

Fighters for Ukrainian independence? Imposture and identity among Ukrainian warlords, 1917–22

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Abstract

This article investigates whether the partisans and warlords (*otamany*) active in Ukraine during the Russian civil wars were ‘fighters for the independence of Ukraine’ as the Ukrainian laws on historical memory claim. Following Sheila Fitzpatrick, it suggests that the partisan leaders were ‘tearing off the masks’, that is, trying to create new identities, often via imposture, in response to the collapse of the old order. The article reconstructs this process by examining the career of the insurgent Andrei Vladimirov, the political proclamations of the *otamany* and the warlords’ invention of their perceived Cossack heritage. In this way, it acknowledges the situative aspect of political loyalty and national identity, while also recognizing that the warlord’s leaflets are useful historical sources.

On 9 April 2015, the Ukrainian parliament passed a package of four ‘de-communization’ laws. These, taken together, sought to root out the remnants of Soviet historical memory supposedly embedded in the minds of the population and to guarantee respect for those individuals who the laws claimed had fought for an independent Ukraine. Law no. 2538–I, for example, is entitled ‘The legal status and honouring of the memory of the fighters for Ukrainian independence in the twentieth century’. It lists organizations whose members it designates as ‘fighters for Ukrainian independence’. These range from the states set up during the 1917–22 civil war, the underground far right groups of the inter-war period, the insurgent armies created during the Second World War, Cold War diaspora groups and Soviet dissident bodies. The law stipulates that those who ‘publicly adopt a disrespectful stance’ toward these ‘fighters for Ukrainian independence’ will be held accountable to Ukrainian law. Moreover, public denial of the ‘legitimacy of the struggle for Ukrainian independence in the twentieth century’ is illegal. Among those defined as ‘fighters for Ukrainian independence’ are the ‘insurgent, partisan detachments active on the territory of Ukraine in the years 1917–30, the aim of whose activity was the struggle for the attainment, defence or revival of the independence of Ukraine’.¹

This last sentence is a reference to the various irregular detachments that arose in what is today’s Ukraine after 1917.² The fall of the Romanov dynasty created a vacuum of power in which several governments and groups vied for control of the south-west of the former empire. This, in turn, allowed numerous autonomous military bands to

¹ See the official website of the *Verkhova rada* <http://w1.c1.rada.gov.ua/pls/zweb2/webproc4_1?pf3511=54689> [accessed 12 Feb. 2016].

² The best short overview of these events is G. Kasianov, ‘Die Ukraine zwischen Revolution, Selbständigkeit und Fremdherrschaft’, in *Die Ukraine zwischen Selbstbestimmung und Fremdherrschaft 1917–22*, ed. W. Dornik (Graz, 2011), pp. 131–79. A good introduction to the various Ukrainian partisan and insurgent detachments is S. Yekelchik, ‘Bands of nation builders? Insurgency and ideology in the Ukrainian civil war’, in *War in Peace: Paramilitary Violence in Europe after the Great War*, ed. R. Gerwarth and J. Horne (Oxford, 2012), pp. 52–71.

operate. At the end of 1917, a war erupted between the Bolsheviks and the nationalist Ukrainian People's Republic (U.N.R.), which claimed the parts of the collapsed Russian empire with a large number of Ukrainian (in the 1897 census, 'Little Russian') speakers (that is, the provinces of Poltava, Kyiv, Katerynoslav, Kharkiv, Podillia, Kherson, Volynia, Chernihiv and Tavriia). At its disposal, the U.N.R. had units made up of self-organized peasants known as Free Cossacks. Military defeat at the hand of the Bolsheviks in early 1918 forced the U.N.R. to turn to the Central Powers for help. Germany, aided by Austria-Hungary, drove back the Bolsheviks in spring 1918, but replaced the U.N.R. with its own regime (under the puppet ruler Pavlo Skoropads'kyi) and introduced requisitioning. This policy provoked a peasant rising in summer 1918. While the Central Powers managed to crush the rebellion, defeat in the First World War forced them to pull their forces out of Ukraine. A new rural rising broke out against Skoropads'kyi. The insurgent peasant bands brought the U.N.R. led by Symon Petliura back to power in December 1918. However, this government once again found itself at war with the Bolsheviks. In early 1919, the U.N.R. had to retreat as the peasant formations, which formed the bulk of its army, faded away. The U.N.R. did not have much to offer the peasants: the proposal to give them land meant little to people who had already taken possession of the landowners' farms. Some insurgent bands joined the Red Army, which itself was made up of spontaneously created partisan units.

The Bolsheviks recaptured Kyiv, but themselves became the target of a rural revolt in spring and summer 1919 in response to the Red Army's violent requisitioning and conscription; the peasants also feared that their land would be collectivized. This enabled the White general Anton Denikin's conquest of the country in mid 1919. However, peasants in Ukraine found the Whites' rule no more tolerable: Denikin, too, required the villages to give up their produce and sons, while also threatening their ownership of the land with the possible return of the landowners. Insurgents harried the White armies, again allowing the Bolsheviks to reconquer the country. Depending on a range of situational and ideological factors, some partisans fought for the Reds, others the U.N.R. – although, behind the White lines, loyalties could be confused and often based upon who was able to provide weapons and support. The third Bolshevik occupation of Ukraine brought yet another war with the U.N.R., with whom many partisans now allied. Even after the Bolsheviks forced the main Ukrainian army to retreat into Poland, Ukrainian insurgent detachments continued to undermine the Bolsheviks' attempts to build a state. The U.N.R.'s last-ditch 'campaign' in winter 1921 involved an attempt by two small U.N.R. forces to enter Ukraine to unite the active partisan detachments and provoke a general peasant rising. Despite the inevitable failure of this attempt, small bands continued to oppose the Bolsheviks into the mid nineteen-twenties. Thus, without doubt, the partisans or insurgents referred to by law no. 2538–I played an important role during the civil war in Ukraine, 1917–22, by helping to bring down several governments set up in the 'Ukrainian-speaking governorates' of the former Russian empire.

The peasant resistance in what is today's Ukraine came in a variety of forms that are not always easy to categorize clearly. Regardless of the ideology underlining the views of the government currently in power, peasants hid their grain, refused to plough their land or ran away to avoid conscription. Bands of deserters formed to ensure their mutual survival; they might ransack the countryside, form cores of resistance against the current authorities, or both. Villages set up their own militias – not only to defend themselves against such bandits and the different governments aspiring to rule all or parts of the former Russian empire, but also to lay their claim to the landowners' estates

against the aspirations of their neighbours. Mobilization orders or requisitioning parties could provoke spontaneous armed peasant resistance. This would often die down after the arrival of a punitive expedition. However, sometimes peasants would send representatives to other villages calling for help and spreading opposition, leading to the development of a large-scale revolt. In some areas, short-lived peasant republics emerged.³ In this way, the larger civil war between aspiring governments created the conditions for a multitude of local civil wars, which in turn could affect the larger conflict.

There was nothing uniquely Ukrainian about this: peasant resistance followed similar patterns in many other parts of the former Russian empire. As historians have turned their attention to the kaleidoscope of revolution in the provinces, this phenomenon has received increasing attention. Rural uprisings severely undermined both the Red and White military campaigns. From the well-known mass rising in Tambov to the myriad small-scale, local conflicts throughout Russia, a major question has been whether the peasants had political goals that drove their violence.⁴ As we will see, the same debate has taken place regarding Ukraine. Large parts of Siberia, in particular, resembled Ukraine. Here, local Cossack commanders, who nominally acknowledged the rule of the White leader Admiral Aleksandr Kolchak, retained a large degree of independence. They constantly undermined Kolchak's rule through their insubordination and violence. These conditions in Siberia are often described as *atamanshchina*.⁵ *Ataman* is the Russian term for a Cossack leader. The suffix *-shchina* is attached to nouns to denote a 'syndrome or set of circumstances associated with a person or place'; normally its use is pejorative.⁶ Thus, *atamanshchina* means the regime of the *atamans*.

The equivalent terms in Ukrainian are *otaman* and *otamanshchyna*. In this article, they will be translated as 'warlord' and 'warlordism' respectively and the words used interchangeably. As in Siberia, military leaders appeared in Ukraine calling themselves *otamans* and the chaos there has been described as *otamanshchyna*. By using the word *otaman*, the Ukrainian commanders styled themselves as Zaporozhian Cossacks, whom Ukrainian nationalists had long hailed as the bearers of the Ukrainian national idea in the early modern period. However, the Zaporozhian Cossacks as a separate estate with its own privileges and duties had not existed for almost a century and a half. This was a significant difference to the Siberian *atamans*, for here Cossack hosts existed until their disbandment by the Soviet state. Most *otamans* had a peasant background and led groups of peasant partisans. Almost all the warlords had served in the Russian army during the First World War, been village teachers or both. The bands often consisted of a small hard core of permanent insurgents organized around a prominent leader. During the various risings, they called upon local peasants to support them. When the rebellions met serious opposition, the peasants returned to their fields and the partisans went

³ For attempts to categorize the different types of peasant resistance, see V. N. Brovkin, *Behind the Front Lines of the Civil War: Political Parties and Social Movements in Russia, 1918–22* (Princeton, N.J., 1994), pp. 155–61, 317–25, and F. Schnell, *Räume des Schreckens. Gewalt und Gruppenmilitanz in der Ukraine 1905–33* (Hamburg, 2012), pp. 210–80.

⁴ For two nuanced analyses that take different approaches, see E. C. Landis, 'Who were the 'greens'? Rumor and collective identity in the Russian civil war', *Russian Review*, lxix (2010), 30–46, and L. G. Novikova, 'Russia's Red revolutionary and White terror, 1917–21: a provincial perspective', *Europe-Asia Studies*, lxxv (2013), 1755–70.

⁵ N. G. O. Pereira, 'Siberian *atamanshchina*: warlordism in the Russian civil war', in *The Bolsheviks in Russian Society: the Revolution and the Civil Wars*, ed. V. N. Brovkin (1997), pp. 122–38. See also J. Bisher, *White Terror: Cossack Warlords of the Trans-Siberia* (2009).

⁶ D. Offord and N. Gogolitsyna, *Using Russian: a Guide to Contemporary Usage* (Cambridge, 2007), p. 274.

underground or moved to a less dangerous place – only to rise again when the time was right. Many warlords preferred to operate near their home villages, but, in order to remain active, they often found themselves fighting in different parts of the country.

Ukrainian historians have used the terms ‘insurgent’ and ‘partisan’ detachment both to describe the peasant rebels who took arms against various governments and to refer to the bands led by the *otamans*. Sometimes historians distinguish between these two; at others, they treat them as one and the same phenomenon. Not all Ukrainian historians have romanticized the insurgent movements as fighters for independence. Some have attacked the *otamans* as an expression of the military indiscipline that undermined attempts to create a Ukrainian state and as responsible for many of the pogroms that swept the country.⁷ Others accept that the peasants had little interest in Ukrainian independence, but see the rural resistance as evidence of their implacable opposition to Bolshevism.⁸ However, the tradition embodied in law no. 2538–I is that of the school that views the insurgents as unwavering supporters of Ukrainian independence and an expression of the Ukrainian national character. Among such romanticizers, Roman Koval’ is particularly prominent. He is the founder of the Kholodnyi Iar historical club, a veritable cottage industry producing monographs on the *otamans* and republishing their memoirs. His stated aim is to venerate the *otamans* as the true Ukrainian heroes of the period and as examples for future generations to follow.⁹ The assumption that the peasant partisans and the *otaman* bands had a clear ideology and goal, namely an independent Ukraine, exists with little reference to the insurgents’ own descriptions of their aims.

Histories written in the West have cast doubt upon the political and national consciousness of the peasant partisans and their leaders. The first to take this stance were the leaders of the Ukrainian states who had been forced to emigrate following the Bolshevik victory. Of course, these authors were looking for someone to blame for the failure of the states which they had led. Volodymyr Vynnychenko, the writer and playwright who as a Social Democrat headed two Ukrainian governments created during the civil war, believed that Petliura was so dependent on the *otamans* that he stylized his former colleague’s period in power as *otamanshchyna*. Vynnychenko wrote that their evil lay in their ‘political illiteracy, in their one-sided psyche, which did not see or understand anything beyond the national, and understood the national only incompletely’.¹⁰

Until the opening of the archives, the émigré writings formed the basis of most Western accounts and thus shaped their interpretation. The two standard works on Ukraine during the civil war – the monograph by John Reshetar and the collection edited by Taras Hunczak – presented the nationally conscious intelligentsia in Kyiv as the prime actors in the Ukrainian revolution. The *otamans* appear only briefly, represented (as in Vynnychenko’s work) as undermining the Ukrainian government

⁷ V. Soldatenko, *U vyri revoliutsii i hromadians’koi viiny (aktual’ni aspekty vyvchennia 1917–20 rr. Ukraini)* (Kyiv, 2012), pp. 130–4.

⁸ V. Verstiuk, ‘Antykomunistychnyi povstans’kyi rukh i dyktatura proletariatu: Istoriia protystoiannia’, in *Studii z istorii ukrains’koi revoliutsii 1917–21 rokiv: na poshanu Ruslana Iakovycha Pyroha. Zbirnyk naukovykh prats’*, ed. V. Verstiuk (Kyiv, 2011), pp. 308–43.

⁹ See, e.g., the inscription in R. Koval’, *Povremennia otamaniv haidamats’koho kraiu* (Kyiv, 2001), p. 2. Koval’ has published or edited well over 40 works on the topic.

¹⁰ V. Vynnychenko, *Vidrodzhennia natsii* (3 vols., Kyiv and Vienna, 1920; repr. Kyiv, 1990), iii, p. 185.

through their wilful independence, rapaciousness and violence.¹¹ Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak's article in the Hunczak collection claimed that 'The *otamans* not only compromised the emerging government through their activities but actually endangered it'.¹² Orest Subtelny and Paul Robert Magocsi both expressed similar views in their well-known overview histories of Ukraine. They portray the *otamans* as anarchic neo-Cossacks who channelled the peasants' rejection of all authority. Magocsi added that often they were 'little more than marauders'.¹³ Arthur Adams, one of the few historians to examine the *otamans* before 1991, gave a slightly more positive interpretation. He presented the warlords as part of a broader Ukrainian *jacquerie*, accepted their self-image as the bearers of Cossack traditions and ascribed to them 'primitive, egalitarian economic and political ideals'.¹⁴

More recent Western works seek to counter the nationalist romanticization of the warlords. Serhy Yekelchuk argued that the *otamans* expressed the 'dreams and phobias of mostly illiterate peasant rebels through the vocabulary of modern socialism or nationalism', and that the main factor in Ukraine was the question of land redistribution.¹⁵ Felix Schnell went further in rejecting the role of ideology, examining the *otamans* as a case study of violence and group militancy. He analysed how the collapse of the Russian empire transformed Ukraine into a 'space of violence', an area where violence was the form of social interaction offering actors the best chances of successfully pursuing their interests. This behaviour was 'contagious': the threat of physical force from others encouraged individuals to use it themselves; those disposed to violence could influence those less inclined towards it more easily. Militant communities – the *otaman* bands – offered their members strength and protection. Violence held them together: it underpinned their leaders' authority, determined status within the bands' hierarchy and united members in the shared experience of combat and complicity in terrorizing the weak. Ideology played no role in this. Violence was not a means to an ideological ends. Ideology was more a rationalization after the fact, while violence was a method of communicating belonging and identity that possessed its own self-perpetuating dynamics.¹⁶

Schnell and Yekelchuk have certainly done a great service in highlighting the complexities of the situation in Ukraine: peasants rarely took up arms to fight for an ideological cause, but rather sought to pursue their own more limited desires and goals within the dangerous conditions of a chaotic civil war. The two historians have also moved the centre of attention away from the nationalist politicians and parties, upon which older accounts concentrated, to a group of actors who played an important role in determining the outcome of the civil war in Ukraine. Schnell identifies a dynamic that undoubtedly existed: violence and the threat of violence drove individuals to become more violent. However, Schnell's 'space of violence' approach has the drawback that it rules out the use of a set of sources – the leaflets and newspapers of the

¹¹ J. S. Reshetar, Jr., *The Ukrainian Revolution, 1917–20: a Study in Nationalism* (Princeton, N.J., 1952), pp. 252–3; *The Ukraine, 1917–21: a Study in Revolution*, ed. T. Hunczak (Cambridge, Mass., 1977). The notable exception is the article by A. E. Adams, 'The great Ukrainian *jacquerie*', in Hunczak, pp. 247–70.

¹² M. Bohachevsky-Chomiak, 'The directory of the Ukrainian national republic', in Hunczak, pp. 82–103, at p. 87.

¹³ P. R. Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine* (Seattle, Wash., 1996), p. 499; O. Subtelny, *Ukraine: a History* (Toronto, 2000), p. 360.

¹⁴ Adams, p. 262.

¹⁵ Yekelchuk, 'Bands of nation builders?', p. 124.

¹⁶ Schnell, pp. 256–62, 363–5.

otamans – before the historian has even looked at them to assess their value. Moreover, one should note that, for all its methodological novelty, this approach still echoes the émigré accounts by questioning the warlords' political commitment.

Did, therefore, the insurgents and partisans have an ideology? Were they supporters of Ukrainian independence as law no. 2538–I claims? Both questions are based on the assumption that it is both necessary and possible to determine the sincerity of ideological statements. Instead, this article will proceed from an approach suggested by Sheila Fitzpatrick. She argued that

Successful revolutions tear off masks: that is, they invalidate the conventions of self-presentation and social interaction that obtained in pre-revolutionary society. This happened in Russia after the October 1917 revolution [...]. In such upheavals, people have to reinvent themselves, to create or find within themselves personae that fit the new postrevolutionary society. The process of reinvention is at once a process of reconfiguration (a new arrangement of data about oneself) and one of discovery (a new interpretation of their significance). It always involves strategic decisions (how should I present myself in this new world?) and may also prompt ontological reflection (who am I really?).¹⁷

The focus is less on determining the 'genuine' identities of the insurgents and more on examining the process by which they created new personae. This perspective views the ideas expressed by the warlords not as concrete goals but as constitutive elements of the personae which they sought to create and project. The personae – and the ideological references used to create them – were important to the *otamans*, otherwise they would not have put such considerable effort into fashioning and projecting them. The article will therefore also study the role these personae played in the warlords' activity, above all those constructed to mobilize support. In order to achieve this, it will – unlike previous studies – pay close attention to the texts produced by the warlords themselves.

One aspect of this self-fashioning was taking new names. One of the best-known *otamans* is Nechypir Hryhor'iev. He served several masters – the tsars, the U.N.R., Skoropads'kyi and the Bolsheviks – before rising against the latter with the aim of making himself leader of all Ukraine in spring 1919. Hryhor'iev – whose first name is sometimes also given as Nykyfor or Matvii – was born with the surname Servetnyk. According to the historian Volodymyr Horak, the future *otaman* chose the new name after he settled in the village of Hryhor'ivka in Kherson province, but he cannot tell us why.¹⁸ Indeed, a defining characteristic of the *otamans* was their use of *noms de guerre*. Some took appellations to evoke a fearsome countenance such as *Otaman Bida* ('misery'), others chose ironic designations that belied their violent careers (*Otaman Anhel*, 'Angel'), and yet others associated themselves with the natural world in which their rural rebels operated, for example *Otaman Zelenyi* ('Green'). As this text will show below, particularly common were sobriquets recalling the leaders of the Zaporozhian Cossacks and *haidamaks*¹⁹ – early modern rebels whom twentieth-century Ukrainian nationalists viewed as their forebears. Certainly, a pseudonym had a practical advantage: it could protect one's family from repression and allow one to return home unmolested

¹⁷ S. Fitzpatrick, *Tear off the Masks! Identity and Imposture in 20th-Century Russia* (Princeton, N.J., 2005), p. 3.

¹⁸ V. Horak, *Povstantsi Otamana Hryhor'ieva, serpen' 1918 – serpen' 1919 rr: Istorychne doslidzhennia* (Fastiv, 1998), p. 8.

¹⁹ The *haidamaks* were Cossack and peasant rebels in Right-Bank Ukraine under the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth. There were several *haidamak* revolts in the 18th century. The most famous rising – the Koliivshchyna – took place in 1768–9.

during periods of calm.²⁰ On the other hand, not all *otamans* used their title to conceal. Most contemporary reports seem to have known that *Otaman* Zelenyi, who led an insurgent band in the province of Kyiv, was really Danylo Terpylo, a teacher from the village of Trypillia, north of Kyiv.²¹

‘All identity projects require impersonation’, wrote Sheila Fitzpatrick, and ‘at a certain point, or in certain circumstances, impersonation becomes imposture’.²² Participants in the revolution and civil wars had to respond to situations beyond their control and adopt identities to suit them. In many cases, these were circumstances where the individual’s life or liberty was at stake. Survival could depend on the ability to play a role that others found plausible by appealing to markers of identity that would convince the audience. Not all such identities were false, but some were clearly more a product of necessity than conviction.

Although he did not apply the concept to the warlords, Serhy Yekelchuk has considered the role of impersonation and imposture in one short study of the civil war in Ukraine. He examined in detail the identities taken on by Ivan Maistrenko, a young leftist who experienced the revolution in the region of Poltava. During the civil war, Maistrenko served as the political commissar of a partisan regiment. As such, he was not an *otaman* himself, but did maintain regular contact with insurgents. He was a convinced advocate of a Ukrainian Soviet state and joined various left-wing parties: the Ukrainian Socialist Revolutionaries, the *borot'bisty* (the left wing of the Ukrainian Socialist Revolutionaries which split off from its mother party), the Ukrainian Communist party and the Communist party of Ukraine (Bolshevik). The movement of the front lines and his task of establishing links to underground activists repeatedly placed him in enemy territory. On numerous occasions he took on roles in order to save his life. When he tried to cross into White territory in the second half of 1919, for example, a White patrol stopped him. In order to claim that he was not a member of the Red Army, he claimed to be a teacher and they let him move on. After finding the Ukrainian socialist underground, he convinced them that he was one of them by speaking literary Ukrainian. In each case, Maistrenko’s survival depended on his ability to identify the markers that others thought indicated his identity. Just as the White patrol assumed that no teacher could be a Bolshevik, so the Ukrainian socialists believed that no supporter of Denikin or the Bolsheviks would speak Ukrainian.²³ As the second example indicates, this adoption of personae was not always about deceit; sometimes, it simply meant the projection of the right identity to suit the situation.

Unlike many *otamans*, Maistrenko’s political convictions have never been in doubt. However, his experience of having to adopt personae to suit the shifting political circumstances was common, particularly among the insurgent leaders. One example is Andrei Vladimirov, a landowner from the village of Bachkurin who in 1918 and 1919 fought in peasant detachments against both the Germans and the Bolsheviks. He had been the commander of the 55th Podolian Rifle Regiment during the First World War

²⁰ For this reason, I. Liutyi-Liutenko, who was active under the name *Otaman* Honta, told very few partisans his real name (I. Liutyi-Liutenko, *Vohon' z Kholodnoho Iaru. Spohadi* (Detroit, Mich., 1986), pp. 40–1).

²¹ Kiev, Central State Archive of Public Organizations of Ukraine (Tsentral'nyi derzhavnyi arkhiv hromads'kykh obednian', hereafter Ts.D.A.H.O.), f. 5, op. 1, spr. 263, ark. 293–5, telegram from Travianko to Rubenshtein.

²² Fitzpatrick, p. 18.

²³ S. Yekelchuk, ‘The revolution at 80: reconstructing past identities after the “linguistic turn”’, *Jour. Ukrainian Studies*, xxiv (1999), 69–84, at pp. 78–84.

and, according to his memoirs, had never hidden his monarchist views from his men. After the October Revolution, he sought to return home. He dressed himself in a soldier's great coat and grey Astrakhan hat; with his 'hairy chin', he commented, he looked very similar to a 'comrade soldier'. As he passed through Bessarabia and Ukraine, he saw great crowds of soldiers, but never officers. This suggested to him that quite a few officers had put on soldiers' greatcoats and 'were pretending to be "comrades"'. The ruse could, however, be dangerous. While still in Bessarabia, a group of anti-Bolshevik partisans stopped him. The officer leading the band wanted to shoot him believing him to be a Bolshevik. For a moment, Vladimirov's disguise was too good. Only by convincing the partisan leader that he was an officer did Vladimirov escape death.²⁴ After 1917, travelling any distance in Ukraine often meant going through territories under the command of several mutually hostile groups. Often, this was not a question of crossing fronts, because there were no fronts: bands of soldiers roamed the countryside, and those whom they stopped often had to prove that they were on the right side or face death. The adoption of the right identity at the right time could be the only way of surviving.

Despite the collapse of the state, the ability to prove one's identity through the possession of the right documents was extremely important. Vladimirov was travelling without any papers: fearing what his soldiers might do to him in the revolutionary turmoil, and unable to meet his commanding staff officer, he had left the front without the requisite documents. For this reason, he particularly feared being stopped by Bolsheviks, as without papers they would assume that he was an officer and shoot him. Indeed, soon after leaving the anti-Bolshevik partisans, Vladimirov was picked up again – this time by a Bolshevik detachment. He explained his lack of documents by saying that he had been captured by anti-Bolshevik partisans and had destroyed his papers to avoid being shot by them. He had only escaped the insurgent band with great difficulty. Vladimirov's performance must have been convincing, for the Red soldiers listened with considerable sympathy to his fate, fed him and supplied him with new papers.²⁵

Vladimirov also had to play the game of adopting identities when he returned to his farm. However, here his self-formation and imposture was constrained by the fact that the locals knew his past and he could not invent a new identity from scratch with impunity. In his home village, he found his property intact. However, tension existed between him and the local peasants: he was a landowner, and they felt that following the revolution they had a right to his land. The peasants, knowing who he was, could not but respond to his pre-war role as a property owner. At Christmas, this tension reached a high point. Fearing for his life, Vladimirov fled with his family for the local town of Mostyrishche. Here, as a member of the non-labouring classes, he still faced the Bolsheviks' suspicion. Yet, he soon received the opportunity to create a revolutionary image for himself. After the Bolsheviks had chased the U.N.R. government out of Kyiv in early 1918, the Bolshevik authorities of Monastyrishche decided to hold a *spektakl'* (show) to celebrate the event. One of the organizers, a certain Semendelev, turned to Vladimirov when looking for a poem he could read on stage. Vladimirov suggested Pushkin's *Pamiatnik*, which Semendelev liked as it contained the line 'For in our [*sic*]

²⁴ Moscow, State Archive of the Russian Federation (Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii, hereafter, G.A.R.F.), f. R-588I, op. 2, d. 296, ll. 1, 3, 5–6, A. Vladimirov, 'Iz vspominanii atamana povstancheskogo otriada v Ukraine'.

²⁵ G.A.R.F., f. R-588I, op. 2, d. 296, ll. 1–2, 6, Vladimirov memoirs.

tyrant age I sang of liberty'. Though, in the end, Semendelev found the poem too hard to learn, he obviously valued Vladimirov's advice: the day after the *spektakl'*, he asked Vladimirov to join his theatrical group. Vladimirov at first refused, saying he had no talent for the stage. However, Semendelev reminded him that he needed to prove he would not turn against the revolution. This convinced Vladimirov. Indeed, the former officer and landowner even managed to write some poetry 'in a revolutionary spirit', which Semendelev performed to great acclaim on the stage. By recreating himself as a revolutionary, however involuntarily and superficially, he managed to survive in the Bolshevik controlled town until the arrival of the Germans in spring.²⁶ Vladimirov was indeed acting both on and off the stage.

Vladimirov soon also had the opportunity to create yet another identity, but this time one that allowed a reconciliation with the peasants who had taken his land and property: the role of the partisan. The arrival of the Germans allowed landowners to return to their properties: they saw the kaiser's troops as a force for law and order that would protect them from the peasants or even allow them to regain their land and inventory. Vladimirov, too, went back to his farm. However, at least according to his own account, he did not seek reprisals against the peasants who had pillaged his property. This stood him in good stead when an uprising broke out against the Germans' requisitioning. Those landowners who had used the German forces to avenge themselves on the peasants now faced retaliation. By contrast, Vladimirov was left unharmed. Instead, when the village formed an insurgent detachment, the peasants decided to take advantage of his military knowledge and demanded that he join. Although he had no desire to fight the Germans, the threatening nature of the request meant that Vladimirov felt he had little choice but to accede. Indeed, the peasants still did not trust him fully. Rather than putting him, as an officer, in charge of the detachment, they chose a former non-commissioned officer, a local peasant. The N.C.O. obviously had less command experience than Vladimirov but was more trustworthy in the peasants' eyes as he came from the same class. Vladimirov marched off to fight the Germans, but his detachment was soon defeated. He then found refuge with a village teacher in Berdichev district, where he hid while the rising against the Central Powers raged.²⁷

Only following Skoropads'kyi's fall could Vladimirov return home. This time, the peasants of his village greeted him warmly as a partisan who had fought for them. They had not pillaged his farm in his absence. Yet, when a delegation of peasants shamefacedly approached him, telling him that other villages were accusing them of counter-revolution for not taking the landowner's land, he voluntarily gave up his property as otherwise they would have destroyed it. Vladimirov rose yet higher in the peasants' estimation. When they decided in spring 1919 to rise against the Bolsheviks, they did not simply ask him to join the partisan detachment, but also suggested that he take command. This time, the suggestion must have been less threatening, as he had the courage to try to refuse. The peasants, however, would

²⁶ G.A.R.F., f. R-5881, op. 2, d. 296, ll. 7–8, 13, 15, 17, 21, Vladimirov memoirs. Semendelev, incidentally, also had the chance to create a new identity for himself. In the past he had been a circus usher, an experience, Vladimirov noted ironically, which made him the 'specialist' on the committee organizing the *spektakl'* as Semendelev thought of himself as a great artist. Now, no longer just a circus usher, he could live out his dreams of stardom by performing pro-Bolshevik poems for the citizens of Monastyrishche.

²⁷ G.A.R.F., f. R-5881, op. 2, d. 296, ll. 22, 26–8, Vladimirov memoirs.

not take no for an answer, and Vladimirov now had to take on the role of a leader of an insurgent detachment.²⁸

Vladimirov's second outing as a partisan was somewhat more successful than his first. Under his command, the detachment captured the town of Monastyrishche. He issued an order to the settlement explaining the ideology of the insurgents: 'We are fighting not against Soviet power, but against the communists, Bolsheviks and Jewish commissars and Chekists. Our slogan is "Long live the soviets, but without Communists and Bolsheviks"'. In his memoir, Vladimirov felt that he had to explain such a strange stance to his readers, who might find it 'funny or even absurd'. Many, if not all, peasants of southern Russia, he argued, understood Soviet power to be the power of the peasants. They were very disappointed that instead of soviets of peasants, they found themselves under the control of soviets dominated by Communists and Jews. 'My order', he explained, 'aimed to influence the peasant masses, who had to play the main, decisive role in this struggle'. Vladimirov judged the declaration to be a success. The next day, 2,500 insurgents came to the town to swell his ranks.²⁹

The assumption of incomprehension on the part of his readers is slightly odd as the phrasing was common to numerous peasant anti-Bolshevik risings.³⁰ Indeed, the declaration was perhaps less a statement of Vladimirov's sincere beliefs, assuming he had any, and more an imposture necessitated by the military situation – but then, imposture was an essential tactic of partisan warfare. Partisans regularly imitated the enemy and the nature of the conflict in Ukraine made it easy to conceal one's identity. Belligerents on all sides wore a variety of uniforms, if they had any at all. For example, in 1918, the peasants had not only taken weapons and ammunition from the retreating armies of the Central Powers, but also their uniforms. Reportedly, some German soldiers went home in nothing but their underwear.³¹ With the combatants lacking uniforms or wearing the same ones as their opponents, it was necessary to find other means to tell friend from foe. Red Army men often identified themselves with a red star. As these were easy to capture, and easy to put on or take off when needed, partisan units often used them when they were pretending to be Red troops.³² Moreover, since many partisans had once served in the Red Army, they often carried official Soviet papers allowing them to travel the country.³³ As the Bolshevik forces tightened their grip on the ever weaker insurgent bands, disguise became even more important to survival. One partisan memoirist describes how, during the last days of the insurgency, the partisans regularly crossed paths with much stronger Bolshevik units. His men sought to hide from them, but if they did not have time to find cover they pretended to be counter-insurgency detachments.³⁴

Imposture was also a useful means of infiltrating an enemy-held settlement. During the rising against the Bolsheviks, Vladimirov's partisans captured a store of supplies, arms and uniforms from the Red Army. He and his followers dressed themselves as Red

²⁸ G.A.R.F., f. R-5881, op. 2, d. 296, ll. 29–30, 34, Vladimirov memoirs.

²⁹ G.A.R.F., f. R-5881, op. 2, d. 296, ll. 35–7, Vladimirov memoirs. The quotations are on l. 36.

³⁰ See V. Kondrashin, 'Lozungy i programma krest'ianskogo povstancheskogo dvizheniia v gody grazhdanskoi voiny', in *Krest'ianskii front, 1918–22 gg. Sbornik statei i materialov*, ed. A.V. Posadskii (Moscow, 2013), pp. 80–98.

³¹ G.A.R.F., f. R-5881, op. 2, d. 296, l. 29, Vladimirov memoirs.

³² G.A.R.F., f. R-5881, op. 2, d. 296, l. 43, Vladimirov memoirs.

³³ This was a particular problem when Hryhor'iev's troops dispersed after the defeat of his rising (Ts.D.A.H.O., f. 5, op. 1, spr. 264, ark. 59–60, military report on the Ukrainian front).

³⁴ Liutyi-Liutenko, p. 60.

Army troops, sporting red stars. Thus clothed, they entered one settlement controlled by the Bolsheviks – who, in his account, Vladimirov defined as being all Jews. The partisans claimed to be a special assignment unit and presented themselves to the chairmen of the local executive committee. Vladimirov demanded food for his unit and information about the situation in the area, including the mood of the population and a list of those hostile to Soviet power. While the chairman was fulfilling this request, Vladimirov ate with the members of the committee, but also gave his deputy the order to surround the building where they were dining. The chairman handed Vladimirov a list of local enemies of Soviet power who he wanted shot. Having received this, Vladimirov arrested the committee and called an assembly of the peasants. He revealed to them the identity of his partisans and presented them with the list of those threatened with execution. The assembly responded by calling for the committee to be handed over to them. A pogrom promptly ensued.³⁵

Survival had compelled the former tsarist officer and convinced monarchist to adopt the role of a ‘comrade soldier’, a revolutionary actor and poet, an anti-German insurgent and finally the commander of a partisan detachment fighting the Bolsheviks. He had – at least, according to his own account written after the fact – never desired to participate actively, yet circumstances had forced him to do so. In his last role, Vladimirov found himself having to issue orders in favour of the soviets as a system of government. He may have done so less out of conviction and more out of necessity. On the other hand, his account of the pogrom he initiated indicated that he believed Jews and Bolsheviks to be one and the same: perhaps the slogan of ‘soviets without Jews’ allowed him to marry his anti-semitic views with peasant aspirations. Either way, the earnestness of his opinions is not the most interesting point. Even if the statements did lack sincerity, this does not indicate the unimportance of ideas. Rather, it suggests the necessity of projecting the right ideas at the right time. Vladimirov adopted the slogan in the belief that it would support his military activity: he sought to mobilize the peasants by appealing to their desires, as he saw them. Vladimirov’s social class had at first defined his relationship with the peasants and the urban revolutionaries of Monasteryishche. However, by taking on new roles – first the revolutionary actor and then the partisan – he had transformed this relationship. Adopting political ideas was, ultimately, one of the survival strategies in the ‘space of violence’.

This account of Vladimirov’s career is entirely based on his own memories written as an émigré in the nineteen-twenties. Many details are impossible to verify with other sources. Certainly, he seems to have misremembered at least one fact: he places his military activity against the Bolsheviks at the end of March and describes it as concurrent with Iurko Tiutiunnyk’s fight against the Red Army.³⁶ However, while Tiutiunnyk did take part in a rising against the Bolsheviks in May, in March he was still a loyal Red Army man. On the other hand, this is the type of error one might expect to creep into the retelling of events from memory. The text was written for a White émigré audience, few of whom would have been sympathetic to the Soviet slogans he had adopted. This might explain why he sought to downplay the sincerity of his participation in the rising – but, if he had wanted to do this, why would he write about the incident at all? In addition, Vladimirov’s descriptions of adopting personae to meet specific situations and the use of imposture to conduct partisan warfare find an echo in

³⁵ G.A.R.F., f. R-5881, op. 2, d. 296, ll. 43–4, Vladimirov memoirs.

³⁶ G.A.R.F., f. R-5881, op. 2, d. 296, ll. 39, 45, Vladimirov memoirs.

many other memoirs by former insurgents,³⁷ as does his account of being forced to join the partisans.³⁸ Moreover, both the White and Bolshevik agents noted how the warlords conducted false flag operations and used official papers to create new identities to avoid persecution.³⁹

One way in which the insurgents developed a new, post-revolutionary persona was through the promulgation of political statements and slogans like Vladimirov's in leaflets. In spring and summer 1919, a number of warlords rose against the Bolsheviks who at that time controlled Kyiv and a large part of today's Ukraine. Many of the warlords had earlier fought for the U.N.R. and then switched sides to support the Red Army. In early to mid 1919, however, they turned against their erstwhile allies and sought to create their own Soviet Ukrainian state that would neither be part of the U.N.R. nor of the Bolshevik-led regime. Some, such as Hryhor'iev, did this on their own account, while others entered into a nominal alliance with the left wing of the Ukrainian Social-Democratic Workers' party. During the rising, therefore, the *otamans* presented themselves as left-wing Ukrainian opponents of a supposedly Russo-Jewish, pseudo-socialist Bolshevism. The self-image they projected was that of representatives of the spontaneous will of the Ukrainian peasant (defined as both an ethnic and socio-economic category), who had fought against the nationalist regimes of Skoropads'kyi and Petliura and were now rising in the name of genuine Soviet and socialist government in Ukraine.⁴⁰

The failure of the rising meant that in the second half of 1919 many *otamans* again allied with the U.N.R. For the purposes of the approach taken here, it is unimportant whether or not this new orientation was an involuntary product of changed military circumstances or represented a shift in political convictions. The central thing is that it entailed projecting a new persona in the leaflets published over the next year and a half. Setting the tone was Iulian Mordalevych. Mordalevych had fought for the U.N.R. until the Bolsheviks expelled the government from Kyiv in early 1919. He then served in a partisan detachment in the Kyiv region during the spring 1919 rising of independent warlords in the name of a non-Bolshevik, non-U.N.R. Soviet Ukraine. He became head of the insurgent committee there in autumn 1919, and once again acknowledged the authority of the U.N.R. In this capacity, Mordalevych issued an appeal to the peasants to support a U.N.R.-led rising. He opened his statement by addressing their supposed sense of Ukrainianness:

In your veins runs Ukrainian blood.

You love your home, your children; you love your farm. THEN LOVE YOUR NATIVE COUNTRY, your fatherland; love your brothers of your native language with your soul and body; help with their struggle for the freedom of the country.

³⁷ For similar examples, see the memoirs of another insurgent in the Kyiv region, G.A.R.F., f. R-5881, op. 2, d. 673, esp. ll. 40 ob-42 and 57, 58 ob, A. Taranenko, 'Vosstanie v mestechke Gorodishche Kievskoi gubernii (9 maia 1919 g.). Vospominaniia'.

³⁸ This was the case for the Russian officer N. Radchenko and at least one other officer he met (see his memoir in G.A.R.F., f. R-5881, op. 2, d. 586, ll. 5, 34, 'Vosstanie krest'ian v selakh: Leshchinovke, Chaikovke, Krasnostavke, Botvinovke, Bosovke i drugikh, Kievskoi gubernii Umanskogo uezda 1918g.').

³⁹ G.A.R.F., f. 446, op. 2, d. 45, ll. 242–3, agent's report for the political office, 28 Nov. 1919; Ts.D.A.H.O., f. 5, op. 1, spr. 264, ark. 59–60, military report on the Ukrainian front, 1 June 1919.

⁴⁰ C. Gilley, 'The Ukrainian anti-bolshevik risings of spring and summer 1919: intellectual history in a space of violence', *Revolutionary Russia*, xxvii (2014), 109–31.

The partisan's declared aim was to achieve Ukrainian statehood. While he still presented the insurgents as leftists who opposed the bourgeoisie, he also asserted them to be the enemies of the 'absurd utopian politics and violence of Red Moscow and the Bolshevik-Communist mobs'; in this way, they had adopted the 'golden mean' between the extremes of capitalism and communism. Mordalevych called upon the population to recognize that they were Ukrainian, and not Little Russians, *khokhly* or Ruthenians, which he viewed as insulting terms. Consequently, he argued, they should acknowledge that there was only one Ukrainian government and one Ukrainian army, which they ought to support.⁴¹

Thus, while a left-wing persona was still dear to the insurgents, many increasingly combined it with nationalist slogans. In 1919, both the insurgents and the U.N.R. had employed leftist slogans to mobilize the peasants against the Bolsheviks. While the rising had certainly weakened the Bolshevik grip on Ukraine, neither the insurgents nor the U.N.R. had managed to capture large swathes of territory. Rather, the Whites had taken advantage of the Bolsheviks' instability, and the slogan of a Ukrainian, Soviet government became tainted by failure. The switch to national mottos may have seemed to offer a more promising means of mobilizing the masses. After all, in the nationalist world view, national consciousness was the most fundamental component of an individual's identity.

The insurgency's failure to overthrow Bolshevik rule in 1919 and 1920, however, meant that many partisans increasingly began to see their efforts as futile. In spring 1921, the Bolsheviks offered an amnesty to the partisans, which a large number accepted. The new change in allegiance was again accompanied by the adoption of another persona. Mordalevych was one of the most prominent warlords to accept the amnesty. He sought to justify his new position to Khristian Rakovskii, the head of the Ukrainian Soviet Republic, in a letter that outlined his philosophy. Continuing the theme of a 'golden mean' from his earlier declaration, he argued that it was necessary to find a mid-way position that guaranteed both personal freedom and the promotion of the collective good. It was also necessary to avoid radical attempts to reconstruct society because this would mean ignoring the psychology of the people that had formed over centuries and would require force. He found this balanced, gradualist socialism to be expressed by Ukrainian thinkers such as Mykhailo Drahomanov and foreigners like Karl Kautsky. Lenin's recent concessions on the national question at the tenth party congress had convinced him that the Bolsheviks were moving in the right direction.⁴² Mordalevych, therefore, explicitly presented himself as a leftist both reconsidering his own views and finding the Bolsheviks changing theirs.

This was clearly too independent a position for the Bolsheviks. In a slightly later letter to Rakovskii, Mordalevych claimed that he was seeking an amnesty because he had come to question his belief in agrarian socialism.⁴³ In Mordalevych's printed article where he called upon other insurgents to lay down their arms, the *otaman* expressed his rejection of agrarian socialism and condemned Kautsky, for whom he had privately expressed admiration in his first letter.⁴⁴ Accepting the Bolshevik amnesty involved

⁴¹ Kiev, Central State Archive of the Highest Organs of Government and Administration of Ukraine (Tsentrāl'nyi Derzhavnyi Arkhiv Vyshchykh Orhaniv, hereafter Ts.D.A.V.O.), f. 1, op. 8, spr. 63, ark. 3–3 zv, appeal by Iulian Mordalevych in a leaflet 'Stradaiuuchy narode' ('To the Suffering People').

⁴² Ts.D.A.V.O., f. 3204, op. 1, spr. 82, ark. 1–1 zv, letter from Iulian Mordalevych, 5 May 1921.

⁴³ Ts.D.A.V.O., f. 3204, op. 1, spr. 82, ark. 8–8 zv, letter from Iulian Mordalevych to Rakovskii, 11 July 1921.

⁴⁴ Ts.D.A.V.O., f. 3204, op. 1, spr. 82, ark. 12–4 zv, Iu. Mordalevych, 'Do povstantsiv. Mii Shliakh' ('To the Insurgents. My Path'), 29 June 1921.

adopting another new persona. Mordalevych tried to assert some control over this, attempting to retain elements of his earlier anti-Bolshevism. However, the Bolsheviks were in the stronger position and could dictate what his new public persona would be. From Mordelevych's perspective, this may indeed have been an imposture. Either way, for all sides, it was important for him to create a persona to meet the image of a repentant *otaman*. Certainly, Mordalevych soon became disappointed with Soviet Ukraine. After five and a half months of living in the new republic, he escaped to Poland. Rejected by other members of the pro-U.N.R. émigré community for his earlier betrayal, he joined Ukrainian émigré leftist circles in Prague. In 1926, he again received an amnesty from the Soviet regime and the opportunity to return to Ukraine, although the deputy head of the Soviet secret services was against issuing him a visa. After the first failed attempt at reconciliation, his move to take on the persona of a penitent warlord faced greater opposition within the ruling party. Whether Mordalevych was able to take up this opportunity to go back is unclear; his subsequent fate is unknown.⁴⁵

Alongside the promulgation of political slogans in leaflets, one of the most visible aspects of 'self-formation' in Ukraine after 1917 was the general appeal to the supposed legacy of the Zaporozhian Cossacks. As mentioned above, these had long ceased to exist as an institution. However, since the end of their host, the Zaporozhian Cossacks had been constitutive elements of numerous projects to construct identity in the areas we now call the Ukraine. Ukrainian nationalists saw the Cossacks not only as representatives of the Ukrainian nation in the early modern period, but also as a knightly class embodying military values.⁴⁶ Thus, the development and depiction of a Cossack persona was an 'invented tradition' that drew on a long custom of imagined identity. After 1917, the territories of today's Ukraine saw a renaissance of everything connected to the Zaporozhian Cossacks. One, undoubtedly satirical, Bolshevik account observed that 'Otamans ... having adorned themselves with curved mediaeval sabres and all sorts of arms, struck poses of Taras Bulbas, Doroshenkos, Sahaidachnyis and other heroes of the Zaporozhian host'.⁴⁷ Others also noticed the theatrical aspect of this. 'Everything [in Kyiv] was rebuilt to look like Ukraine in the olden days', wrote the later Soviet writer, Konstantin Paustovskii, who served in the U.N.R. and Bolshevik armies in Ukraine, 'It was hard to tell if something serious was going on or if the city was merely acting out a play with characters dressed up like old-time peasant rebels'.⁴⁸

The regular forces of the U.N.R. imagined themselves as modern-day Cossacks. Privates were known as Cossacks, while the word *otaman* was used to refer to a division, corps or army group commander. Other Cossack terms used in the U.N.R. army were *starshyna*, a word for a Cossack civil or military official, or officer, and *kish*, the word for a Cossack camp, for battalion.⁴⁹ Poems in the U.N.R.'s frontline newspaper *Ukrains'kyi kozak* (*The Ukrainian Cossack*) exhorted the soldiers of the U.N.R. army to follow the

⁴⁵ On Mordlevych, see V. Savchenko, *Atamanshchyna* (Khar'kov, 2011), pp. 165–9.

⁴⁶ J. Bürgers, *Kosakenmythos und Nationsbildung in der postsowjetischen Ukraine* (Konstanz, 2006), pp. 38–48; O. W. Gerus, 'Manifestations of the Cossack idea in modern Ukrainian history: the Cossack legacy and its impact', *Ukrains'kyi istoryk*, xix (1982), 22–39, at 29–32.

⁴⁷ Moscow, Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii, hereafter R.G.A.S.P.I.), f. 71, op. 35, d. 904, l. 2, E. A. Shchadenko, 'Bat'ko Antonov, ataman Grigor'ev and mama Odessa' ('Little Father Antonov, *Otaman* Hryhor'iev and Mother Odessa').

⁴⁸ Quoted in W. B. Lincoln, *Red Victory: a History of the Russian Civil War* (Boston, Mass., 1999), p. 312.

⁴⁹ Yekelchik, 'The revolution at 80', pp. 73–4.

examples of their military forebears. One, entitled ‘*Haidamaks*’, reminded its readers that ‘We are Cossacks! With a knightly spirit/... We are *haidamaks* .../And those who do not know a Cossack/... Remember Zalizniak/And the vengeance of Honta’.⁵⁰ The poem thus elided the Zaporozhian Cossacks, the *haidamaks* and the troops of the U.N.R. army as all part of one and the same phenomenon. Equally, it invoked the image of the Cossacks as the knights of the Ukrainian nation and all the noble values associated with that. In the same issue, on the date of the Cossack leader Bohdan Khmel’nyts’kyi’s death, the paper also claimed that his memory inspired the present generation of Cossacks to fight for Ukraine’s freedom: ‘the figure of Bohdan Khmel’nyts’kyi hovers over Ukraine and calls to struggle for an independent Ukrainian Republic, whose president he was during his life’.⁵¹ By presenting the Cossack hetman as president of a Ukrainian republic, the article depicted the current state as a governmental form with a historical pedigree in order to legitimize it and its leader.

The appeal of the Cossack myth, however, stretched beyond just the ‘nationalists’. In June 1919, a number of Red partisan units responded to an appeal by Petliura calling on them to fight for the U.N.R. with the words ‘We the Comrade Bohuntsi and other Ukrainian Cossack-Red Army men have received your obscene appeal. We answer you as did the Zaporozhians the Sultan in ancient times’.⁵² This was a reference to Ivan Sirko’s 1676 reply to an ultimatum from Sultan Mehmed IV calling for surrender of the Zaporozhian Cossacks, immortalized in Il’ia Repin’s painting ‘Zaporozhian Cossacks write a letter to the Turkish sultan’.

Of all the forces active in Ukraine, the insurgents were particularly keen to present themselves as heirs of the Zaporozhians. One sees this in the use of the term *otaman* itself, but also the *noms de guerre* chosen by the *otamans*. As mentioned above, many warlords named themselves after the leaders of the Zaporozhian Cossacks and *haidamaks*. Examples include the *otamans* Mamai (after the folk hero Kozak Mamai), Baida (a Cossack whose deeds against the Turks had been immortalized in many songs), Bohun (after Ivan Bohun, an adviser to Bohdan Khmel’nyts’kyi), Zalizniak (after Maksym Zalizniak, leader of the Koliivshchyna rising 1768–9), Sirko (the seventeenth-century leader of the Zaporozhian Cossacks depicted in Repin’s painting) and Honta/Gonta (after Ivan Gonta, another participant in the Koliivshchyna).⁵³

The warlords’ self-reinvention was often quite theatrical. Like every performance, it required costumes, props and a stage. Many stories, some possibly apocryphal, surround Iukhym Bozhko in this regard. Bozhko was the organizer and commander of several units that fought for the U.N.R. against the Bolsheviks, but he was also difficult to control and discipline and finally died while taking part in a mutiny against Petliura. In November 1918, he created a unit called the ‘Zaporozhian Sich’ that acknowledged the U.N.R. Bozhko was said to have demanded that the director of the historical museum of Katerynoslav send him its Cossack artefacts and an old Cossack bible; and he allegedly used a goose-quill pen to write declarations. His followers were reported to sport shaven heads and topknots, long moustaches and uniforms modelled on the garb of the Cossacks (fur hats with a cloth tail, high-collared jerkins with large buttons, baggy

⁵⁰ P. Stakh, ‘Haidamaky’, *Ukrains’kyi kozak*, no. 27, 10 Aug. 1919, p. 1.

⁵¹ ‘Do rokovyn smerty Bohdana Khmel’nyts’koho (Pomer 9 serpnia 1657 r.)’, *Ukrains’kyi kozak*, no. 27, 10 Aug. 1919, p. 1.

⁵² R.G.A.S.P.I., f. 71, op. 35, d. 500, l. 237, extract from the ‘Podolian Communist’, no. 63, 15 June 1919.

⁵³ Savchenko, p. 8.



Figure 1. Otaman Bozhko (third from the right) with members of his band alongside the writer Osyn Makovei (fourth from the left) (Kiev, Central State CinePhotoPhono Archives of Ukraine, 0–181840).

trousers and broad belts).⁵⁴ Photographs of Bozhko's band show that the *otaman* himself certainly dressed this way (see Figure 1). While the members of his band do not seem to have taken this dressing up to quite such extremes, many do wear either fur hats with a cloth tail, have their hair styled in a Cossack topknot or have sashes tied round their waists. Several, like Bozhko, have guardless long knives thrust into their belts.⁵⁵ Bozhko and his men were not the only insurgents to dress up in this way. One report on the pogroms in Fastiv in 1919 describes three *otamans* 'strutting about the town in theatrical costumes and multi-coloured hats'.⁵⁶

The stages were the sites associated with the Cossack past. In a later romanticized account of the Kholodnyi iar partisans, one insurgent fighter and memoirist described their base, the Motronin monastery, as a 'sacred place for Ukrainians. Cossackdom was born here. Not far away ... Khmel'nyts'kyi was insulted, and swaddled by the circumstances of the time, Khmelnivshchyna was born ... Here the Koliivshchyna began and here it ended'. Maksym Zalizniak, the leader of the Koliivshchyna, had taken refuge as a monk in the monastery, and Abbot Mel'khisiedek had blessed his struggle in the name of 'Freedom'. The local peasants had supposedly experienced tsarist oppression for the shortest time and thus maintained the Cossack traditions of

⁵⁴ M. Sereda, 'Otamanshchyna. Otaman Bozhko', *Litopys Chervonoï Kalyny*, i (1930), 10–2, at p. 10. Savchenko, pp. 115–21, draws extensively on this source.

⁵⁵ Kiev, Central State CinePhotoPhono Archives of Ukraine (Tsentral'nyi derzhavnyi kinofotofono arkhiv, hereafter Ts.D.K.F.F.A.), 0–181840. This photograph is reproduced in Yekelchuk, 'Bands of nation builders', p. 108.

⁵⁶ *Kniga pogromov. Pogromy na Ukraine, v Belorussii i evropeiskoi chasti Rossii v period grazhdanskoi voiny 1918–22gg. Sbornik dokumentov*, ed. L. B. Miliakova and others (Moscow, 2008), pp. 243–4.

resistance. ‘Some two decades ago’, the author wrote, ‘the peasants here lifted up “their free voice” in the night in the elections of the Hetman of Ukraine and, at the old Cossack graveyard, placing their hands on an ancient Cossack sabre, swore not to betray or reveal the secret’.⁵⁷ Zalizniak thereby imagined the Cossacks, *haidamaks* (many of whom were not Cossacks) and nineteenth-century peasant disturbances to be all part of one phenomenon: the Ukrainian people’s struggle for freedom. The insurgents were but the latest descendants of this tradition, bound to their forebears not only by the goal of their struggle, but also the territory in which it took place. Of course, the Motronin monastery had offered itself as a base for different generations of insurgents for sound military reasons: it was a very defensible position and a good place to hide. Other *otamans* hoped to establish a similar geographical connection with their imagined antecedents. According to one later account, when Petliura requested that Bozhko rejoin the U.N.R. army, the latter demanded that his ‘host’ receive land that had once belonged to the Zaporozhians.⁵⁸

Even where they did not physically act out such roles, the *otamans* published texts that evoked Cossack scenes. One finds this in the leaflets produced by *Otaman* Orlyk. Orlyk, whose real name was Fedir Artamenko, had served in the U.N.R. army until it retreated into Poland. Thereafter, he led a band of partisans in Ukraine that attacked Red Army garrisons and sabotaged Soviet infrastructure. He also sought to agitate the peasants against the new regime. With this aim, he issued an appeal ‘To brother peasants and workers of Ukraine’ that opened with a poem:

We all have sharp sabres, raven black horses,
We win for ourselves glory – the glory of Ukraine.
We will cut our way through to you, executioners and monsters,
And show you our glory – the glory of the Zaporozhians.
Hey, you lads, everyone on their horses,
Be ready,
Soon we shall go to feast
In the Jews’ mansions.

The rest of the leaflet was largely devoid of such imagery, although it did refer to the ‘yoke’ of the Bolsheviks as a ‘seventeenth-century yoke, from the time of serfdom’. Instead, it attacked the Bolsheviks as Jews who had brought violence and hunger to the villages and towns.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, Orlyk’s Cossack text sought to conjure up an image in the readers’ minds of mounted men swinging sabres (rather than modern weapons) who would avenge the injustices done against the people and, in a typical expression of Cossack *joie de vivre*, stop for a repast in the halls of their enemies. The image could have come from Taras Bulba.

One leaflet in fact made an explicit reference to Nikolai Gogol. During the rising against the Hetman, one insurgent unit calling itself the Free Partisan Detachment of Anarchists published a Russian-language leaflet titled ‘Wondrous is the Dnepr in calm weather, when freely and smoothly he races his full waters through forests and hills’.

⁵⁷ Iu. Horlis-Hors’kyi, *Kholodnyi iar. Roman u dvokh chastynakh* (L’viv, 1934; repr. Cherkasy, 1994), pp. 44–5.

⁵⁸ Sereda, p. 12.

⁵⁹ Kiev, State Archives Department of the Security Services of Ukraine (Derzhavnyi arkhiv sluzhby bezpechny Ukrainy), f. 5, spr. 666646, tom. 11, ark. 1 (15), leaflet, ‘Braty seliane ta robytnky Ukrainy’ (‘To Brother Peasants and Workers of Ukraine’), 27 Dec. 1920.

This is a quotation from Gogol's short story 'A terrible vengeance', a Gothic folk tale with Cossack protagonists. The leaflet imagined an ideal period, the 'time of Free Ukrainian Cossackdom, of joyful feasts, of hefty clashes with the enemy, of the brave lads the Gritskos and Petruses, of the beautiful Oksanas, of the quiet moonlit nights, of the sobbing sound of the *bandura*. A time of a free Ukraine without yokes, without chains, without slavery'. This time was long gone and replaced with the terrible oppression of the tsars. However, the 'sound of the free song of Cossackdom, of the Gritskos, of the Petruses rung out, again the healthy laughter of the beautiful Oksanas rang out, the sable swung back far in the Cossack's firm hand against the enemy, again the chords of the *bandura* sing of love, of a Free Ukraine'. This had not lasted long; Judases had betrayed Ukraine: 'Instead of the Cossack's sabre, the *haidamak's* treacherous bullet whistled, aimed at [his] brother's breast'. The leaflet called upon Ukrainians to remember their forefathers, Taras Bulba and the Zaporozhians, and rise up to free Ukraine.⁶⁰

The leaflet is unusual with regard to the language in which it was written as well as its explicit literary references. It appealed to the people of Ukraine through the construction of an idealized Cossack past freedom rather than the immediate issue of requisitioning and violence against the village. Perhaps this is an indication that the authors of the text were members of the intelligentsia. The juxtaposition of good Cossacks and bad *haidamaks* is uncommon, but certainly a product of the time in which it appeared: Skoropads'kyi's troops were known as *haidamaks*. Despite these uncommon aspects, it is further evidence of the ubiquity of the Cossack myth among insurgent detachments in Ukraine.

So, were the *otamans* and other insurgents 'fighters for the independence of Ukraine in the 20th century'? As part of the commendable attempt to counter the nationalist romanticization of the warlords, Serhy Yekelchuk argues that 'the revival of the term *otaman* suggested a spontaneous return to Cossack traditions, but the rebels were not conscious Ukrainian nationalists. Rather they were motivated by local concerns, prejudices and naive anarchism'.⁶¹ The approach adopted in this article, however, suggests that whether the warlords really believed in Ukrainian nationalism or were driven by other motives is inconsequential. The significant fact is that it was important to many of them to cultivate and project a Zaporozhian persona. In doing so, they took part in a general wave of neo-Cossack revival that swept Ukraine, catching up not only Ukrainian nationalists connected to the U.N.R., but also partisans who fought in the Red Army. The pervasiveness of Cossack symbols is testimony to the success of nineteenth-century historians in propagating the image of the Zaporozhians. For some inhabitants of the area that is now today's Ukraine, it clearly had a mobilizing power. The Cossack myth may well have been the core of some insurgents' identity, providing a framework which gave meaning to their activity. For others, the Cossack persona may have been an imposture – yet the fact that they chose it indicates that they believed it would be useful in order to justify their actions to others. Either way, many insurgents found it sufficiently important to cultivate.

Yekelchuk is right to argue that the espousal of Cossack traditions did not necessarily mean that the warlords were Ukrainian nationalists. Numerous groups all drew on the same well of myths and symbols, but filled them with different political content: a

⁶⁰ Ts.D.A.H.O., f. 57, op. 2, spr. 266, ark. 10, appeal by the Vol'nyi Partyzanskyi Otriad Anarkhistov.

⁶¹ Yekelchuk, 'Bands of nation builders?', p. 121.

Cossack identity might provide the basis for loyalty to the U.N.R., the Bolsheviks, the idea of an independent Soviet Ukraine free of Bolsheviks, or simply to a local warlord. The *otamans* themselves recognized different masters at various times and espoused a variety of slogans. While many were keen to present themselves as leftists and opponents of the Russians and Jews, the emphasis regularly changed depending on who they were currently allied with. Often these shifts in loyalties and slogans were a response to the military situation. However, clearly, the widespread use of political platforms and positions by the combatants in the civil war convinced the warlords that adopting political personae that would define them in relation to the various fighting camps was important. The leaflets and newspapers were therefore part of the warlords' identity projects. That the creation of such identity projects involved imposture does not make them any less significant: as Fitzpatrick argues, impersonation is an inevitable part of self-formation.

Thus, to designate the warlords as 'fighters for the independence of Ukraine' is simplistic on two levels. First, it ignores the fact that many warlords and partisans who fought for the U.N.R. or proclaimed independence to be their goal at one point had supported the Bolsheviks and leftist political aspirations. Second, it fails to acknowledge that the warlords' statements and allegiances were the product of identity projects emerging from the collapse of the old regime and the resulting shifting military situation. These often entailed imposture. Certainly, historians need to be very careful in answering the question 'what did the warlords *really* want?' However, one can go further: not only is it often impossible to separate 'genuine' from 'false' identities and beliefs (and questionable whether these are clearly distinct), but also one can examine the *otamans* productively without needing to attempt to do so. There are many problems with the 9 April laws about Ukrainian historical memory.⁶² One, as this article has tried to show, is that simplistic, declarative laws cannot capture the complexity of identity creation in a time of crisis.

⁶² The online journal *Krytyka* has published a number of texts dealing with the laws in English (<<http://krytyka.com/en/taxonomy/term/5392>> [accessed 26 Apr. 2016]) and Ukrainian (<<http://krytyka.com/ua/categories/antykomyunistychni-zakony-9-kvitnya-2015-roku>> [accessed 26 Apr. 2016]). *Krytyka*'s call for papers on the matter also has links to other texts examining the laws (<<http://krytyka.com/en/articles/submit-your-opinion-piece-decommunization-ukraine>> [accessed 26 Apr. 2016]).