

Colloquy, Russia's War on Ukraine  
September 2024

The war in Ukraine is about peoples, nations, and empires.

Is Ukraine a nation? Are Ukrainians a distinct people, or just “Little Russians”? Is a “special military operation” run from Moscow imperialism of one people attempting to rule over another, or is it an effort to reunite the people of “the Russian world”, some of whom have been corrupted by foreign influence and money and ideology and propaganda to reject their heritage of unity.

By **people**, we mean a bunch of humans that see themselves as “us”, members of the same tribe. People-ness is subjective, although it is usually reinforced by a shared language and customs and, often, religion or ideology.

We generally think of “people-ness” as depending on prior communality of language or religion or customs. But it also works the other way: humans who live together develop common language and customs and beliefs. They also develop common economic habits and institutions. They assimilate. Americans are an example. In 1066, when an invading army of French-speaking Vikings conquered the Anglo-Saxon kingdom in Britain, there were no Englishmen. Normans ruled Saxons. Three hundred years later, *English* kings were fighting for dominion in France, and Geoffrey Chaucer was writing in a new, assimilated language, *English*.

A **state** is a political unit, a territory ruled by a single government. Few are culturally homogenous; many include several peoples. Most peoples live in more than one state, across borders or in a diaspora. Before recent times, your state, or realm, or empire was whatever turf the king or warlord could conquer, without much regard to who lived there.

**Nations** and **nationalism** are something more, and a product of modern times. *Nationalism* is the idea that each *people* deserves and must rule its own *state*. This seemingly clear and innocent idea is responsible for much of the awfulness in the world.

The people – “we the people” in the preamble to the US Constitution – are to pledge “our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor” to the cause of creating our own autonomous state. Subjects of this or that king become citizens, “children of the fatherland”, whose duty is to fight and die for “la patrie”. Patriotism is the highest virtue. Depending on whom

you ask, it overrides all other moral claims. This is historically new. Most historians place the origin of modern mass nationalism in the French Revolution.

So who, exactly, are “the people”. Along with modern nationalism comes the problem of the enemy within, the non-people inside the borders of “our” nation. Who is excluded, the “other”, is also subjective and changeable and subject to manipulation by power-seeking scoundrels and demagogues.

And, if the state is to be congruent with “the people”, where are its boundaries? Good luck sorting that out without endless violence. Ask anyone in Gaza. Or in Taiwan. Or in Donbas.

Finally, **empire**. An empire is a state which includes a core people and ruling elite and distinct subject peoples, generally on its periphery. Sometimes subject peoples are mixed in geographically, for example Jews in the Russian Empire or Greeks and Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. Often the imperial elite is multiethnic – many of the Ministers of the later Tsars were so-called Baltic Barons; others were Georgians and Armenians.

Was the Soviet Union an empire? It’s a really interesting case. Georgians or Latvians would say yes, for them it was. But Ukrainians? The “Dniepropetrovsk mafia”, Russian-speakers from Ukraine, ran the Soviet Union for much of its later life.

***National liberation movements*** are efforts of subject peoples to break away, for example the American war of independence. Is Ukraine today fighting a war of national liberation of a newly-conscious people? One could argue that.

Subjective national identity seeking liberation of self-determination can form very quickly. My favorite example is a colonial Englishman who bravely served king and country: Braddock’s soldiers were destroyed by the French and Indians in Western Pennsylvania; Washington led the retreat that saved some of the force. That was 1755. Twenty years later that same person became commander of the ragtag army seeking to overthrow the rule of his former king. What changed in so short a time? A feeling of American nationalism, of a people apart from the English, now seeking to establish their own state. Ukrainian nationalism is, I think, a similar case of rapid, pervasive growth of national identity.

Often, the leaders of national liberation are those most closely assimilated to the imperial elite. Gandhi was a certified British barrister. Frantz Fanon, the prophet of violent anticolonial people’s liberation in Algeria and Africa, was a French-trained psychiatrist. Or George Washington. Or Russian-speaking Volodymyr Zelensky, who was a TV celebrity in Moscow when Ukraine rebelled against its pro-Russian President on the Maidan in 2014.