke with the federation, declaring the Ukraine's secession from Russia, it did so without soliciting the opinion of the population at large.

I have had occasion to respond to emigre Ukrainian nationalists who keep trying to convince America that "communism is a myth; it is really the Russians who are seeking world domination, not the communists" (and, indeed, it is "the Russians" who are supposed to have seized China and Tibet, as is stated in a law passed by the U. S. Senate three decades ago, and still on the books).<sup>13</sup> Communism is the kind of myth of which both Russians and Ukrainians got a firsthand taste in the torture chambers of the Cheka from 1918 onward.

The kind of myth that confiscated even seed grain in the Volga region and brought twenty-nine drought-ridden Russian provinces to the murderous famine of 1921-22. The same myth that later thrust the Ukraine into the similarly pitiless famine of 1932-33. As common victims of the communist-imposed collectivization forced upon us all by whip and bullet, have we not been bonded by this common bloody suffering?

As late as 1848, Galicians in Austria-Hungary referred to their national council as the "Chief Russian Rada." But then in a severed Galicia, and with active Austrian encouragement, a distorted Ukrainian language was produced, unrelated to popular usage and chock-full of German and Polish words. This was followed by the attempt to force Carpatho-Russians away from their habit of using the Russian language, and by the temptations of radical Pan-Ukrainian separatism, which manifests itself among the leaders of today's emigration in bursts of farcical ignorance (such as the assertion that St. Vladimir "was a Ukrainian"<sup>14</sup> or reaches lunatic vehemence in statements such as: "Let communism live so long as the Muscovites perish."

How can we fail to share the pain and anguish over the mortal torments that befell the Ukraine in the Soviet period? But does that justify the ambition to lop the Ukraine off from a living organism (including those regions which have never been part of the traditional Ukraine: the "wild steppe" of the nomads-the later "New Russia" – as well as the Crimea, the Donbas area,<sup>15</sup> and the lands stretching east almost to the Caspian Sea)? If we are to take the "self-determination of peoples" seriously, then it follows that a nation must determine its fate for itself. It is a question that cannot be decided without a national plebiscite.

To separate off the Ukraine today would mean to cut across the lives of millions of individuals and families: the two populations are thoroughly intermingled; there are entire regions where Russians predominate; many individuals would be hard put to choose between the two nationalities; many others are of mixed origin, and there are plenty of mixed marriages (marriages which have indeed never been viewed as “mixed”). There is not even a hint of intolerance between Russians and Ukrainians on the level of the ordinary people.

Brothers! We have no need of this cruel partition. The very idea comes from the darkening of minds brought on by the communist years. Together we have borne the suffering of the Soviet period, together we have tumbled into this pit, and together, too, we shall find our way out.

An impressive roster of prominent names has been produced at the intersection of our two cultures over the last two centuries. As Mikhail Dragomanov <sup>16</sup> has phrased it, the cultures are “indivisible, yet unmixable.” An avenue must be opened – amicably and joyfully – for the free manifestation of Ukrainian and Belorussian cultures not only on their two territories but among the Great Russians as well. No forced Russification (but no forced Ukrainization either, as began in the late 1920s). There must be an untrammelled development of parallel cultures and school instruction in either language, according to the parents’ choice.

Of course, if the Ukrainian people should genuinely wish to separate, no one would dare to restrain them by force. But the area is very heterogeneous indeed, and only the local population can determine the fate of a particular locality, while every ethnic minority created by this process in a given district must count upon the same kind of forbearance toward itself. All the above holds fully for Belorussia as well, except that the passions of separatist extremism have never been stirred up in that land.

And finally let us bow our heads before the Ukraine and Belorussia in recognition of the Chernobyl disaster. It was brought about by the careerists and fools generated by the Soviet system, and we must help set things right to the extent that we are able to do so.

<sup>9</sup>The Mongols overran most of the principalities of Kievan Rus in the mid-thirteenth century. As Mongol control disintegrated in the westernmost of these areas, the lands now known as Ukraine and Belorussia fell under Lithuanian and then Polish control for three, and in some cases four, centuries.

<sup>10</sup>The earliest historical account of Kievan Rus is contained in the Primary Chronicle, compiled by the monk Nestor at the beginning of the twelfth century.

<sup>11</sup>Yaroslav the Wise and Vladimir Monomakh were outstanding rulers of Kievan Rus in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, respectively.

<sup>12</sup>The Ukrainian Central Rada [i.e., Council], formed in Kiev soon after the collapse of tsarist authority, was a coalition of groups seeking Ukrainian territorial autonomy.

<sup>13</sup>The reference is to Public Law 86-90, passed in 1959, which requires the President to proclaim a yearly “Captive Nations Week.” The preamble contains language equating communism with Russian imperialism.

<sup>14</sup>Vladimir, Prince of Kiev (956 -1015), was canonized for bringing Christianity to what was then called Rus. The term Ukraine began to be used in its present geographical meaning only several centuries later.

<sup>15</sup>“New Russia” is the former name of the territories north of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov which were acquired by Russia (mostly in the eighteenth century) in its wars with Turkey. The Crimean peninsula-historically part of “New Russia”- was transferred from the R.S.F.S.R. to the Ukrainian Republic in 1954 at the whim of Nikita Khrushchev. The Donbas industrial area has a predominantly Russian-speaking population.

<sup>16</sup>Dragomanov (Drahomanov), Mikhail Petrovich (1841-95) – Ukrainian historian and political theorist who championed autonomy for the Ukraine but believed this would be best achieved within the framework of a federative union with Russia. Dragomanov firmly opposed political extremism of any kind, including national chauvinism. Lived abroad after 1876.