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 **Stalinist Patriotism as Imperial Discourse: Reconciling the  
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# Stalinist Patriotism as Imperial Discourse: Reconciling the Ukrainian and Russian "Heroic Pasts," 1939-45\*

Serhy Yekelchyk

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On 7 November 1941, Stalin concluded his Revolution Days speech by appealing to the Soviet people to draw inspiration from the "brave example of our great ancestors, Aleksandr Nevskii, Dmitrii Donskoi, Kuz'ma Minin, Dmitrii Pozharskii, Aleksandr Suvorov, and Mikhail Kutuzov."<sup>1</sup> Notable for the absence of revolutionaries and Civil War icons, this list of Russian princes, defenders of the monarchy, and tsarist military leaders seems to have provided the multinational Soviet state a single heroic past with which to identify - the familiar Russian tsarist historical mythology. But, as Lowell Tillett demonstrated in his attentive reading of the then-available Russian-language publications, the state also promoted non-Russian martial traditions as long as they were subordinated to the dominant rhetoric of Russian patriotism within the ideological framework of the "friendship of peoples."<sup>2</sup> **[End Page 51]**

However, access to declassified archives and propaganda materials generated in a non-Russian republic provides a much more complicated picture of wartime Soviet patriotism. Ukrainian materials document the impressive growth of a distinct national mythology, which subsequently had to be reconciled with the Russian grand narrative within the framework of the "friendship of peoples," yet never lost its significance as the historic foundation of Soviet Ukrainian identity. But the archival findings also shed an entirely new light on the inner workings of Stalinist culture and nationality policy. The local bureaucrats and intellectuals who interpreted the vague yet powerful signals from Moscow emerge as major players shaping Stalinist historical imagination. It was their interaction with the Kremlin, rather than simply Moscow's totalizing designs, which produced the official line on non-Russian identities and national patrimonies. Moreover, the local ideologues and intelligentsia occupied the ambiguous position of mediator between the Kremlin and their non-Russian constituencies, and their survival and well-being depended on producing a socialist "national ideology" specific to their republic.<sup>3</sup> This social group's complicated relationship with the center, as well as the resulting cultural products, cannot be explained solely on the basis of familiar models of totalitarian controls or patron-client links. Insights from post-colonial theory are particularly helpful in making sense of the limits and possibilities of non-Russian patriotic culture under Stalinism.

This paper understands the Soviet experiment in constructing socialism in a multinational state as consisting of at least two stages with markedly different imagery and vocabularies. The original Bolshevik project laid claim to a kind of global universality based on class. Reconfigured by this core project, the essentially imperialist undertaking of keeping the nationalities of the Russian empire in a new state resulted in a program of nativization, endowing the toilers of various nationalities with presumably equal and full-fledged national institutions.<sup>4</sup> However, Stalin's turn to the "construction of socialism in one country" weakened the class ethos of Soviet ideology, and the emerging void was gradually filled by the default imagery of modern nations and nation-states.<sup>5</sup> **[End Page 52]**

The "Stalin Constitution" of 1936 announced that exploiting classes no longer existed in the USSR. In fact, the notion of "class" had long been losing its utility for the state as a classification tool, precisely because the Bolsheviks had recast this sociological category to define an individual's relationship to the state, as well as political rights and obligations.<sup>6</sup> But in a "workers' and peasants' state" populated exclusively, at least on paper, by workers and kolkhoz peasants, the category of "class" lost its taxonomic value. Nationality then became the only universal label for classifying - and ruling - the Soviet populace.<sup>7</sup> Not surprisingly, **[End Page 53]** nationalities ceased to be considered equal: those less important lost their

territorial and cultural privileges; the remaining major peoples could be ranked in a hierarchy headed by the "great Russian people"; and a new category of "enemy nations" became possible.<sup>8</sup> While in the 1920s the USSR...

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\* Various incarnations of this article have been presented at the AAASS annual convention in St. Louis in November 1999, the Maryland Workshop on New Approaches to Russian and Soviet History in March 2000, and the Midwest Russian History Workshop in Chicago in October 2000. My sincere thanks go to all those who commented on these drafts, especially to two anonymous reviewers for *Kritika* and the journal's editors. This article uses the Ukrainian spelling of all Ukrainian personal names, including those originally appearing in the Russian spelling in Russian documents. Similarly, all the Ukrainian place names are rendered in their Ukrainian form, with the exception of Kiev and the Dniester that are standard English forms. This paper uses the following abbreviations for the names of the Russian and Ukrainian archives: RGASPI (Rosiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv istoriï i politicheskoi istorii), RGALI (Rosiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva), TsDAHO (Tsentralnyi derzhavnyi arkhiv hromadrykh ob'stadok Ukrainy), TsDAVOV (Tsentralnyi derzhavnyi arkhiv vyshchykh orhaniv vlady i derzhavnogo upravlinnia Ukrainy), TsDAMLN (Tsentralnyi derzhavnyi arkhiv-muzei literatury i mystetstva Ukrainy), and NAIU (Naukovyi arkhiv Instytutu istorii Ukrainy Natsionalnoi Akademii nauk Ukrainy).

<sup>1</sup> *Pravda*, 8 November 1941, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Lowell Tillet, *The Great Friendship: Soviet Historians on the Non-Russian Nationalities* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), 60–70. Still, his exclusive reliance on the Russian press sometimes overshadows Tillet's sophisticated argument about the "friendship" framework. At one point in his analysis of the war years, he concludes, "[w]hatever the fine points of distinction may have been between the new Soviet patriotism and old Russian nationalism, they were soon lost sight of in the great emergency" (61).

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