

# Intellectual and Political Contexts of the Theory of *Ethnos* in the Russian Empire/Soviet Union

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POUR CITER CET ARTICLE Alymov, Sergei, 2019. "Intellectual and Political Contexts of the Theory of Ethnos in the Russian Empire/Soviet Union", in Bérose - Encyclopédie internationale des histoires de l'anthropologie, Paris. URL Bérose : article1610.html

#### BEROSE Publisher: ISSN 2648-2770

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Visited on 20 April 2024 at 10:06

This article seeks to reconstruct the intellectual and political context of the first formulations of *ethnos* (JTHOC) as a subject matter of ethnography in the Russian Empire at the turn of the 20th century [1]. It makes an argument that these definitions were a product of a group of like-minded scholars, preoccupied with establishing ethnography and anthropology in Russian universities and, besides, acting as political activists at the time of the Russia's Great Revolution and the Civil War (details see in: Anderson et al, 2019).

The intellectual tradition that produced *ethnos* theory was formed around such institutions as the Department of Geography and Ethnography of Saint Petersburg University, the Russian Anthropological Society of Saint Petersburg University, the Russian Museum, and the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera, or MAE) of the Academy of Sciences. The main features that characterized their thinking were:

1) a training in natural sciences and to an extent a shared positivistic idea of biosocial laws that govern society as a "natural" phenomenon;

2) an interest or training in physical (biological) anthropology;

3) a connection to the discipline of geography and sometimes geographical determinism;

4) borrowings from contemporary French and German anthropology;



5) a vision of anthropology as an umbrella natural science of "man" that stemmed mainly from the French tradition of *anthropologie*. Ethnography was seen as one of its subdisciplines.

The idea of *ethnos* as a subject matter of ethnography as a discipline was suggested for the first time, in Russia, by the ethnographer and museum curator Nikolai Mikhailovich Mogilianskii (1871-1933) in his article "Ethnography and its Tasks" [2] (1908). In 1916 Mogilianskii published an essay "On the Subject Matter and Tasks of Ethnography" [3] with the following definition of *ethnos*:

The  $\xi\theta vo \zeta$  [*ethnos*] concept -- is a complex idea. It is a group of individuals united together as a single whole by several general characteristics. [These are:] common physical (anthropological) characteristics; a common historical fate, and finally a common language. These are the foundations upon which, in turn, [an *ethnos*] can build a common worldview [and] folk-psychology - in short, an entire spiritual culture (Mogilianskii 1916: 11).

After 1916, the five core elements of Mogilianskii's definition (a single collective identity; a physical foundation; a common language; a common set of traditions or destiny; and a common worldview) would appear in successive descriptions of Russian and Eurasian *ethnos* theory for the next 100 years. A full-fledged "theory of *ethnos*" was developed by the Russian émigré ethnographer Sergei Shirokogoroff who came from the same intellectual milieu of Saint-Petersburg academics (Anderson 2019; Arzyutov 2019). In the first book-length monograph on the topic, he included many of the same attributes:

[An] *ethnos* is a group of people, speaking a common language who recognize their common origin, and who display a coherent set [kompleks] of habits [obychai], lifestyle [uklad zhizni], and a set of traditions that they protect and worship. [They further] distinguish these [qualities] from those of other groups. This, in fact, is the ethnic unit – the object of scientific ethnography. (Shirokogorov 1923: 13)

There was one characteristic that Mogilianskii shared with his older friend and teacher Fëdor Kondratievich Volkov [Khfider Vovk [4]]: their Little Russian/Ukrainian origins and active involvement in the Ukrainian national movement and politics. The fact that this program was conceived in ethnic-national terms made these anthropologists particularly mindful of ethnic divisions while their scientific anthropological outlook contributed to the way they naturalized these differences. The appearance of *"ethnos* thinking" should be considered not as an invention of pure scientists, but in the political context of the turbulent last years of the Russian Empire, replete with national parties and movements at the age of collapsing empires and rising nation-states.

# **Key Characters**

Nikolai Mogilianskii was born in 1871 in Chernigov in Malorossia [Little Russia]. In 1889 he entered the natural sciences division of the Saint-Petersburg University where he listened,



among others, to the lectures of the anthropologist and geographer Eduard Petri and the anatomist Petr Lesgaft. In 1894 he went abroad to continue his education in Paris. During his stay there he studied anthropology at l'École d'Anthropologie under Paul Broca's disciple Léonce Manouvrier, Gabriel de Mortillet, Charles Letourneau and others. In Paris he became close friends with Fedor Volkov who also influenced him as a more experienced anthropologist and compatriot. Upon returning to Saint-Petersburg Mogilianskii became a professional anthropologist and ethnographer. He worked in the Emperor Alexander III's Russian Museum until 1918. He also lectured in anthropology and geography in several educational institutions. After the Bolshevik revolution Mogilianskii moved to Kiev where he held high posts in the government of independent Ukraine under getman [5] (a military commander in Eastern and Central Europe) Pavlo Skoropadskii. In 1920 he immigrated to Paris. In 1923 he moved to Prague where he resumed his teaching and research. Mogilianskii died in Prague in 1933.

Anthropologist, archaeologist and ethnographer Fedor Kondratievich Volkov (1847-1918), or Vovk, was educated at the departments of natural sciences of the faculty of physics and mathematics at the universities of Odessa and Kiev. As a result of increasing persecutions of the Ukrainian movement, in which he took an active part, Volkov left the Russian Empire. In 1887, after a peripatetic period involving many cities and countries of residence, he finally settled in Paris, where he attended lectures of leading French anthropologists, including Manouvrier, Topinard, and others, and was on the editorial board of the journal *L'Anthropologie*. In 1905 he received a master's degree in natural sciences for his dissertation, *Skeletal Variations of Feet among the Primates and Races of Man*, under the supervision of Ernest-Théodore Hamy. After the 1905 Revolution Volkov returned to Russia, and in 1907 was appointed as curator at the Russian Museum and started teaching at Saint Petersburg University. He died in 1918 on his way from Saint Petersburg to Kiev. In March 1918, several months before his death, he was elected the head of the department of geography and ethnography at Kiev University (Franko 2000).

# Anthropology in Saint-Petersburg before Volkov

A paradigm which saw ethnography as a sub-discipline of the natural science of man was predicated upon its institutional position in the university curriculum. The chair in geography and ethnography was opened at the Saint Petersburg University in 1887 at the faculty of physics and mathematics, division of natural sciences. The first professor was a Baltic German, Eduard Petri (1854-1899). Petri was sceptical about dividing the human race into neat categories based only on physical characteristics. The generalized "types" of European, African, and Mongol man he described in his textbook had both physical and psychological characteristics. Arguing against Friedrich Müller's vision of nationalities as differing only in language and ways of life, he claimed that nations were basically smaller subdivisions of races that could be grouped together on the basis of all the "anthropological data" about them (Petri 1890: 107). Thus the paradigm of seeing ethnic differences in biological terms while at the same time rejecting the epistemological validity of the idea of



race was in place in Petri's writings.

Petri's immediate successor was the geographer and scientific journalist Dmitrii Andreevich Koropchevskii (1842-1903). Friedrich Ratzel exercised a formative influence on Koropchevskii's thinking. Apart from editing Ratzel's Russian translations he published *The Introduction to Political Geography* which popularized Ratzel's *Anthropogeography* and outlined "the newest geographical ideas about the significance of surrounding nature for the physical, mental and social development of humankind" (Koropchevskii, 1901: vii). In this work he came quite close to evaluating the laws governing correlations between the density of population, territory, and "the level of culture" obtained by certain peoples or states. Their viability, in his opinion, depended on their ability to expand, increase in population, and encourage the population's activity. Koropchevskii began his study with a critique of the concept of race, which he, following French anthropologists Topinard and Joseph Deniker, saw as an abstract and subjective collection of physical characteristics. Instead, he credited only peoples and ethnic groups with real existence. These, in his view, constituted the proper object for ethnology:

Theoretically, the main object of the ethnologist's research is the ethnogenetic (народообразовательный процесс) [...] Practically the task of the ethnologist boils down to defining to which stage of the ethnogenetic process one or another ethnic group can be assigned. (Koropchevskii 1905: 27)

Ethnic groups or types, Koropchevskii argued, should be studied in connection with the geographical milieu that gave birth to them. He saw the ethnogenetic processes in naturalistic terms as defined by Ratzel and the German naturalist Moritz Wagner, who discovered the main evolutionary mechanisms in the migration and isolation of species. Thus, Koropchevskii followed Petri's line of argument in preferring ethnic terms to racial ones and, at the same time, introduced Ratzel's concept of geographic determinism and the term "ethnogenesis", which would have a long career in twentieth-century Russian-Soviet science. (More on physical anthropology in pre-revolutionary Russia see: Mogilner 2013).

## The Ukrainian national movement and the definition of nationality

The preeminent Ukrainian historian Mikhailo S. Hrushevs'kii [Mikhail S. Grushevskii] (1866-1934) called Ukrainian ethnography "a martial science" that dominated Ukrainian studies throughout the nineteenth century. For the Ukrainian public, the richness of folklore constituted "one of the major signs attesting to the value of the Ukrainian element and its rights to development and national culture" (Grushevskii 1914: 15). The first semi-organized nationalist movement with clear political aims - Cyril and Methodius Brotherhood (1845-1847) - appeared on the eve of the European "spring of nations" and was harshly put down by the Tsarist government. Its leader, the historian and ethnographer Nikolai Kostomarov (1817-1885), adhered to the Romantic idea of national soul or primordial "spiritual essence" to explain the differences between Great and Little Russians.



In the 1880-90s these arguments were to be supported by more "solid" and "objective" evidence with the advent of positive science in the lectures by Kiev-based historian Volodimir Antonovich [Włodzimierz Antonowicz] [6] (1834-1908). The synopsis of his lectures on anthropology and ethnography was published in Lvov in 1888 under the title "Three National Types of Peoples" [7] which referred to the "types" of the Little Russians, Great Russians, and the Poles. In these lectures he defined nationality as the sum of the characteristics that differentiate one group of people from another. These characteristics are of two kinds: some are given by nature and are primordial; others are "developed on the basis of the first ones" and are shaped by a nation's history and culture.

The most important primordial characteristics, according to Antonovich, were to be found in the data of physical anthropology, particularly measurements of the skull. The craniological data that he provided attested to significant differences in the shapes and other indicators of the skulls and faces of Great Russians, Ukrainians and Poles. As to the peoples' characters in Antonovich's interpretation, they exhibited differences similar to those described by Kostomarov; but above all, these differences had a natural basis in what he called the "functioning of the nervous system of a people" whereby the nervous system of a Muscovite was of a phlegmatic type, whereas the Poles were sanguine, and the Ukrainians-Russians were melancholic (Antonovich 1995: 90-100).

# Fedor Volkov and the Politics of Ukrainian Identity

In the early period of his life Volkov was influenced by Antonovich, Chubinskii and Kostomarov as well as by contemporary socialist and populist (pro-peasant) theories. When he returned to the Russian Empire during the First Russian Revolution in 1905-7 he encountered a thriving Ukrainian community in Saint Petersburg. After the declaration of civil liberties and the convening of the first parliament (Duma) (1906), Ukrainian nationalists could legally engage in public politics. They published journals, had their representatives in the First State Duma and vividly discussed the question of national determination and autonomy. In 1906 the newspaper Ukrainskii vestnik (Ukrainian Herald) published Volkov's article "Ukrainians from the Anthropological Point of View". Discussing various "ethnic indicators", he claimed that "the successes of somatic anthropology [...] urged [scholars] to look for other, more lasting ones, which happen to be purely physical indicators like the colour of bones, hair and eyes, proportions and forms of various parts of the body and, predominantly, its skeleton' (Volkov 1906: 418). Volkov argued that they all showed a similar pattern of geographic variation along a northeastern-southwestern axis from a comparatively short, blond, long-headed type to the brachycephalic population of tall stature, dark hair and eyes and a straight and narrow nose that he believed to be "the main Ukrainian type".

The final, classic version of Volkov's studies of Ukraine were published in the second volume of a rich and well-illustrated edition, *The Ukrainian People in its Past and Present* [8], published in Saint Petersburg by Maksim A. Slavinskii (1868-1945), the same journalist who edited *Ukrainskii vestnik*. Their conclusions were the following:



1) The Ukrainian people on the entire territory is distinguished by a range of common ethnographic characteristics, which leaves no doubt that it constitutes an ethnic unity that definitely stands out among other Slavic peoples.

2) The Ukrainian people preserved in its everyday way of life a considerable number of vestiges from the past, proving that it had not undergone very deep ethnic influences from outside, and that in spite of an eventful history it developed its ethnographic characteristics consistently and quite uniformly.

3) As all other peoples, it was exposed to a certain extent to external ethnographic influences and assimilated some alien forms, but not to a degree that could alter its main ethnographic characteristics and deny its common Slavic type.

4) In particulars of its ethnographic way of life the Ukrainian people manifests the closest similarity with its Western neighbours – Southern Slavs, such as Bulgarians and Serbs, as well as Romanians, who remain a quite Slavic people ethnographically. Poland was the main conduit of cultural diffusion from the European West.

5) In their most ancient form, the ethnographic characteristics of Belarusians and Great Russians are close if not identical to those of the Ukrainians (Volkov 1916b: 647).

## The concept of ethnos and the teaching of anthropology

Another important aspect that helps understand the formation and significance of the concept of *ethnos* was the position of ethnography and anthropology in the university. The beginning of the First World War stimulated the authorities to look for an alliance with scientists who, from their side, were also willing to cooperate in the war effort. In 1915, under the newly appointed liberal minister of popular enlightenment Pavel Ignatiev, a draft of a new University Charter was sent to university councils for discussion. This and other bureaucratic procedures continued until the Revolution, and the charter was never approved. Nevertheless, it triggered a round of debates about the academic teaching of anthropology/ethnography and its status as a natural or human science. In fact, Mogilianskii's article "On the Subject Matter and Tasks of Ethnography" – which contained a definition of *ethnos* – was his motion in this debate.

Mogilianskii was emphatic about the distinction between the history of culture that had as its subject matter human culture in general, and ethnography that dealt with *ethnos* and its specific features. He suggested establishing two departments – anthropology and ethnography – at the faculty of natural sciences, and a department of history of culture at the faculty of history and philology. Mogilianskii followed the opinion of Volkov who suggested the establishment of an Anthropological institute with departments of physical anthropology, prehistoric anthropology, and ethnography. The model for this institute was the École d'Anthropologie in Paris, the only place where, according to Volkov, anthropological sciences were taught "in their entirety" (Volkov 1915: 102). Both Volkov and



Mogilianskii adhered to the late 19th century French vision of anthropology and ethnology which, however, had developed in a rather peculiar way. The term "anthropology" was used to denote "a natural science devoted to 'positive' investigations into human anatomy, the variety of human physical types, and 'man's place in nature'" (Williams 1985: 331) while ethnology was usually defined as the study of races (Conklin 2013: 53). Mogilianskii's understanding of ethnic differences echoed this definition. He subscribed to Paul Broca's definition of anthropology as a "science that studies the human group in its entirety, its details, and its relations to nature" (GARF R-5787-1-93: 2). The most interesting aspect of this scheme is, of course, Mogilianskii's concept of a relationship between racial anthropology (ethnology) and ethnography that reflected his vision of the nature of ethnic differences. Just as in his general lecture course of anthropology, tribes and peoples were defined as "lesser units" within a few large racial groups that "differ from each other by secondary characteristics". As an example, he cited the visible physical differences between a tall, blond, and blue-eyed Norwegian and a brown, dark-eyed, and dark-haired Portuguese, both of whom would be classified within a single "white race" (GARF R-5787-1-93: 4).

# Mogilianskii as political activist

Mogilianskii was a liberal who could not accept the Bolshevik revolution; and soon after it took place the Russian Museum sent him to Kiev. In the summer of 1918 he informed the museum of his resignation and his decision to remain in Kiev (Dmitriev 2002: 152). On April 29 1918 Pavlo Skoropadskii was elected the getman (head) of the National State of Ukraine – or "The Hetmanat" [9], which survived until December 1918. Mogilianskii was appointed deputy state secretary. From May till November he was present at the meetings of the cabinet and assisted Pablo Skoropadaskii. The antisocialist "pro-Russian" political position of Skoropadskii and Mogilianskii failed with the defeat of Germany and the uprising of Ukrainian separatists and leftists lead by Simon Petlyura. In 1920 Mogilianskii finally settled as immigrant in Paris. There he organized the "Ukrainian National Committee", edited the journal *La Jeune Ukraine* and wrote several long essays that summarized his ideas about the Ukraine, its ethnography, history, political life and future prospects.

"Ukraine and Ukrainians" was the most ambitious work ever written by Mogilianskii about the topic. The 45-page handwritten manuscript, written in Paris in 1921, presents an attempt to integrate ethnography, history, physical anthropology, and current politics into an inclusive characterisation of an "ethnic type":

> This word and concept [the Ukrainians] is a subject of hatred for Russian centralists who did not and do not want to accept the existence of this particular ethnic type which is characterized by exact and definite features; on the other hand, this notion is a symbol and credo to the Ukrainian separatists who, against all evidence in support of a close resemblance between Great Russians and Ukrainians, appeal to differences in anthropological features and try to create almost impassable gaps between them, both from the anthropological and the cultural points of view (GARF R-5787-1-34: 1).



As has been already shown, Mogilianskii disagreed with both extreme positions. He proceeded to give an overview of the history of the Russian plains to give an account of the making of two "types" – Great and Little Russians. It was the result, so he believed, of their mixing with the Finns and the Turks, respectively. Mogilianskii referred to Volkov's conclusions as decisive evidence taken from the "modern science of anthropology with its exact methods of research" that proved the difference between Great and Little Russians and the existence of a distinct homogeneous Ukrainian type (Ibid: 9-11). After an outline of the history of Ukraine from the periods recorded in the earliest archaeological findings to the eighteenth century, Mogilianskii turned to language and literature as "the strongest characteristic of a people, aside from the anthropological type" (Ibid: 22). There he relied on Shakhmatov's and Korsh's conclusions about the independence of the Ukrainian language. As to the literature, he admitted that Ukraine did not yet have works of "world significance", but attributed this to its literature young age.

Having considered the differences between Great and Little Russians, Mogilianskii returned to Volkov's conclusions:

The Ukrainian people in all its ethnic territory is characterized by a range of ethnographic features common to all its members, which do not leave any doubt about the fact that it constitutes one ethnographic whole that definitely stands out among other Slavic peoples (Ibid: 34-35).

# The development of Volkov's methodology by Sergei Rudenko

Mogilianskii died in exile, and his post-1917 writings remained for the most part unpublished and inaccessible to readers in the USSR. That was also the case with Sergei Shirokogoroff's writings. Nevertheless, the idea of *ethnos* and Volkov's methodology, with its complex investigation and mapping of data from physical anthropology, as well as from material and spiritual culture, was followed by the generation of his pupils who stayed in the Soviet Union.

The most prominent among them was Sergei Ivanovich Rudenko (1885-1969), an Ukrainian born in Kharkov. He studied anthropology in Saint Petersburg with Volkov and spent a year in 1913-14 attending classes at the École d'Anthropologie in Paris and working in Léonce Manouvrier's laboratory. Undoubtedly, it was his book, *The Bashkirs: An Ethnological Monograph*, that established Rudenko as one of the leading Russian anthropologists. It was published in two volumes: *The Physical Type of Bashkirs* (1916) and *The Way of Life of Bashkirs* (Byt bashkir) (1925) (Rudenko 1916, 1925) [10]. This book was written under the obvious influence of Volkov's methodology and reflected the model Volkov suggested in his writings on the "Ukrainian People in its Past and Present". Volkov distinguished three groups of Ukrainians: northern, middle, and southern Ukrainians whose dialectal and cultural borders roughly coincided with those of anthropological types. The correlation between "types", ascertained on the basis of physical anthropology, linguistics, and cultural traits was the issue that also intrigued Rudenko. In his book he distinguished three major cultural types of Bashriks (eastern, south-western and northern) and concluded that they retained their most



ancient "pure" Turkish cultural forms in the eastern type, while the other two had fallen under strong influence of neighboring Finns and Slavs. To his satisfaction these cultural types generally coincided with the physical anthropology types he had delimited in the first installment of his monograph.

At the First Turkological Congress in 1926, Rudenko gave a paper titled "The Current State and Next Tasks of the Ethnographical Studies of the Turkish Tribes", in which he presented an ambitious research programme and made a series of theoretical observations characteristic of the Volkov school. Starting from the premise that language functioned as the primary uniting factor for the Turks, he demonstrated that: "...the language, the culture, and the physical type live their own independent lives, without the seemingly natural links between the elements which we deem essential for every ethnic group" (Rudenko 1926: 77).

Having noted that language was the "least resilient of the ethnical characteristics", Rudenko suggested concentrating on "the basic features of the Turkish physical type and the Turkish household". He claimed that it was possible to speak of a physical type that was characteristic for the Turks and which manifested itself most vividly in the Kazakh-Kyrgyzes. As the distance from this "centre" increased, it was modified by "miscegenation". He also drafted a description of the "Turkish culture per se", with its cultural characteristic of nomadic cattle-breeders. Rudenko proposed to "determine the geographical distribution of the individual cultural (bitobie) elements and their combinations in the closed biological units that we call ethnic groups" (Rudenko 1926: 86). This study was to reveal the "provincial and regional groupings" that presumably coincided with the peculiarities of a physical type and dialects. His presentation ended with a reference to exact scientific methods and biological metaphors:

In order to succeed in developing our knowledge about the biology of human societies, the life of ethnic groups, and the factors which influence their lives, in order to clarify the evolution of the human culture, we must switch from dilettantism to precise scientific investigation (Ibid: 88).

## Marxism and the end of biosocial theory in the Soviet Union

Rudenko's grandiose program was doomed. It was formulated right before the Cultural Revolution and the "Great Break" which shook the life of the whole country in 1929. Among other disruptions, such as the restructuring and the Bolshevik's "takeover" of the Academy of Sciences, there came a firm philosophical dictate that social laws should be shown to work independently of natural laws. Within ethnography, this placed a taboo on any direct reference to the social structures being linked to biological processes. As historian Mark Adams has observed, this was epitomised by the emergence of a new pejorative term *"biologizirovat"* [11] (to biologize). He further reflected that "no field that linked the biological and the social survived the Great Break intact" (Adams 1990: 184).

Valerian Aptekar, a fervent proponent of Marxism and student of the linguist and archaeologist academician N.Ya. Marr [12], started a campaign against ethnology as science.



He claimed that "culture" and "*ethnos*" – two central concepts of ethnology – were construed as natural, metaphysical or biological substances with their own immanent forces. Cultures and ethnic groups in ethnological discourse are endowed with biological, chemical and physical characteristics, thus portraying social processes as analogous with those in organic and even non-organic nature. He also insisted that *ethnos* in ethnological discourse stood for a thinly disguised race. Although Aptekar's critique was to an extent justified, his accusations of ethnographers in racism were hardly adequate given the distinction that they made between two concepts since the times of Eduard Petri. Nevertheless, the huge ideological turn of the late 1920s – early 1930s led to a devastating critique of "bourgeois" science, including purges of many prominent ethnographers, and the creation of a Marxist ethnographic literature that used only "sociological" or historical concepts (Slezkine 1991; Alymov 2014).

Rudenko's suggestions about correlations between cultural and physical types as well as formulations like "biology of human societies" became ideological anathema. Rudenko was arrested in the summer of 1930 in Bashkiria, but there is no direct evidence that the repressions against him were related to his scientific views. The researcher was named in the so-called "academic case" against the "All-People's Union for the Revival of Russia" – an organization fabricated by the Soviet secret police (OGPU) to deal with politically conservative academics. Rudenko was charged with the squandering of resources during his expeditions.

Any further development of the theory of *ethnos* with its biosocial implications became impossible in the Soviet Union during Stalinism. Ironically, *ethnos* became a catchword for the new generation of theoreticians that came to professional maturity in the 1960s, and late Soviet ethnography from this point on was strongly associated with the theory of *ethnos* as developed by academician Yulian V. Bromley (1921-1990). At the same period the previously repressed biosocial implications and the geographical determinism came to full fruition in the works of another famous and highly controversial thinker of the late Soviet period, Lev N. Gumilev (1912-1992), who was influenced during the early stages of his career by Sergei Rudenko (Bassin 2016).

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[1] The research for this article was conducted with the financial support of The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC ES/K006428/1) "Etnos: A life history of the etnos concept among the Peoples of the North" [2013-2017].

[2] «Этнография и ее задачи».

[3] «Предмет и задачи этнографии».

[4] In Ukrainian: Федір (Хведір) Кіндратович Вовк.

[5] Гетьман.



[6] Antonovich was of Polish descent, but rejected his ethnic roots when he became a "khlopoman" – a movement in Little Russia similar Russian narodnik (a populist).

[7] "Три національні типи народні".

[8] Украинский народ в его прошлом и настоящем.

[9] Гетьманат.

[10] Руденко С. И. Башкиры. Опыт этнологической монографии. Ч. 1: Физический тип башкир. Петроград: "Якорь", 1916; Руденко С. И. Башкиры. Опыт этнологической монографии. Ч. 2: Быт башкир. Л.: Гос. типография им. И. Федорова, 1925.

[11] «Биологизировать».

[12] Николай Яковлевич Марр.