Contested identities: competing articulations of the national heritage of pioneer settlers in Misiones, Argentina

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Abstract: From the early 1890s until 1914, thousands of Ukrainians migrated to North America seeking free land on the agricultural frontier of western Canada or work in the mines and factories of the United States. At the same time a smaller number, about 50,000, migrated to Brazil and some 10,000 immigrated into Argentina where they settled mostly in the northern Territory of Misiones. Intermixed and often confused with Poles, Ukrainian settlers in Misiones established a distinctively Ukrainian cultural landscape. This paper outlines the creation of this landscape, describes its various components and reviews and explains the significance of recent efforts to establish a distinct national identity for Argentineans of Ukrainian origin in Misiones. It argues that the commemoration of the centenary of Ukrainian settlement in the territory by the placement of monuments in public places has meaning at different levels. Monuments marking the Ukrainian settlement of Misiones both celebrate the pioneer past and affirm national origin of the pioneers. Physically they mark territory while conceptually they delineate Ukrainian national consciousness.

Introduction

The close of the nineteenth century marked the beginning of one of the world’s great migrations as hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian peasants from the Austrian Crown Lands of eastern Galicia and Bukovyna left their homeland and sought new lives and opportunities in the Americas. Mixed with thousands of other Slavs — Russians, Belarusians, Poles, Czechs, and Slovaks — they headed to the mines and factories of the United States’ eastern seaboard and to the agricultural frontiers of Canada, Brazil and
Argentina. Although most Ukrainians who sought agricultural land went to western Canada or Brazil, a significant number, some several thousand, settled in Argentina, particularly in the frontier zone of Misiones, before the outbreak of war in Europe halted emigration in 1914.

The Ukrainian experience in Misiones paralleled that of Ukrainian agricultural communities established in Canada and Brazil. Each was characterized by three major waves of immigration, and in each case the Ukrainian community had to overcome economic adversity, assimilative pressures, and had to strive to assert its national identity within the cultural mix of immigrant society. This paper examines the process whereby the Ukrainian community in Argentina’s Misiones province has attempted to establish its identity and position itself within the immigration mythology and settlement history of the area. It also considers how it has sought to mark its presence in the cultural landscape through employment of both religious and secular iconography.

The Ukrainians

The nineteenth century was the era of European nationalism but for the people who spoke the Ukrainian language a sense of national identity was only beginning to emerge at the time of their first transatlantic migration. In the past Kievan Rus had been one of Europe richest civilizations but the invasions by the Huns, Tatars and Turks beginning in the 13th century had destroyed the kingdom and led to the subjugation of its people and fragmentation of its territory. At the end of the nineteenth century the greater part of Ukraine—central and eastern Ukraine—lay under Russian Czarist control, while the westernmost fringe of Ukrainian ethnographic territory constituted the Austrian Crown Lands of Galicia and Bukovyna and the Hungarian administered region of Carpathian-Rus (Transcarpathia).

In the early 1890s most Ukrainian peasants identified with their family, kin group and village rather than with any larger national concept. The term Ukrainian was being promoted by the
nationalistic intelligentsia but the appellation *malorosy* [Little Russians] was more popularly used. Ukrainians in the Austrian territories were Austrian by nationality though ethnically Ukrainian. Within the group they would distinguish themselves ethnographically as *lemky, boiky, or hutsuly* but would also identify themselves regionally as *halychyny or bukovyntsy* — Galicians and Bukovynians. A further geographical term, Ruthenian, a Latinized variation of *Rusin*, was also used to describe all Ukrainians in the Austrian territory of western Ukraine (Simpson 1951).

Although a sense of national identity was only beginning to emerge among the Ukrainian peasantry in the early 1890s there was no doubt in the minds of the people as to their religious affiliation. In Bukovyna the Ukrainian population was almost entirely Greek Orthodox. In Galicia, in contrast the Ukrainian population belonged almost entirely to the Greek Catholic or Uniate Church. This church had been established in 1596 at the Church Union of Berestia with the hope of weaning the Ukrainian peasantry away from Orthodoxy and leading them in to the Polish dominated Roman Catholic church in Galicia. The Uniate Church acknowledged the Pope in Rome as its spiritual leader but maintained the Orthodox tradition of a secular married clergy and the Slavonic rite. The transition towards Catholicism became arrested and by the middle of the nineteenth century the Uniate church became the national church of Ukrainians in Galicia, defending their national identity and a focus for emerging nationalist feelings among the population.

Though Eastern Galicia was predominantly Ukrainian and Ukrainian-Catholic, Bukovyna was Greek Orthodox, while Western Galicia was Polish and Roman Catholic. Religious and linguistic boundaries were often ill-defined. Konfessions-natioalität — a confessional - nationalism (Turczynski 1975, 415), prevailed as the root of self-identity among the vast majority of Ukrainian peasants who emigrated from western Ukraine before 1914. Language alone was not a sufficiently restrictive determiner of nationality in a region of mixed population which had for long been subjected to campaigns of Polonization when under Polish administration. This confusion about ethnic identity was exacerbated because almost all Ukrainians who emigrated to the
New World before 1914 were Austrian citizens and carried Austrian passports. Immigration officials in Argentina and, for that matter, immigration officials elsewhere in the Americas, recorded Ukrainian arrivals by generic appellations — as Russians, Austrians or Poles, rather than by their correct ethnic designation as Ukrainians. After 1918 the situation became further confused as the former Austrian Galicia became part of the newly created Poland and its Ukrainian population, formerly Austrian by nationality, became Polish nationals.

Ukrainian Settlement in Argentina

Although a number of small groups and individual Ukrainians immigrated into Argentina as early as the 1880s it was not until 1897 that significant numbers of Ukrainians entered the country. Those who did not remain in the Buenos Aires region settled mostly in the Mendoza area or in the northern Territory of Misiones (Figure 1). In that year a mixed Ukrainian-Polish contingent of 29 people in 14 families (8 Ukrainian and 4 Polish, one mixed Italian-Ukrainian, and one of undetermined origin, but probably Ukrainian), established a farming colony near to the site of the old Jesuit mission of Apostoles (Snihur 113-115). The peak years of Ukrainian immigration were 1896-1914. It is impossible to extrapolate hard data from the available statistics on Russian and Austrian immigration but it is believed that as many as 15,000 Ukrainians may have arrived in Argentina during that period, though it is unclear how many remained in the country. The years 1896-1902 were the most important for immigrants from Austria, especially Galicia, whereas the period 1905-14 was the most important for Ukrainians from the Russian Empire. By 1914 the Ukrainian community in Argentina may have reached 15,500 with 7,500 in Misiones, 4,000 in Buenos Aires and another 4,000 in Mendoza and other regions (Wlodek 1923, 368; Strelko 1975, 94-95). Ukrainian settlement was frequently associated with Polish settlement. By 1914 the National Territory of Misiones emerged as the centre of Ukrainian population and institutional life. Some 7,536 in 905 families were enumerated there in 1913-14 and were
distributed as follows: 400 families in Apostoles; 225 families in Azara and Tres Capones; 200 families in Bonpland; and 40 families each in San Jose and Cerro Cora (Karmansky 1923, 168). Often Ukrainian and Polish families, especially those who came from Galicia, were intermixed and settled in close proximity.

The town of Apostoles became the centre of settlement by Ukrainians, most of whom, if not all, came from Galicia and were Ukrainian-Catholic by faith. Some distance away in the Obera area, small colonies of settlers from Volyn were established in places such as Los Helechos in the 1920s and 1930s, but remained somewhat disconnected from the Ukrainian-Catholic mainstream by their physical isolation and their Orthodox and Evangelical religious beliefs. They were among the 80,000 Ukrainians immigrated into Argentina in 1920-1939, of whom about 70,000 remained. The vast majority of these came from Galicia and Volyn, then controlled by Poland, and hence carried Polish passports. This
inter-war immigration was widely distributed across the country though Buenos Aires was the favoured province of settlement with Misiones and Chaco two alternative primary centres. There is no hard data on the distribution of Ukrainians in Argentina by 1939 but one estimate which suggests 120,000 immigrant and Argentine-born Ukrainians by the late 1930s has 25,000 Ukrainians in Misiones, about 55,000 in and around Buenos Aires, some 6,000 each in Rosario and in Chaco and sizable communities in Mendoza, Santiago del Estero, Cordoba, Rio Negro, and Chubut (Kalendar Svitlo 1939, 41-42).

There was a third phase of Ukrainian immigration into Argentina after the end of the Second World War. From 1946-1950 approximately 6,000 Ukrainians arrived, although it is thought that up to two thirds of these may have re-emigrated. Most of these immigrants who remained in Argentina settled in Buenos Aires and environs (Vasylyk 1972, 32). Since the independence of Ukraine in 1991 there has been a trickle of Ukrainian immigration to Argentina. Again, most of these new immigrants have settled in Buenos Aires and environs though some have moved in to other areas where Ukrainian community life is present (Vasylyk 1999; Jachno 1999; Kruk 1999).

Contested Identities and the Commemoration of the Past

Societies lay claim to the past just as they lay claim to the present. In the latter case they may express their sense of identity through political claims on territory. Perhaps the most emotive way to lay claim to territory is by the simple act of naming places. Control of toponomy may not grant political control of territory but it accords a certain status to the group which bestowed the name, if nothing else, affording it a place in the history of the landscape. More ephemeral but no less emotive is the parade (Visser 1996). Its significance as an overt vehicle to “claim” territory or to affirm past territorial rights as has occurred with sectarian marches through contested areas has been well documented by geographers (Goheen 1993) Often the process is more subtle though no less significant. Institutional buildings which overtly express national identity; secular and religious memorials and buildings; toponyms; the
völkische in secular architecture; and the secular landscape can all serve to affirm a society’s claim on territory and to root its place in the past. In many cases, particularly with architecture, these elements affect the public’s perceptions at a subliminal level. This is not to deny the force of their impact which may be extremely powerful but the act of creating or dedicating a monument, like the holding of a sectarian march, is seen as a more immediate and political act, which is why the dedication of created monuments, crosses, plinths and the like, is often wrapped in religious and military pageantry so as to legitimize the object and sanctify the events which it commemorates. Parades reify space but monuments canonize the past and claim the future:

A monument can . . . be a work of art or a public facility; it can even give pleasure. But those are secondary characteristics. A monument can be nothing more than a rough stone, a fragment of a ruined wall as at Jerusalem, a tree or a rough cross. Its sanctity is not a matter of beauty or of use or of age; it is venerated not as a work of art or as an antique, but as an echo from the remote past suddenly become present and actual. (Jackson 1980, 91)

The critical attribute of the monument is the power to remind, to recall something specific and, perhaps more importantly, to suggest a way of thinking and a way of acting in the present. Monuments are a vital element in the construction of landscapes of power (Osborne 1998).

**Identity and Landscape in Misiones**

Long before the arrival of the Slavic settlers in Latin America, Misiones was a European colonial frontier region first penetrated by Jesuit missionaries whose missions gave the province its name. Most places were named by Spanish-speaking adherents and servants of the Roman Catholic Church well before the arrival of the Ukrainians and Poles. Consequently, most places were named
for Saints (San Isidro), after landscape features (Tres Capones), or Argentine figures (San Martine), with some Guarani names surviving from colonial times (Iguasu). Place names were rarely bestowed by Ukrainian or Polish settlers since names generally already existed for most sites. The naming of streets or the erection of monuments was a more common practice: hence in centres where Ukrainians have a presence -- whether in Misiones or in the industrial suburbs of Buenos Aires -- a *Calle Ucrania* (Ukraine Street) can often be found.

Religion continues to play a central role in Misiones’ Ukrainian society. The Ukrainian churches have a dual function as guardians of both spiritual welfare and national identity. Often the most imposing buildings in a settlement, their physical appearance symbolizes the Ukrainian presence through incorporation of styles and architectural features associated with Ukrainian national identity (Figure 2). Although much of the architectural symbolism found in Ukrainian sacred architecture is spiritual in origin much of it either has or may be given a secular nationalistic interpretation.

**Figure 2:** The Russian Orthodox Church at Tres Capones, Misiones, serves a Ukrainian congregation and the church building itself constitutes an emblem of Ukrainian identity within the district. (Photo: J. Lehr)
Architecturally at least, secular and religious motifs become intertwined. As an example, the *tryzub* or trident, which is the Ukrainian national symbol, sometimes appears on grave headstones and in mausoleum designs. This symbol also recalls the three banias or domes that adorn many Ukrainian churches, which in a religious sense represent the Holy Trinity. In the Russian Orthodox cemetery at Tres Capones, for example, many of the mausoleums have their facade resembling the tryzub (Figure 3). In all Orthodox cemeteries the cross of St Andrew is ubiquitous and imparts a distinctive appearance to the landscape.

Although linguistically related, Polish and Ukrainian are quite separate languages. Polish is written in the Latin script — a legacy of the dominance of Roman Catholicism in Poland— while Ukrainian uses the Cyrillic alphabet — a legacy of the influence of the Greek Church in Byzantium.

Use of Ukrainian inscriptions, indecipherable to virtually all outsiders, carries more than the written message. It proclaims identity, separates and distances from other groups which the host society might otherwise regard as cultural affiliates (Figure 4). The Ukrainian Catholic, Russian and Ukrainian Orthodox churches, their cemeteries and associated religious institutions thus came to serve as visible reminders of the distinct identity of the groups which founded them and continue to support them.

Apart from religious buildings and sacred sites there is a secular cultural landscape associated with areas settled by Ukrainians. However, this landscape is becoming eroded as modernity eliminates...
Prefabrication and employment of materials manufactured outside the region impart a modern look to many chacras or homesteads, disguising or eliminating any obvious ethnic character. Despite this, it is still possible to identify chacras developed by Ukrainian pioneers even though they may now be owned by farmers of non-Ukrainian background. House styles, the design of some ancillary farm buildings and the presence of a pich (the distinctive Ukrainian outdoor oven) are clear indicators of Ukrainian origins (Figure 5).

The centenary of the first Slavic settlement in Misiones occurred in 1997 and was accompanied by a rash of monument unveilings, dedications, and associated ceremonies and celebrations. Although the Ukrainians in Misiones had constituted the majority in many areas of settlement they found themselves cast in the role of just one of the many groups which had settled in the area. The Poles, generally outnumbered by Ukrainians, received equal billing partly because of the Argentinean practice of labelling all Slavic
immigrants as *polacos*, a term which eventually became applied to any fair-haired blue-eyed European in the region (Balanda 1999). This situation was exacerbated by the fact that during the inter-war immigration all Ukrainian immigrants from Galicia were Polish nationals since Galicia was under Polish control and they travelled under Polish passports. To most Argentineans the niceties of Slavic ethnic nomenclature were either mysterious or of little concern.

The distinctive Ukrainian and Polish farm wagon, some of which had been brought in “knocked down” form to Argentina by Ukrainian immigrants during the first wave of settlement became universally described, outside of the Ukrainian community, as a *carro polaco* — literally “a Polish wagon.” Today, Ukrainian community leaders avoid this designation, preferring the simple term *carro* though *carro ucraino* would be a better designation. This type of wagon proved to be well suited to the hilly topography of southern Misiones and the design was adopted by other non-Slavic immigrants (Berecke 1999). Universally used throughout southern Misiones until the onset of mechanisation in the mid-1970s, the carro polaco is still used on the chacras in the more remote areas and even in the more prosperous areas, where mechanization came earlier, many stand

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**Figure 5: Traditional style Ukrainian outdoor oven (pich) survives in a Ukrainian pioneer’s chacra now owned by an Italian farmer.**

(Photo: J. Lehr)
To the Ukrainian community the carro polaco has become something of a secular icon of identity. In the town of Apostoles a carro polaco has been used as the centrepiece of a monument commemorating the centenary of the first European settlement of the area in 1897 (Figure 7). Adjacent memorials of recent and earlier commemorations, placed on a “wall of the immigrants,” demonstrate the struggle by the Poles and Ukrainians to assert their place in the history of the region as numerous plaques dedicated by various Ukrainian organizations and institutions at various times in the past have been duplicated by Polish agencies.

The quest to establish an identity separate from the Poles has led the Ukrainian communities in Misiones not only to erect their own memorials but to commemorate their own national heroes through public monuments placed in public places; in public parks and places, on streets and boulevards. The Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko, always an evocative figure for the Ukrainian national movement, embodies Ukrainian aspirations for an identity separate
from Russians and Poles, the two peoples who have historically attempted to absorb the Ukrainians and suppress Ukrainian desires for their own national territory. Today, in Misiones, there is scarcely a community of any substance which has a Ukrainian population sufficiently large to organize itself that does not have a statue of Shevchenko prominently placed in a public place. There are three such monuments in Argentina: one in the Federal Capital, Buenos Aires, one in Apostoles, Misiones, and another in the town of Obera, Misiones. It is possible that Argentina has more monuments to Shevchenko than any other non-Spanish-speaking poet in a public square. With the current attainment of the independence of Ukraine it is highly likely that such projects will no longer be undertaken, but, as the evidence suggests, the contest over the national origins of the Slavic settlers in Misiones continues. A Ukrainian consulate has been opened in Apostoles and both Poland and Russia likewise have honorary consuls in Misiones (Kruk 1990).
Conclusion

Territoriality has been identified as a basic human trait, one which is intrinsically linked to concepts of self identity, expressed at the national, regional, local or individual level. In Misiones, ethnic territoriality is expressed through the iconography of the landscape, but what makes the situation in Misiones unusual is not that the iconography is contested but that identity attached to that iconography is disputed. The struggle is not so much over what is represented but who controls the meaning attached to the representation. What is at stake in the struggle for control over the objects which constitute the iconography of immigration history in Misiones, the manner of their exhibition, and the terminology associated with them, is the articulation of identity. As Ivan Karp (1991, 15) has pointed out, when cultural ‘others’ are implicated, exhibitions or monuments tell us who we are and, perhaps more significantly, who we are not. Exhibition of cultural icons in the landscape present images of self and of ‘other,’ or, in the symbolic landscapes of parts of rural Misiones, self-images of the Ukrainians and Poles. Few members of the Ukrainian community are aware of, or attach much significance to, the cultural landscape of Ukrainian settled areas. The symbols of the sacred landscape speak primarily to the group which created them but the conscious placement of memorials in public places speaks to the wider community. It also speaks volumes about the self awareness and social positioning of the immigrant communities, their visions of the past, and their view of their path towards the future.

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