

CHAPTER NINE

IMAGINING A SOVIET NATION: CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE UKRAINIAN PAST AT THE TWILIGHT OF THE STALIN ERA¹

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In June 1951 hundreds of Ukrainian writers, actors, musicians, and artists arrived in Moscow for a *dekada* (ten-day festival) of Ukrainian art. This grandiose exhibition of the Ukrainian republic's cultural achievements appeared to be a huge success and was crowned by the decoration of 669 Ukrainians with various orders, medals, and honorary artistic titles. The premier Soviet newspaper, *Pravda*, provided extensive, enthusiastic coverage of the festival.² The ambassadors of Ukrainian culture left Moscow in high spirits, sending telegraphed expressions of gratitude to Stalin, the party, and the government. On 2 July, however, *Pravda* unexpectedly fired a devastating ideological salvo at the Ukrainians in the form of the editorial "Against Ideological Distortions in Literature." Unsigned, but engineered by Stalin himself, this long article was ostensibly devoted to just one "distortion," Volodymyr Sosiura's short poem "Love Ukraine" (1944), which had appeared in Russian translation in 1951. *Pravda* accused the poem, written during the patriotic fervor of World War II, of glorifying "a primordial Ukraine, Ukraine in general," rather than Soviet Ukraine. In an aside, cryptic reference was made to other serious shortcomings in the work of the Ukrainian Communist Party's Central Committee.³

¹ Parts of this paper are derived from my book, *Stalin's Empire of Memory: Russian-Ukrainian Relations in the Soviet Historical Imagination* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), pp. 6–7, 10–11, 69, 81–83, 129–37, 142–47, and 150–53. These fragments are reproduced here with the kind permission of the publisher, the University of Toronto Press.

² See *Pravda*, 14–27 June 1951.

³ *Pravda*, 2 July 1951, 2. On Stalin's personal involvement, see D.T. Shepilov, "Vospominaniia," *Voprosy istorii*, no. 6 (1998): 43–44.

Within days of *Pravda*'s publication, Ukrainian authorities launched a campaign of ideological purification in the republic, complete with condemnations of "nationalist deviations" in all areas and genres of creative activity.⁴ While the editorial dealt only with a single poem's failure to stress love for Soviet socialism, the Ukrainian leaders discerned a larger ideological significance between the lines. The republic's ideologues interpreted the vague critique from the Kremlin according to what they perceived as the main threat to Soviet Ukrainian identity—a "harmful obsession" with the national past and concomitant insufficiency in the portrayal of historical ties with Russia. On 2 August the Ukrainian First Secretary, Leonid Melnikov, reported to Stalin's deputy for party affairs, Georgii Malenkov, that the Ukrainian intelligentsia, "in their creative and scholarly work, often idealize the past." He assured Moscow that his subordinates would instruct local intellectuals to portray Ukraine as "an inseparable part of our great Fatherland." Writing to Stalin on 14 August, Malenkov expressed his regret that the Ukrainian leaders overlooked "attempts to portray the historical process in Ukraine as separate from the history of the peoples of the USSR."⁵ Generally, the ideological conferences held in the republic concentrated on what was considered to be an inappropriate infatuation with the national past.

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Modern students of nationalism have little patience with older scholars who see nations as organic entities with unique, objective characteristics. Ever since Karl Deutsch, it has not been possible to analyze nation-building without emphasizing the role of print media; over time, Eric Hobsbawm's and Benedict Anderson's once revisionist notions of modern nations as "invented" and "imagined" rallied overwhelming support in the profession.⁶ Ernest Gellner contributed an influential proposal;

⁴ Recent Ukrainian research properly contextualizes this episode as a prologue to a wider ideological purge in Ukraine. See Volodymyr Baran, *Ukraina 1950–1960-kh rr.: Evoliutsiia totalitarnoi systemy* (Lviv: Instytut ukrainoznavstva im. I. Kryp'iakevych NANU, 1996), pp. 60–65. However, the campaign's significance for Soviet Ukrainian identity remains unexplored.

⁵ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsialno-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI), 17/133/311, fols. 38–39 (2 August); Tsentralnyi derzhavnyi arkhiv vyshchykh orhaniv vlady i upravlinnia Ukrainy (TsDAHO), 1/24/785, fols. 61–67 (14 August).

⁶ See Karl W. Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication: An Inquiry into the Foundations of Nationality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1953; 1966); Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); and Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991).

although national high culture is a recent invention, nationalists always insist on its primordial character and folk roots.⁷ Taken to the extreme, the idea of a nation as a “discursive construct” ignores the historically specific character of the nation-building process as well as the need for historical myths that resonate with the current needs and inherited perceptions of the nation’s potential members.

Without rejecting the nation’s “discursivity,” in this paper I suggest that nations are always imagined through the concrete social and cultural practices of their given societies. States and intellectuals do not have a free hand to invent or manipulate national traditions and memories because, as Arjuna Appadurai noted back in 1981, history is not “a limitless and plastic symbolic resource”.⁸ The continuous veneration of the glorious Cossack past in Ukraine since the seventeenth century only confirms that national myths can have deep historical roots and a long tradition of collective remembrance before they are mobilized in the modern process of identity construction. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century intellectuals thus had limited cultural space for their social engineering: they were evoking narratives, objects, and images that were already associated with certain notions or emotions.

During the late 1930s and early 1940s, when the Soviet Union accomplished the transition from an unqualified condemnation of tsarist colonialism to an increasing identification with the Russian imperial past, the Stalinist reinstatement of the “nation” as a subject of history resulted in the rehabilitation of both Imperial Russian and Ukrainian national patrimony. By the late 1940s, the local bureaucrats and cultural figures worked out a revised and acceptable version of the Ukrainian national past that emphasized historical ties to Russia. Yet, with reified ethnicity as a principal category of Soviet political taxonomy, historical narratives of the post-war period remained in essence “national histories” disguised by the superficial rhetoric of class and amalgamated into the imperial grand story. The notion of the Russian-Ukrainian friendship inescapably involved the constant affirmation of the Ukrainians’ ethnic difference. In addition, the production of official discourse on the past did not lend itself to total regimentation: republic-level ideologues constantly adjusted the Kremlin’s guidelines to local realities, intellectuals

⁷ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983).

⁸ A. Appadurai, “The Past as a Scarce Resource,” *Man* 16 (1981): 201–19.

often deviated from the prescribed course, and audiences could read differently even the most impeccable cultural product.

The last point is central to this article. Even if granted a free hand in their manipulations of historical narratives, modern nation-builders still have difficulty enforcing their interpretations outside the public domain. Prasenjit Duara suggests that “[n]ationalism is rarely the nationalism of *the nation*, but rather marks the site where different representations of the nation contest and negotiate with each other”.⁹ Stalinist ideologues could, at a price of considerable effort, impose uniformity on public representations of the past—but not on individual readings of those representations.

Narrating the Nation

The *Zhdanovshchina*, the post-war cultural purification campaign of 1946–48, which takes its name from the Kremlin’s leading ideologue, Andrei Zhdanov, is usually understood as a reassertion of the party’s ideological control over culture in order to purge literature and the arts of western influences and “apolitical subjects.” While intellectuals in Moscow and Leningrad did indeed experience the campaign as a crusade against liberalism and heterodoxy, Russian national mythology was rarely attacked. The Ukrainian *Zhdanovshchina*, however, from its very beginnings targeted “nationalism,” particularly in the portrayal of the past.¹⁰ Soviet ideologues were generally suspicious of non-Russians’ identification with their own past rather than with the Soviet present and with Russian imperial history.

The first major postwar Ukrainian historical novel, Petro Panch’s *The Zaporozhians* (1946), was an epic narrative set in seventeenth-century Ukraine. With the advent of the *Zhdanovshchina*, the work soon came under critical fire for “idealizing” the Cossacks. Panch allegedly did not stress the tension between rich and poor Cossacks sufficiently; instead, he portrayed the wealthy Cossack Veryha positively and had one of the

⁹ Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 8.

¹⁰ See Serhy Yekelchuk, “Celebrating the Soviet Present: The *Zhdanovshchina* Campaign in Ukrainian Literature and the Arts,” in Donald J. Raleigh, ed., *Provincial Landscapes: Local Dimensions of Soviet Power, 1917–1953* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), pp. 255–75.

characters, the noble Buzhynsky, utter the incriminating words: “Cossacks have always fought for Ukraine, for our faith, for freedom!”¹¹

During an ideological conference in 1947, Panch took the floor to repent his errors and promise a “party novel” about the Cossack period. The writer quoted two letters of support received from his readers after *The Zaporozhians* had been criticized in the press. One reader regretted that the witch-hunt would prevent Panch from writing interesting works. Another, a twenty-two-year-old disabled veteran, advised the writer not to bow before the ideological pressure: “The novels they would like you to write would be of low artistic quality and would find sympathetic readers only in a certain historical period and exclusively among a small group of people.” Up to this point, Panch had seemed to be defending himself with evidence of his readers’ support, yet the embattled writer suddenly shouted: “Together with my critics, I will slap these ‘sympathizers’ in the face!”¹²

In September 1947 the Ukrainian leaders Lazar Kaganovich and Nikita Khrushchev met with a group of 105 leading Ukrainian writers, who discussed the “nationalist mistakes” of Panch and others and pledged loyalty to the party cause. Most speakers strongly condemned “harmful nostalgia for the past,” but the well-known novelist Natan Rybak, who had just completed the first part of an ideologically sound historical novel about Ukraine’s incorporation into Russia, decided to test the waters. Phrasing his defense of the historical genre to resonate with the official anti-nationalist rhetoric, he said: “I do not know who could have a stake in the disappearance of historical novels . . . We Soviet writers should not abandon a topic of such importance as our people’s history [i.e., leave it for the émigré nationalists].” Rybak also mentioned that he had discussed the idea for his latest novel with Khrushchev as early as 1940 and that the party leader had given him some helpful advice. Kaganovich and Khrushchev, however, made no comments in response, leaving the writer in uncertainty.¹³

Novels about wartime heroism, industrial reconstruction, and the revival of agriculture came to constitute the bulk of Ukrainian literary production. In 1947 the young writer Oles Honchar received the Stalin

¹¹ See *Literaturna hazeta*, 17 April 1947, 2. Compare the original publication: Petro Panch, *Zaporozhysi* (Kiev: Radianskyi pysmennyk, 1946). Ostap Buzhynsky’s phrase is on p. 23.

¹² TsDAHO, 1/23/4512, fols. 260–68.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1/23/4511, fols. 41–43.

Prize, Second Class, for part 1 of his war trilogy, *The Standard-Bearers*. The following year, the same award went to him for part 2 of the work, while Ivan Riabokliach received the Stalin Prize, Third Class, for a short novel about post-war collective farms, *A Golden Thousand*. Rybak's bulky historical novel, *The Pereiaslav Council*, was actually published, first in a literary journal and then in late 1948 separately, in due time earning the writer the Stalin Prize, Second Class.¹⁴ Rybak's case established a precedent: as long as they celebrated Ukraine's eternal friendship with Russia, Ukrainian historical novels were welcome.

Although one could hardly find a more timely historical topic than the 1654 Pereiaslav Council, the press welcomed Rybak's novel rather reservedly. In August 1947 *Literaturna hazeta* reacted with approval, albeit without enthusiasm, to the publication of select chapters of the novel in a journal. When a book edition appeared in late 1948 in a relatively modest print run of 20,000 copies, the same newspaper noted the publication but did not run a book review for several months.¹⁵

The novel presents an epic picture of the Khmelnytsky Uprising, ending with the Pereiaslav Treaty of 1654. Although Rybak combined several narrative lines featuring main characters from various social strata, all developing the theme of Russian-Ukrainian friendship, his main emphasis was clearly the deeds of the Cossack leader, Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky. Like many other positive historical characters in Stalinist literature, Rybak's Khmelnytsky appears as an ideal ruler imbued with traits similar to those of Stalin. The hetman is an omnipresent and omnipotent father of the people who governs his state with an iron hand:

Only a short time has passed, but he had accomplished much, and he had the right to credit himself with having done so. The entire country was now divided into regiments and colonels elected in each regiment. He had often had to suggest who should be elected, but these suggestions had been necessary. He had had to dismiss those independent in thought [*iaki myslyly svoieumno*] and slow in action, he had had to threaten some and exile others to the Crimea, ordering them to stay there until he recalled them. Yet others he had removed in such a way that nobody knew what happened to them, and if anyone happened to mention them

¹⁴ *Literaturna hazeta*, 8 April 1948, 1; 14 April 49, 1–2 (Honchar and Riabokliach); 6 December 1948, 3 (*Pereiaslav Council* published); 9 March 1950, 1 (Stalin Prize).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 7 August 1947, 2; 6 December 1948, 3.

in conversation, Lavryn Kapusta [the head of the secret police] could only shrug his shoulders non-committally.¹⁶

Rybak's Khmelnytsky is not a feudal lord; like the Stalin of post-war propaganda, he stands above all social strata, wisely guiding the Ukrainian nation in its entirety towards union with Muscovy, while at the same time expressing care and concern for the common people in periodic cleansings of the upper classes.

More important, Rybak struck a fine balance between national history and class history by representing the union with Russia as beneficial to both the Ukrainian nation as a whole and the Ukrainian toiling masses in particular. When his vision so dictated, he did not hesitate to radically rewrite events. The critics hailed Rybak's treatment of the controversial Colonel Bohun, who had neither attended the Pereiaslav Council nor taken an oath to the tsar. In his *Fighters for Freedom*, the pre-revolutionary nationalist novelist Adrian Kashchenko had portrayed Bohun as an opponent of the union with Russia. In *Bohun*, the early Soviet Ukrainian writer Oleksandr Sokolovsky had depicted the colonel as a true representative of the toiling masses and the enemy of the feudal lord Khmelnytsky. In his 1938 play *Bohdan Khmelnytsky*, Oleksandr Korniiichuk had chosen not to mention Bohun at all in his description of the Pereiaslav Council and the subsequent events. Rybak was the first writer to claim that Bohun had, in fact, always supported Khmelnytsky and had even taken an oath to the tsar.¹⁷

The first indication of the novel's official acceptance came from Liubomyr Dmyterko, the secretary of the Writers' Union, in his report to the writers' congress in December 1949. After praising new novels on Soviet topics, he added: "Together with the works on contemporary subjects—and I repeat, there are dozens of them—Natar Rybak's weighty historical novel, *The Pereiaslav Council*, stands at the vanguard of Soviet Ukrainian prose." Dmyterko went on to approve of the topic and the style, as well as to read aloud extensively from the book's description of the Pereiaslav Council.¹⁸

¹⁶ Natan Rybak, *Pereiaslavska rada* (Kiev: Derzhavne vydavnytstvo khudozhnoi literatury, 1949), p. 45.

¹⁷ On different writers' portrayals of Bohun, see Mykola Syrotiuk, *Ukrainskyi radianskyi istorychnyi roman* (Kiev: Vydavnytstvo AN URSR, 1962), pp. 295–99.

¹⁸ L. Dmyterko, "Ukrainska radianska literatura pislia postanovy TsK VKP(b) pro zhurnaly 'Zvezda' i 'Leningrad,'" *Bilshovyk Ukrainy*, no. 1 (1949): 74–75.

The plots of two historical plays, both completed in 1949, mark new limits for what was permissible and warranted official approval. Leonid Smiliansky's drama *Sahaidachny* attempted to recast this early-seventeenth-century Cossack leader as a promoter of union with Russia. However, it was no mean task. Although Sahaidachny had sent a friendly embassy to the tsar in 1619 or 1620, he had also participated in the Polish army's march on Moscow in the previous year. The Ukrainian Central Committee's expert felt that even passing references to the war with Russia were inappropriate and that the entire last scene, in which Sahaidachny dies with the words "Bells, bells" on his lips, was ambiguous: "Is he referring to the bells greeting the Cossack envoy in Moscow or to the bells sounding the alarm when Sahaidachny together with the Polish prince invaded Russian territory?"¹⁹

In contrast, Liubomyr Dmyterko's *Together Forever* passed the censors with flying colors. The play depicts events in Ukraine after Khmelnytsky's death (1657), when Hetman Ivan Vyhovsky attempted to break with Muscovy. Dmyterko discredits Vyhovsky and his followers, who are cast as lacking mass support and who are opposed in the play by pro-Russian Cossack leaders. First published in June 1949, the play immediately earned good reviews, and the Sumy Drama Company staged it as early as November 1949. When Kharkiv's Shevchenko Theater, Ukraine's leading drama company during the post-war decade, first performed *Together Forever* in February 1950, the press hailed the premiere as a success of national significance.²⁰ However, Dmyterko's play had a short theatrical run. Staged by practically all Ukrainian companies in 1950, by 1952 it was no longer being produced in Kiev, Kharkiv, or Lviv. Contemporary theater critics attributed the quick decline of interest in the play to its low artistic quality, namely, its lack of developed and vivid positive characters.²¹

In early 1952 Ukrainian functionaries and writers were already thinking about the preparation of new literary works to celebrate the tercentenary of the Pereiaslav Treaty. A conference at a major publishing house, *Radianskyi pysmennyk*, called upon litterateurs to compose new peacens to the "age-old friendship" with Russia. The Writers' Union

¹⁹ TsDAHO, 1/30/1416, fol. 8.

²⁰ *Radianske mystetstvo*, 13 July 1949, 2 (review); 12 November 1949, 3 (Sumy); 1 March 1950, 3 (Kharkiv).

²¹ *Radianske mystetstvo*, 30 July 1952, 3.

proposed that the leading poets be mobilized to create a monumental collective ode to said friendship.²²

Too much should not be attributed to such “planning,” since the two major historical novels published in 1953–54 had been in preparation long before the authorities issued an appeal for them. The topicality of Pereiaslav enabled two authors to revive Cossack glory as a major component of Soviet Ukrainian identity. Petro Panch revised his 1946 novel, *The Zaporozhians*, adding two more parts and publishing the resulting bulky volume under the title *Ukraine Was Humming*. Only later did Ukrainian ideologues notice that Panch “had not properly eliminated” the mistakes for which the party had denounced *The Zaporozhians* in 1947.²³ The publication of volume 2 of Rybak’s *The Pereiaslav Council* was the major event in Ukrainian literary life in 1953. Contemporary critics agreed that the sequel was artistically superior to the original, even though Rybak had further developed elements of adventure, intrigue, and espionage not considered proper in a serious historical novel.²⁴

The tercentenary celebrations marked the culmination of the historical genre’s rehabilitation. As the best novel embodying the new official version of the past, *The Pereiaslav Council* was elevated to the near-sacred status of a work that authorities exhorted the populace to “study” (not unlike the *Communist Manifesto* or the *Short Course* of party history). Between January and May 1954 all Ukrainian provinces reported the organization of public readings, readers’ conferences, study workshops, and amateur dramatizations of the novel. In Stanyslaviv province alone, more than a hundred readers’ conferences took place. The village of Vovkovyi in Rivne province, where a readers’ conference with 190 participants was preceded by a lecture, “The Pereiaslav Council and Its Historical Importance,” and followed by the screening of the 1941 film *Bohdan Khmelnytsky*, could serve as a typical example.²⁵

The Pereiaslav Council went through several editions during 1953–54, including a luxurious Ukrainian two-volume set with color illustrations

²² *Literaturna hazeta*, 24 April 1952, 3 (conference); TsDAHO, 1/30/3597, fol. 71 (poem).

²³ *Literaturna Ukraina*, 24 December 1953, 3 (excerpts from *Ukraine Was Humming*); Petro Panch, *Homonila Ukraina* (Kiev: Derzhlitvydav, 1954); *XVIII zizd Komunistychnoi partii Ukrainy 23–26 bereznia 1954 r.: Materialy zizdu* (Kiev: Polityvdav Ukrainy, 1954), p. 157 (insufficient revisions).

²⁴ Tsentralnyi derzhavnyi arkhiv-muzei literatury i mystetstva Ukrainy (TsDAMLM), 590/1/204, fol. 3 and *Literaturna hazeta*, 12 November 1953, 3–4.

²⁵ TsDAHO, 1/30/3681, fols. 113 (Stanyslaviv province) and 124 (Vovkovyi).

by A. Riznychenko. Three Moscow publishers planned to issue a Russian translation of the novel in 1954, causing the Central Committee of the party to intervene and decide that the jubilee edition would be printed by Goslitizdat. As if all these propaganda were not enough, Ukrainian radio broadcast readings of the novel, chapter by chapter, and dramatized selected fragments in a kind of historical soap opera.²⁶

Following in Rybak's footsteps, many other writers speedily produced novels about the Ukrainian, mostly Cossack, past that emphasized Russian help and the Ukrainians' age-old desire to unite with their Russian brethren. These works included Ivan Le's *Sworn Brothers*, Iakiv Kachura's *Ivan Bohun*, Vasyl Kucher's *Ustym Karmaliuk*, and Iurii Mushketyk's *Semen Palii*.²⁷ The Ukrainian writers had so successfully recovered from the official purge of the historical genre in 1946–47 that in May 1954 Moscow's Institute of World Literature convened a special conference on the Ukrainian historical novel. At the Third Congress of the Ukrainian Writers' Union in October 1954 nobody felt it necessary to defend the historical genre. Mykola Bazhan, head of the organization, praised the recent works of Rybak, Panch, Le, and others as Soviet Ukrainian prose's most notable accomplishments, declaring: "The important role of contemporary subjects for the successful development of Socialist Realism in literature does not at all diminish the significance of historical subjects."²⁸

Despite the party's ideological supervision, writers were still able to mount a subtle but effective defense of the historical genre. Regimenting the public's perception of their books was beyond even the Communist Party's capabilities.

The numerous letters from readers, which can be found in Natan Rybak's personal archive, allow an insight into how the post-war public perceived his novel. Reactions varied from a sentiment expressed in an anonymous note, which claimed that reading the epic narrative of the Cossacks' heroic deeds and resulting incorporation into Russia "left a sense of both elevated pride and burning bitterness in the heart," to lengthy tirades that seemed to confirm the novel's desired

²⁶ Natan Rybak, *Pereiaslavska rada* (Kiev: Derzhlitvydav, 1953), 2 vols.; Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii (RGANI), 5/17/454, fol. 1 (Moscow publishers); TsDAHO, 1/30/3631, fols. 4 and 8; *Literaturna hazeta*, 6 May 1954, 3 (radio).

²⁷ Conveniently grouped together in a report to Moscow in RGANI, 5/17/454, fol. 11.

²⁸ RGANI, 5/17/402, fol. 78 and *Literaturna hazeta*, 22 May 1954, 4 (conference); TsDAMLM, 590/1/199, fols. 23–24 and *Literaturna hazeta*, 28 October 1954, 2 (congress).

educational impact. Petro Zhytnyk, from the village of Mykolaivka of Nekhvoroshcha district in Poltava province, wrote to Rybak on 27 February 1952:

The history of Ukraine and, in particular, the life and activities of the great statesman Bohdan Khmelnytsky have been of interest to me since childhood. Under the influence of Kulish's *Black Council*, I had formed wrong conceptions about Ukrainian history and Hetman Khmelnytsky's role, and I was not able to free myself from those ideas for a long time. Much later, in 1943, having read O. Korniiuchuk's play *Bohdan Khmelnytsky*, watched the film of the same name, and having read your novel *The Pereiaslav Council* for the first time in 1949, I finally understood with profundity the age of Bohdan Khmelnytsky, his services in liberating Ukraine from foreign oppression and uniting it with Russia. These wonderful works allowed me, a common citizen, to see the great truth!²⁹

Ideologically correct as it is, the letter reveals that this reader was not interested in the notions of the friendship of people, class struggle, and the fraternal aid of the Russian elder brother so dear to Soviet ideologues' hearts and sown so abundantly throughout the novel. Instead, Zhytnyk understood the great hero Khmelnytsky as a historical agent who had liberated Ukraine and brought it to its beneficial union with Muscovy.

Other Ukrainian readers also perceived *The Pereiaslav Council* as simply a work glorifying their nation's heroic past, as if the "friendship of peoples" paradigm never existed. Ivan Burlaka, from the village of Erazmivka in Oleksandrivka district in Kirovohrad province, wrote to Rybak in December 1950: "Khmelnytsky, the Cossack leader and the liberator of all Ukrainian people, is shown so forcefully. It is a truly patriotic book that explains the state-building aims and humane ideals of the heroic Ukrainian people's national liberational movement."³⁰

Most striking is the number of letters Rybak received from ethnic Ukrainians living in other Soviet republics. All his correspondents from Kuban, Sverdlovsk province, and Georgia wrote of their Ukrainian or even Cossack roots with pride and complained about the difficulties in obtaining Ukrainian historical novels in Russia. Dmytro Krykun in Kuban informed the writer that the local bookstore had sold out its allotment of *The Pereiaslav Council* in a week. Krykun considered himself

²⁹ TsDAML, 687/1/47, fols. 23 overleaf (anonymous note) and 29 (Zhytnyk).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, fols. 11–12.

lucky to have procured a book in a second-hand shop; although only volume 1 was available, at least it was in Ukrainian.³¹

Having read the first volume in Russian translation, Colonel Hryhorii Bludenko, who was stationed in Bukhta Olga in the Primore region in the Russian Far east, wrote to Rybak in May 1951: “I am sure that your *Pereiaslav Council* reads much better in Ukrainian. I am serving here on the Pacific Ocean among many other Ukrainians who do not want to ever forget their people, their language, and their glorious ancestors, such as Bohdan Khmelnytsky.”³²

The readers could apparently interpret selectively even the most ideologically correct historical novel, overlooking its descriptions of class struggle and friendship with Russia and reading it instead as a fascinating account of their ancestors’ glorious past. Imbibing a Ukrainian historical novel did not always mean swallowing wholesale a text ideologically sweetened with the right measures of class and national history, both modified by the doctrine of Russian guidance. For many, reading such a work was a heady act of discovering or reaffirming their national identity.

Painting the Friendship

In late 1946, as the Ukrainian press unveiled a campaign against historical topics, *Radianske mystetstvo*, the newspaper of the republic’s Committee (Ministry) for the Arts, focused on uncovering the “unhealthy glorification of the past” in contemporary paintings. Art critics denounced the artist Ivan Shulha for expressing in his canvas *The Zaporozhians’ Song* “morbid nostalgia for the past.” Hryhorii Svitlytsky’s painting *Native Land*, depicting a young woman in traditional peasant dress against the background of a beautiful country landscape, prompted them to ask, “What does it have in common with our Soviet Ukraine?” Mykhailo Derehus’s series *The Khmelnytsky Uprising* was pronounced “clearly unfinished,” but not because of its morbid nostalgia for the Cossack period—the artist “did not pay appropriate attention” to the Pereiaslav

³¹ Ibid., fols. 7, 9–9 overleaf, 20–20 overleaf, 21 overleaf, 37–38 (Krykun), 54 overleaf.

³² Ibid., fol. 18.

Council and the historic union with Russia.³³ Like they did in literature, the ideologues targeted works identifying with a “separate” Ukrainian national past, while those engaging with a past common for Ukrainians and Russian were still welcome.

The Ninth Exhibition of Ukrainian Art (November 1947) demonstrated a turn towards representations of Russian-Ukrainian friendship. While no picture celebrating an “exclusive” Ukrainian past made it into the exhibition, Hryhorii Melikhov presented a large painting, *Young Taras Shevchenko Visiting the Artist K.P. Briullov* (2.89 m × 2.95 m). The canvas portrayed a young peasant lad—the future Ukrainian national bard and professional artist, Taras Shevchenko (1814–61)—gazing admiringly at the great Russian painter, who would become his teacher at the Imperial Academy of Arts. Artistically accomplished as it appeared at the time, the work also served as a perfect illustration of the myth of the Ukrainian “younger brother” being taught and guided by the Russian “elder brother.” As the head of the Union of Ukrainian Soviet Artists, Oleksandr Pashchenko, announced, “Melikhov’s canvas is a serious blow to the Ukrainian bourgeois nationalists, who sought to isolate Ukrainian culture from the wholesome influence of Russian culture.” The painting won the Stalin Prize, Third Class, thus proving that not all non-Russian historical works were doomed under the *Zhdanovshchina*.³⁴ In fact, Melikhov’s work was such a coup on the all-Union artistic scene that in 1950 the famous Tretiakov Gallery pressured the Museum of Ukrainian Art in Kiev to give up this painting in exchange for a less valuable canvas from the Moscow art gallery’s collection. Kievans managed to defend their property rights with help from the Ukrainian party’s Central Committee.³⁵

Other artists emulated Melikhov and portrayed Russian historical figures tutoring their Ukrainian contemporaries or, at least, visiting Ukraine. Notable among works on this topic were the following paintings: M. Dobronravov’s *Peter the First in Lviv* (1947), H. Svitlytsky’s *The Composer P.I. Tchaikovsky in Ukraine* (1947), K. Trokhymenko’s *Gorky Reading Shevchenko to the Peasants* (1949), M. Khaertinov’s *After the Battle*

³³ *Radianske mystetstvo*, 17 September 1946, 4 (Shulha); 22 October 1946, 1 (Svitlytsky and Derehus).

³⁴ TsDAHO, 1/30/2426, fol. 73 (Pashchenko); O. Pashchenko, ed., *IX ukrainskaia khudozhestvennaia vystavka: katalog* (Kiev: Mystetstvo, 1948), pp. 27, 32, and 36; *Radianske mystetstvo*, 12 November 1947, 3 (exhibition); *Literaturna hazeta*, 22 April 1948, 1 (Stalin Prize).

³⁵ TsDAHO, 1/30/2041, fols. 36–38.

at *Poltava* (1950), V. Puteiko's *Maxim Gorky and Mykhailo Kotsiubynsky on the Island of Capri* (1951), P. Parkhet's *The Assault on Khadzhibei* (1953), V. Zabashta's *P.I. Tchaikovsky and M.V. Lysenko* (1953), and F. Shostak's *The Printer Ivan Fedorov in Lviv* (1954). Graphic artists and sculptors also produced numerous works on the topic of Russian-Ukrainian friendship, such as O. Kulchytska's lithograph *Ivan Fedorov among the Townspeople of Lviv* (1949), M. Vronsky's sculpture *T.H. Shevchenko and N.G. Chernyshevskii* (1954), and S. Besedin's drawings *Pushkin in Ukraine, T.H. Shevchenko among Progressive Russian Cultural Figures*, and *P.I. Tchaikovsky Visiting M.V. Lysenko* (all 1954).³⁶

While stressing Ukraine's historical connection to Russia, artists shied away from portrayals of their nation's "separate" past. Until 1954, when S. Adamovych displayed his canvas *Prince Danylo of Halych* at the Tercentenary Exhibition, no painter dared to work on the history of the Galician-Volhynian Principality. Adamovych himself came under harsh criticism. Depicting the thirteenth-century prince on the battlefield after his victory over the Teutonic knights, his painting did not develop the theme of Russian-Ukrainian friendship and was soon dismissed in the press as "pointless" (*bezzmistovne*).³⁷ The rehabilitation of Cossack glory as a legitimate topic also proved difficult. After the critics condemned Mykhailo Derehus's series on the Khmelnytsky Uprising (1946), the artist concentrated on illustrating historical novels, including Gogol's *Taras Bulba* and Rybak's *The Pereiaslav Council*. During the *dekada* of Ukrainian art in Moscow in June 1951, Derehus finally brought his Cossack heroes back into the mainstream of official art with his large painting *The Pereiaslav Council* (on which he was assisted by S. Repin and V. Savenkov).³⁸ Although mildly criticized for its lack of action and dramatic tension, the work's timely subject probably protected Derehus during the ensuing purge of "nationalist errors" in Ukrainian culture.

³⁶ Mykola Bazhan, ed., *Istoriia ukrainskoho mystetstva* (Kiev: URE, 1968), vol. 6, pp. 125–26; A. Dmytrenko, *Ukrainskyiadianskyi zhyvopys* (Kiev: Mystetstvo, 1966), pp. 80 and 88; H.M. Iukhymets, *Ukrainskeadianske mystetstvo 1941–1960 rokiv* (Kiev: Mystetstvo, 1983), pp. 96, 112, and 140.

³⁷ *Literaturna hazeta*, 17 June 1954, 4.

³⁸ TsDAML, 196/1/26, fol. 19; "Za novye uspekhi izobrazitel'nogo iskusstva Ukrainy," *Iskusstvo*, no. 4 (1954): 7; *Vystavka izobrazitel'nogo iskusstva Ukrainskoi SSR: Zhyvopis, skulptura, grafika* (Kiev: Mystetstvo, 1951), p. 17; M. Kholodkovskaia, "Introduction," in *Mikhail Gordeevich Derehus* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1954), pp. 19–22 and 30–33.

Later in 1951 young Mykhailo Khmelko, who had already earned two Stalin Prizes for paintings on Soviet topics, presented his monumental canvas *Forever with Moscow, Forever with the Russian People*. This large, magnificent painting portrayed Khmelnytsky and the Russian ambassador addressing a cheering crowd in front of the cathedral in Pereiaslav. Khmelko put the Cossack colonels, Muscovite boyars, and bishops in the foreground, including every detail of their decorative garments and gonfalons.³⁹ However, the republic's artistic community, apparently upset with the success of Khmelko's decorative monumentalism during a time when lyrical and genre works on Ukrainian subjects were dismissed as untopical, used the language of class to attack the authorities' favorite. When the painting was first exhibited in Moscow, Ukrainian critics accused Khmelko of indulging in "excessive theatrical splendor." Soon Lidiia Popova published a more damaging objection, namely, that the artist had ignored the "representatives of the common people." During the artists' conference in 1952, Serhii Hryhoriev lectured Khmelko that a historical painting "should depict not a farce or parade, but the drama of history."⁴⁰

In January 1953 the newspaper of the Artists' Union, *Radianske mystetstvo*, went as far as publishing ironic verses critical of Khmelko:

Rubies, steel, enamel, and cut glass;
Satin, brocade, and a sledge with fretwork.
This is all good, but one thing is unfortunate,
That the people are in the background.⁴¹

The critic Valentyna Kuryltseva concluded that Khmelko had not studied history thoroughly enough.⁴² For lack of another magnificent depiction of the act of union, in 1953 the authorities adopted the unsophisticated *Pereiaslav Council* by Derehus, Repin, and Savenkov as the principal official image of "reunification," later to be reproduced on stamps, tapestries, and vases in massive numbers.⁴³

³⁹ The painting was first displayed at the All-Union Artistic Exhibition in Moscow in December 1951 (*Radianske mystetstvo*, 26 December 1951, 1; 1 January 1952, 2).

⁴⁰ *Literaturna hazeta*, 31 January 1952, 4 ("excessive splendor"); *Radianske mystetstvo*, 14 December 1952, 2 (Popova); TsDAML, 581/1/343, fol. 9 (Hryhoriev).

⁴¹ *Radianske mystetstvo*, 14 January 1953, 4.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 25 March 1953, 3.

⁴³ TsDAHO, 1/70/2247, fols. 93 and 140; TsDAML, 119/1/168, fol. 1; *Literaturna hazeta*, 7 January 1954, 1.

Nevertheless, the critics' sympathies went to three new, artistically superior works by young Ukrainian artists. Oleksandr Khmelnytsky's dynamic *Together Forever* (1953) portrayed the robust and almost unruly Ukrainian and Russian masses rejoicing outside the cathedral in Pereiaslav. V. Zadorozhnyi's unusual *Bohdan Khmelnytsky Leaves His Son Tymish as a Hostage with the Crimean Khan* (1954) depicted the human side of the hetman, and Mykhailo Kryvenko's lyrical *When the Cossack Went to War* (1954) illustrated a folksong about a girl bidding farewell to a young Cossack.⁴⁴ The gradual rehabilitation of the Cossacks as part of Ukrainian heritage led Derehus to rework one of his illustrations to Gogol's *Taras Bulba*, the result being the painting *Taras at the Head of the Army* (1952). The graphic artist Oleksandr Danchenko produced a remarkable and highly acclaimed series of etchings with a title reminiscent of Derehus's 1946 series, "The Ukrainian People's War of Liberation (1648–1654)." The centerpiece of the series, *The Feat of Three Hundred at Berestechko*, glorified the heroism of the nation's great ancestors with an enthusiasm unseen since the war years.⁴⁵

In early 1954 the industrious Khmelko presented a new variant of his *Forever with Moscow* and, taking advantage of his position as the party-appointed chairman of the Artists' Union, used the tercentenary celebrations to maneuver his monumental painting back into the official canon. The changes were purely cosmetic: dressing some personages in dark clothes instead of gold-embroidered garments, making the colors less bright, and adding an old peasant bard in rags in the foreground. Although the revised painting was not praised as the definitive account of the council or nominated for any prizes, the authorities ensured that it was widely exhibited during the celebrations. In addition, Khmelko secured publication of the work on postcards, with a print run of 50,000.⁴⁶ At the insistence of Central Committee functionaries, a color reproduction of the painting was included in the authoritative *History of the Ukrainian SSR*, over the objections of the distinguished artist Vasyl Kasiian, who punned that this canvas "had not received an appraisal warranting it a place in history [nor in the *History*]."⁴⁷

⁴⁴ TsDAMLM, 581/1/440, fols. 6–9; *Radianske mystetstvo*, 9 June 1954, 2.

⁴⁵ Iukhymets, *Ukrainske radianske mystetstvo*, 100; Bazhan, *Istoriia ukrainskoho mystetstva*, 6: 229–30.

⁴⁶ TsDAHO, 1/30/3599, fols. 78–80; 1/30/3634, fol. 11; 1/30/3643, fol. 112.

⁴⁷ Naukovyi arkhiv Instytutu istorii Ukrainy Natsionalnoi Akademii nauk Ukrainy (NAIU), 1/50, fol. 21.

Together with other contemporary historical paintings, Khmelko's work was also displayed at a jubilee exhibition in the State Museum of Ukrainian Art in Kiev. The archives preserve the book of visitors' comments from this exhibition, and, although some entries have been blackened with ink, the remaining remarks shed an interesting light on the popular reception of the historical genre. Hidden among numerous ideologically correct notes (many of them signed by officially organized groups of visitors, including schoolchildren and soldiers), one finds the unorthodox opinions of individual spectators. In particular, many visitors were disappointed with Khmelko, whose work, in the words of one, "looked better on the postcards." Another anonymous observer noted: "The more I look at Khmelko, the more I like Velazquez." The visitors Koptilov and Koptilova suggested: "Many paintings depicting Bohdan Khmelnytsky would have benefited if he had been dressed more modestly." Another spectator, with an illegible signature, on the contrary, found Ie. Bilostotsky's bust of the hetman scandalous because the facial features were not those of a great national hero: "Why, then, all these radio programs? A stupid expression and a weak-willed lower lip. The spirit of history is totally absent." Several visitors singled out Kryvenko's lyrical painting, *When the Cossack Went to War*, as a work into which the author had "put his heart."⁴⁸

Even more important than some visitors' independent reading of historical images was the fact that this mammoth exhibition included frescoes from Kievan Rus', icons from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, Cossack portraits, Shevchenko's historical drawings, as well as pre-revolutionary historical paintings that had previously been deemed ideologically harmful: Feodosii Krasysky's *Guest from the Zaporozhian Host* (1901; variants 1910 and 1916) and Oleksandr Myrashko's *The Funeral of the Chieftain* (1900). By exhibiting these works together with numerous Soviet paintings on subjects from the Ukrainian past, particularly from the Cossack times, the authorities were de facto making an important acknowledgement. The display recognized the continuity of Ukraine's cultural development through the ages, as well as the succession of artistic traditions in the portrayal of the national past. Embodied in pre-revolutionary historical paintings, Ukrainian national mythology

⁴⁸ TsDAML, 665/1/169, fols. 16, 30 (Khmelko), 18 overleaf (Khmelnytsky's clothing); 46 overleaf (Bilostotsky); 2, 7, and 19 (Kryvenko).

was now implicitly, if selectively, accepted as Soviet Ukraine's national heritage.

History at the Opera

The genre of grand historical opera afforded a unique opportunity to combine Stalinism's quest for monumentalism and traditionalism in the arts with the system's regard for national history. Since the late 1930s authorities in both Moscow and Kiev favored the idea of producing a Ukrainian patriotic historical opera that would provide Soviet Ukrainians with a truly imposing representation of their heroic past.

In May 1948 the prospect of going to Moscow for the *dekada* forced the Ukrainian functionaries to prioritize the writing of a Soviet Ukrainian historical opera. Significantly, with the post-war cult of the "Russian elder brother" on the rise, the Ukrainian establishment preferred a new work celebrating union with Russia to yet another revival of Mykola Lysenko's classic *Taras Bulba* (1892), in which Russian help and tutelage were not portrayed. In two months, the resourceful playwright Oleksandr Korniiichuk produced a verse libretto of *Bohdan Khmelnytsky* co-authored with his wife, Wanda Wasilewska. The libretto was based on Korniiichuk's 1938 play but stressed the Ukrainians' desire to unite with the Russians. In July the press reported that the composer Kost Dankevych was already hard at work on the score.⁴⁹

Ukrainian ideologues turned the writing of *Bohdan Khmelnytsky* into an affair of state. As soon as the Odessan Dankevych had completed the score's first draft in January 1950, he telegraphed the news to the Ukrainian party's Central Committee. As early as 15 February the newspapers announced that the score's first audition at the republic's Committee for the Arts had been a success. By August Dankevych had delivered the final version of the score.⁵⁰

Bohdan turned out to be a grand historical opera, a work that had little in common with the conventions of twentieth-century western musical theater. Based on national motifs, it imitated the form and dramatic

⁴⁹ RGALI, 962/11/558, fols. 17, 21, and 48 (decision to produce a historical opera); TsDAMLM, 435/1/297 (first draft of the libretto); *Radianske mystetstvo*, 28 July 1948, 3 (Dankevych).

⁵⁰ TsDAHO, 1/30/2041, fol. 1 (telegram); *Radianske mystetstvo*, 15 February 1950, 3 (first audition); 23 August 1950, 3 (score ready).

structure of nineteenth-century Russian and Western European operas. The plot developed against the background of the Cossack war with Poland, ending with the decision to ask the tsar for protection (but not the act of union itself). Both Ukrainian newspapers and internal reviews characterized the Kiev premiere of Bohdan Khmelnytsky in January 1951 as a triumph.⁵¹

During the Moscow *dekada* of Ukrainian art in June 1951 the Kiev Opera Company performed *Bohdan* four times at the Bolshoi Theater with apparent success.⁵² *Pravda*, however, expressed reservations regarding this opera, which, in the newspaper's opinion did not sufficiently portray the Polish gentry as the enemy and did not have a single battle scene.⁵³ At first, this comment might appear as nothing more than an isolated low-key critique of an otherwise laudable work. Yet in the wake of *Pravda's* editorial "Against Ideological Distortions in Literature" (2 July), all problems in Ukrainian culture suddenly acquired an ideological coloring. While the ideological offensive in Ukraine was just beginning, *Pravda* intervened again on 20 July with an equally long editorial, "On the Opera *Bohdan Khmelnytsky*." Even then, the flagship of the party press did not call the opera nationalistic, nor did it demand a better portrayal of the Russian "elder brother." The editor praised the opera's subject and music, as well as the singers' performances, but also elaborated on several critical lacks: no proper depiction of the enemies, no suffering of the masses, no battles, and no more than one duet.⁵⁴

Bewildered by the insignificance of these accusations, Ukrainian functionaries themselves broadened the critique of *Bohdan*, interpreting the pronouncements from Moscow to mean that the opera was guilty of insufficiently glorifying the historical Russian-Ukrainian friendship.⁵⁵ This indictment reflected post-war Ukrainian ideologues' obsession with the issues of national patrimony and national identity, a concern reinforced by numerous previous reprimands from the Kremlin.

By January 1952 Korniiichuk and Wasilewska had prepared a new libretto, but several exhaustive discussions of the text at the republic's Writers' Union, Academy of Sciences, Committee for the Arts, and

⁵¹ *Radianske mystetstvo*, 31 January 1951, 1; *Literaturna hazeta*, 8 February 1951, 3; RGALI, 962/2/2336, fol. 13; 962/3/2306, fol. 6.

⁵² TsDAHO, 1/30/2428, fols. 3–85.

⁵³ *Pravda*, 16 June 1951, 1.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 20 July 1951, 3–4.

⁵⁵ *Literaturna hazeta*, 26 July 1951, 4; TsDAHO, 1/30/2424, fols. 13–14; 1/1/976, fols. 12, 18–20, and 227–29.

Composers' Union took months, each resulting in dozens of minor critical comments and further revisions. The new libretto contained a new act 1, scene 1 portraying the execution of Cossack rebels and the people's suffering under the yoke of the Polish lords. Another addition, act 2, scene 2, showed the Polish gentry hatching their evil plans and Cossacks storming a Polish castle. Finally, the Russian Don Cossacks appeared on the scene, and a new act 4 depicted the Pereiaslav Council as the apotheosis of the Ukrainians' historical association with the Russian people.⁵⁶

Critical comments on the draft libretto in Ukraine reveal just how unanimously the republic's officials and artistic elite had "developed" Moscow's vague critique. The apparatus of the Ukrainian party's Central Committee, in particular, demanded a more elaborate depiction of fraternal assistance from Russia (the librettists decided to show the arrival of a cart with Russian weapons). The ideologues also felt that in the opera, "the word 'Ukraine' was used too often."⁵⁷ Less subtly, other Ukrainian reviewers suggested changing the last words of the final chorus from "Glory to Bohdan Khmelnytsky!" to "Glory to the Russian people!" which was duly implemented. Nevertheless, the Ukrainian Composers' Union still demanded "a more powerful representation [of the Ukrainians'] striving to unite with the great Russian people."⁵⁸ As a result, work on *Bohdan Khmelnytsky* dragged on and the new version of the opera remained unfinished at the time of Stalin's death.

Finally, mindful of the imminent tercentenary celebrations planned for early 1954, Ukrainian authorities began coordinating feverish efforts to stage *Bohdan* in time for the jubilee. On 27 September 1953 the Kiev Opera Company opened its new season with the new version of the opera, more pro-Russian than ever. A flood of reviews promptly announced that it was a "great achievement" of the Soviet Ukrainian musical theater.⁵⁹ The subsequent lavish celebration of the 300th anniversary of the Pereiaslav Treaty cemented the opera's place in the canon of Soviet Ukrainian culture. The Kharkiv, Odessa, and

⁵⁶ TsDAMLM, 435/1/304, fols. 1–8; 435/1/305; TsDAHO, 1/30/2747; Tsentralnyi derzhavnyi arkhiv vyshchykh orhaniv vlady i upravlinnia Ukrainy (TsDAVOV), 4763/1/357, fols. 2–5 and 44.

⁵⁷ TsDAMLM, 435/1/2012, fols. 5–6 and 8.

⁵⁸ TsDAVOV, 4763/1/357, fol. 95 (concluding words); TsDAMLM, 435/1/1959, fol. 15 (Composers' Union).

⁵⁹ *Radianske mystetstvo*, 30 September 1953, 3; 14 October 1953, 3; *Literaturna hazeta*, 1 October 1953, 3; 29 October 1953, 2.

Stalino (Donetsk) opera companies staged *Bohdan*—reportedly with phenomenal success—in the spring of 1954. In May the Kiev Opera went to Moscow for the *dekada*, where they presented *Bohdan* to great acclaim.⁶⁰ Soviet television broadcast *Bohdan* live from the Bolshoi on 10 May. In his introductory comments, Dankevych claimed that the Kievans had come to the Bolshoi to express “their feelings of brotherly love and boundless gratitude” to the Russian people. The opera was also repeatedly broadcast in full on all-Union and Ukrainian radio and released on gramophone records. The festive tercentenary concert in Kiev included no fewer than three arias from Dankevych’s work. The composer himself became a People’s Artist of the Soviet Union.⁶¹

The lack of reliable sources makes it difficult to reconstruct historical opera’s influence on contemporary national identity. Tens of thousands of Soviet Ukrainians attended performances of *Bohdan Khmelnytsky*, and millions heard the opera on radio. Yet no one carried out an independent poll of listeners in 1954 to determine just how they “read” this cultural product. In January 1954 the Paris correspondent of the Ukrainian émigré newspaper, *Novyi shliakh* (New Path, Toronto), was allegedly told by visitors from Soviet Ukraine: “One must buy tickets to the Kiev Opera three or four weeks in advance to attend *Bohdan Khmelnytsky*. The public enthusiastically applauds the excellent Ukrainian settings and costumes; Ukrainians serving in the military greet the Cossack banners loudly. And the whole house listens as if in trance to Bohdan’s boring aria on the need to ‘reunite’ [with Russia].”⁶² Although some Canadian informants deemed this passage important enough to report to the Soviet All-Slavic Committee, which oversaw contacts with foreign Slavs,⁶³ no other source corroborates the émigré newspaper’s information. Reading both the Soviet archival documents and the press of the time, one might just as easily conclude that *Bohdan* was popular precisely because it embodied the idea of a union of Russians and Ukrainians.

⁶⁰ RGANI, 5/17/402, fol. 71; TsDAHO, 1/24/3504, fol. 24; 1/30/3632, fols. 20–22; TsDAVOV, 5116/4/15, fol. 44; 5116/4/19, fols. 1–2; 5116/4/20, fols. 1–7 and 25.

⁶¹ Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), 6903/26/39, TV programs and transcripts for 10 May (no pagination); RGANI, 5/17/402, fols. 76–77 (all-Union radio); TsDAHO, 1/30/3631, fol. 25 (Ukrainian radio); 1/30/3633, fols. 47–54 (gramophone disks); 1/30/3632, fols. 180–86 (concert); *Radianske mystetstvo*, 17 November 1954, 4 (Dankevych).

⁶² *Novyi shliakh*, 15 January 1954, 4.

⁶³ GARF, 6646/1/356, fols. 14–18.

The archives, however, shed interesting new light on the extent of the opera's popularity. The attendance records of the Kiev Opera for 1954 show that *Bohdan* was the public's absolute favorite: the company performed it 36 times that season with a total of 52,768 tickets sold, that is, to an average audience of 1,466 people. In the same season, the company performed the "official" Russian patriotic opera *Ivan Susanin* 8 times for a total of 6,950 listeners (an average of 869 at each performance), *Boris Godunov* 7 times for a total audience of 7,183 (an average of 1,026), and *Carmen* 9 times for a total audience of 9,894 (an average of 1,099).⁶⁴ A general statistical survey of all Soviet opera companies in 1954 reveals that 7 theaters—Kiev and 6 other smaller provincial houses, all of them in Ukraine—staged 129 performances of *Bohdan* for a total of 136,123 spectators, an average of 1,055. No Russian classical opera enjoyed such an average attendance Union wide that year. *Ivan Susanin*, staged by all the largest opera houses, came close, with 15 theaters, 126 performances, and 128,276 patrons (1,018). *Eugene Onegin*, *The Queen of Spades*, and other classics lagged far behind. The opera most often performed on a Soviet subject, Iulii Meitus's *The Young Guard*, incidentally also a work by a Ukrainian composer, scored 9–87–49,980 (574).⁶⁵

These statistics are convincing: *Bohdan* enjoyed unprecedented popularity in Ukraine. How many listeners craved a Ukrainian patriotic opera and how many the authorities "organized" to listen to a new and topical musical work about Russian-Ukrainian friendship are open to discussion. But for all practical purposes, *Bohdan* did become *the* Ukrainian national historical opera in the 1950s. Whatever its intended propaganda message, the operatic synthesis of the representation of the nation's past with grand spectacle and theatrical ritual filled an important niche among the cultural pillars of Ukrainian identity. While *Bohdan*'s content duly glorified the "elder brother," the opera also exalted the heroic Cossack past and the homeland's liberation from foreign oppression. Thus, *Bohdan Khmelnytsky* offered Ukrainian listeners the experience of identifying with their glorious ancestors.

In an angry and touching letter to Khrushchey, the singer Mykhailo Hryshko, unhappy with critics' comments about his "static" portrayal

⁶⁴ RGALI, 2329/3/168, fol. 35 overleaf. A real rarity, Puccini's *Tosca*, surpassed *Bohdan*'s record average attendance: 2,959 people showed up at a mere two performances of *Tosca* in Kiev.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 2329/3/111, fols. 1–3.

of Bohdan, expressed this sense of belonging to a historical community. Hryshko had read the scholarly books, chronicles, and historical novels on the subject, sometimes almost feeling as if he were meeting Khmelnytsky's colonels on the street. The singer thought of himself as "a son of [his] people, in whose veins runs the blood of ancestors who passed into eternity and dreamt of seeing their fatherland free and independent."⁶⁶ Similarly, the students of a small-town school wrote to Korniiichuk in 1954 that his play (and libretto) *Bohdan Khmelnytsky* "teaches us to love and be proud of our people, who defended their independence in arduous struggle."⁶⁷ It was precisely the possibility of such a selective reading of non-Russian representations of the past that undermined the principal message encoded in the official memory, that of the Russian-dominated "friendship."

* * *

Having completed an ideological purification campaign in late 1951, the Ukrainian leadership was satisfied with its efforts. From November 1951 to May 1952 no ideological decrees or major public statements indicated the party's concern with any "nationalist deviations" in culture. Soon, however, the republic's bosses discovered that Stalin himself remained suspicious of Ukraine's ideological situation. In May 1952 First Secretary Melnikov disclosed to the members of the Ukrainian party's Central Committee: "On 14 April Comrade Korotchenko and I were received by Comrade Stalin. In a conversation that lasted approximately four hours, Iosif Vissarionovich [Stalin] showed great interest in the state of Ukrainian industry, agriculture, and culture." The Ukrainian party leader went on to report on Stalin's approval of Ukraine's post-war reconstruction, but he saved the bad news for the end: "Comrade Stalin was keenly interested in the state of ideological work in Ukraine and expressed the opinion that things were not going particularly satisfactorily in this field [*chto zeds delo u nas obstoit neblagopoluchno*]."⁶⁸

Melnikov did not specify whether Stalin had elaborated on the problems motivating his concern. Yet one is tempted to surmise that the omniscient "father of peoples" realized that his viceroys had failed

⁶⁶ RGANI, 5/17/445, fols. 85–86.

⁶⁷ TsDAML, 435/1/1302, fols. 1–2.

⁶⁸ TsDAHO, 1/24/1605, fols. 19 and 23. Demian Korotchenko at the time served as the chairman of Ukraine's Council of Ministers.

to fashion a Soviet Ukrainian culture completely separate from non-Soviet Ukrainian culture. Perhaps Stalin bemoaned the limits of the state's ideological control over the production of historical works and the influential role of local bureaucrats and intellectuals in shaping the sense of nationhood in his many nations. Perhaps he was also frustrated by the Ukrainian public's apparent ability to "read" the much-edited cultural products selectively, interpreting them as narratives of their national past.