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# Review Of "Children Of Rus': Right-Bank Ukraine And The Invention Of A Russian Nation" By F. Hillis

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**Children of Rus': Right-Bank Ukraine and the Invention of a Russian Nation.**

By Faith Hillis.

Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013. Pp. ix+329. \$55.00

In *Children of Rus'*, Faith Hillis explores the development of Russian nationalism as an ideological and political phenomenon in Right-Bank Ukraine in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a timely subject given the current tensions (spring 2014) between Russia and Ukraine in Crimea. Hillis traces the emergence of a Russian national project in territories that had historically been part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth until their integration into the Russian Empire at the end of the eighteenth century. Well written and chock full of insights into the politics of late Imperial Russia, *Children of Rus'* is a model of meticulous scholarship and perceptive analysis and should be essential reading for anyone interested in learning about the complexities of Russian and Ukrainian identities.

Hillis begins with an examination of the emergence of a "Little Russian" nationalist ideology that appeared first in the area east of the Dnieper River and then spread to the southwestern borderland (the territory from the west bank of the Dnieper River to the border of the Habsburg Empire populated by a mix of inhabitants who spoke Polish, Russian, Yiddish, and Ukrainian) after the region had become part of the Russian Empire under Catherine the Great. Orthodox clerics and Cossack leaders challenged the dominance of the Polish-Catholic gentry by positing that Orthodox believers in the area, as descendants of Rus' and its Orthodox faith, were the native inhabitants of the region and therefore the rightful owners of its land and resources. As Hillis notes, "By identifying the territory that they interchangeably called Little Russia and Ukraine as the birthplace of the Rus' faith, they also situated themselves at the center of a larger Orthodox world" and asserted that local culture and traditions were "authentic and essential manifestations of Rus' culture" (12).

At first Imperial officials paid little attention to the proponents of a Little Russian identity. But the Polish revolt of 1830–31 prompted St. Petersburg to recognize the political value of the Little Russian idea as a bulwark against Polish nationalism. As Little Russian activists settled in Kiev, found work in the state bureaucracy, and joined government commissions devoted to the study of the history and archaeology of the region, they claimed that the southwestern territories had been home to a flourishing East Slavic culture before Polish rule enabled Poles and Jews to exploit the descendants of Rus'. The Little Russian lobby did not challenge the integrity of the Russian Empire because it believed in the cultural unity of East Slavic Orthodox believers. Consequently, Imperial policy makers embraced the Little Russian idea as a way to undermine the position of non-East Slavs.

Not surprisingly, in the aftermath of the second Polish revolt in 1863, St. Petersburg redoubled its efforts to repress Polish nationalism and welcomed efforts by advocates of the Little Russian idea to challenge the perceived economic and political power of Poles and Jews in the southwest. Hillis writes, "Indeed, the Little Russian idea remained a centerpiece of official efforts to claim the southwestern borderlands for the empire. . . . Well into the twentieth century, influential figures in the St. Petersburg ministries and the Kiev governor-general's office would hail its potential to reinforce the unity of the empire and the East Slavic descendants of Rus'" (88). By the end of the nineteenth century the educated and cultural elite in the southwest had adopted the Little Russian idea, which by then had morphed into an ideology and political movement that advocated on behalf of a Russian nation that constituted the nucleus of the empire. Specifically, the Russian nationalist movement in Right-Bank Ukraine mobilized on behalf of Orthodox be-

lievers and sought to weaken if not eliminate the influence of non-Orthodox Poles and Jews. Eventually they helped form the Nationalist Party, the second largest party in the empire on the eve of World War I and the best-organized and most politically effective organization of late Imperial Russia. The persistence of activists, the dynamics of local politics and society, and the support of bureaucrats in St. Petersburg help to explain why a region where few of its inhabitants spoke Russian as their native language managed to become a bastion of Russian nationalism by 1914.

Hillis stresses that Little Russian identity and ideology were not identical to Ukrainian nationalism, though at times they coincided. Nor was it the same as Imperial Russian identity, though, again, at times they worked together to undermine those nationalist movements perceived to threaten the integrity of the empire. She argues that the Little Russian movement was far from monolithic: radical, liberal, and conservative factions existed, each advocating different resolutions to the problems they believed beset the Orthodox believers in the southwest border territories. By the outbreak of war in the summer of 1914 the movement had lost its coherence, largely because some advocates of the Little Russia idea had come to embrace Ukrainian separatism as a platform, while many other nationalist patriots had reached the conclusion that the idea threatened the unity of the empire. Moreover, tsarist officials now feared the challenges posed by any form of ethnoreligious Russian nationalism. Rather than contribute to the stability of the empire, Russian nationalist organizations threatened to unravel the tattered fabric of social and political stability.

Hillis traces how Little Russian activists were able to assume a leading role in southwestern politics after the turn of the twentieth century. Like elsewhere in the empire, mass politics, particularly on the local level, came of age in the years after the Revolution of 1905. But she notes that the civil society in late Imperial Russia included groups who were anything but civil. Virulent antisemitism was rife among the Russian nationalists examined by Hillis, and some nationalist activists did not shy away from attacking Jews. As Hillis notes, "Denouncing the very notion of civic equality as an existential threat to Rus' traditions, right-bank nationalists demanded a strong, interventionist, and illiberal state that would promote the welfare of some of its subjects and marginalize others" (16).

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**Open Letters: Russian Popular Culture and the Picture Postcard, 1880–1922.**

By *Alison Rowley*.

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013. Pp. xii+323. \$65.00.

This book is a welcome addition to the study of Russian visual culture. Russian publishers began to issue postcards in quantity in the 1890s several decades after their European colleagues. Postcards quickly gained prominence. The topics of these mini-views of the world concerned everything from political and religious leaders to celebrities, tourism, advertising, propaganda, movies, humor, art, and erotica. Producers used them to raise money for charity, to influence opinion, to commemorate something, or to make a profit. People bought them, used them, or saved them for many different reasons. Like phonograph records and sheet music they were national and transnational, imported and exported by citizens and foreigners alike. The complexity of the medium and its seemingly peripheral character may explain its partial neglect by European historians and even more so by those of Russia. This book is a welcome remedy for that neglect.