Summary: This chapter examines the divergent views among Russian and Ukrainian elites on the possibility of a single high culture in imperial Russia. The ‘imperial culture,’ as a hybrid or ‘all-Russian’ formation, which relied on Ukrainian participation and subordination, but whose Ukrainian element is elided in discourses that imagine Imperial Russian culture as a Russian ‘national’ one, was founded on a Ukrainian–Russian consensus that was shattered during the 19th century, when Ukrainian elites began withdrawing from pan-imperial cultural participation. This laid the foundation for a rival ‘national’ high culture in the imperial state and may be seen as the most important reason why the empire did not coalesce on the basis of a single multinational culture. Ukrainian high culture never challenged Great Russian (ethnic) nationality or culture, only the state-sponsored all-Russian imperial culture – which later assumed the deceptive, un-prefixed name ‘Russian.’ The current crisis of what is called ‘Russian identity’ amounts either to attempts to resuscitate the ‘all-Russian’ idea or to come to terms with its demise. Russian Federation leaders still dabble in the former, believing that a ‘union’ with Ukraine would legitimize the continued existence of the ‘all-Russian’ idea.

Introduction

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the status of Russia as an Empire has, for all practical purposes, been settled. If in 1994 Zbigniew Brzezinski (1994: 72) still posed the issue in the form of a question (‘Is Russia primarily a nation-state or . . . multinational empire?’), today, the latter view, has become conventional wisdom. Not only are we learning much about
the structure and workings of the Empire but also, more importantly, we
now know that the empire has been an obstacle to Russia’s full national
development. Geoffrey Hosking has emphasized that the ‘building of an
empire’ ‘impeded the formation of a [Russian] nation’ (Hosking 1998: xix).
‘For more than three centuries, [the Russian Empire’s] structures had been
those of a multi-ethnic service state, not those of an emerging nation’
(Hosking, 1998: 478). A ‘fractured and underdeveloped nationhood has
been [the Russians’] principle historical burden in the last two centuries
or so, continuing through the period of the Soviet Union and persisting
beyond its fall . . .’ (Hosking, 1998: xx). And Ronald Suny has noted:
‘Tsarism never created a nation within the whole empire or even a sense
of nation among the core Russian population . . .’ (Suny, 2001: 56). He
singled out the ‘Russian elites’ for failing ‘to articulate a clear idea of the
Russian nation, to elaborate an identity distinct from a religious
(Orthodox), imperial, state, or narrowly ethnic identity. Russia was
never equated with ethnic Russia; almost from the beginning it was
something larger, a multinational “Russian” state with vaguely conceived
commonalities – religion, perhaps, or loyalty to the tsar – but the debate
among intellectuals and state actors failed to develop a convincing, attrac-
tive notion of Russianness separate from the ethnic, on the one hand, and
the imperial state, on the other’ (Suny, 2001: 44). In a sense, recent scholar-
ship reinforces what the former prime minister of the empire Sergei
Witte understood at the beginning of twentieth century: ‘The big mistake
of our decades-long policy is that we still today do not understand that
there hasn’t been a Russia from the time of Peter the Great and Catherine
the Great. There has been a Russian Empire’ (Suny, 2001: 55–56).

In accepting the axiom that there never has been a highly developed
‘national’ Russia, a Russian nation, or a Russian nation-state, this chapter
draws attention to the paradoxical practice, among Russian and non-
Russian scholars, to refer to a Russian ‘national’ culture – as if this was a
self-evident category. The problem is not with the possibility of a
Russian ‘national’ culture, but the straightforward equating of imperial
cultural processes with Russia’s ‘national’ ones. In other words, despite
the acknowledgement of an empire, scholars never consciously recognize
an ‘imperial culture’ and everything that such a notion implies.
N. V. Riasanovsky, for example, has written: ‘until now [1991] Russia never
had a national stage in its history.’ His admission, however, is followed by
the declaration that Russia has had a national culture: ‘I repeat, there
were national literature, music, architecture, and thinkers, but the gov-
ernment and the state, as well as the bulk of the population, still belonged
to the old world, not to modern nationalism’ (Riasanovsky, 1991: 12).