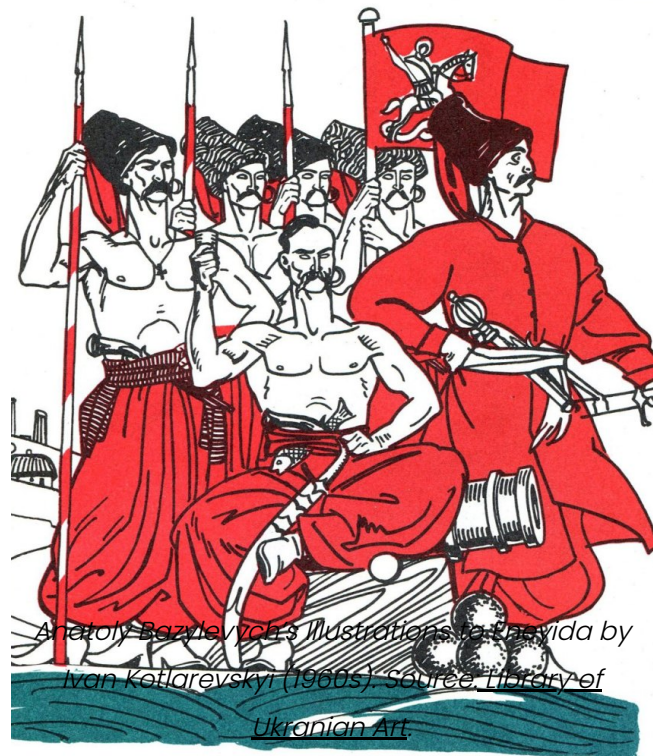


The Cossack Myth in Eastern Europe – Interview with Denys Shatalov

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This article is part of the TRAF0 series “Emerging Topics. Insights from ‘Behind the Scenes’”. Today, we put the spotlight on the workshop, “The Cossack Myth in Eastern Europe in the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries”, which will take place at the Forum Transregionale Studien, Berlin, on 12–13 December 2019. We talked to the convener, Denys Shatalov (Prisma Ukraïna Visiting Fellow 2019) about the upcoming event. More information on the workshop, including the full program, can be found here.



How did you come up with the idea for the workshop “The Cossack Myth in Eastern Europe in the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries”?

The Ukrainian “Cossack myth” stipulates the key role of Cossacks in Ukrainian history and presents the Cossacks as the embodiment of national values. The popular narratives stress the Cossacks’ love for freedom, their role as permanent defenders of the Motherland, and their unsurpassed military skills and bravery. This myth has become a significant part of Ukrainian national consciousness.

The Cossack myth started to take shape with the emergence of the Cossackdom itself. The free adventurers, burglars and warriors from the “Wild Fields” of the Southern-Ukrainian steppes, uncontrolled by the government and a buffer zone between the European and Turkic-Orient world, gradually became the military estate of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth’s borderlands in the 16th and 17th centuries. In the middle of the 17th century, following Khmelnytsky’s rebellion, they created the Hetmanate, which is now being interpreted as an early Ukrainian nation-state. This group of people, known as the Cossacks, served as an emblem of Ukraine both on mental and real geographical maps. This representation, using one concrete social group, became the basis for the self-identification of the whole nation. Cossack history has been a theme exploited by Ukrainian national activists since the end of the 18th century. But the content of the myth was and is very flexible; it lent itself to be instrumentalized by very different political forces. For example, with some nuances between them, the Cossack theme was exploited for patriotic mobilization during WWII both by Soviet propagandists and by Ukrainian nationalists. Its powerful influence on the Ukrainian consciousness was accentuated once again with the start of the Revolution of Dignity and the war in the East of Ukraine.

So I had the idea to gather specialists in different fields and periods, including historians, literary scholars and anthropologists, to have active discussions of specific aspects of the myth functioning throughout Ukrainian history. I am sure that these talks could be useful not only for those working on the Ukrainian past and present, but also to those who are interested in histories of nation-building in Central and Eastern Europe. The Cossack myth could be treated as a versatile example of making use of history in such a process.

How does the topic of the workshop relate to your own research?

My PhD dissertation (defended in 2016) and the current project, on which I work in the framework of my fellowship at the Forum Transregionale Studien, are devoted to several aspects of how the Ukrainian Cossacks were represented in public opinion from the late 18th century to the first half of the 19th century. In my dissertation, I showed how, just after liquidation of Cossackdom in the Left-Bank Ukraine and the Zaporizhian Sich, the memory of these military structures turned into a historical myth in the Russian Empire. I also tried to define the different ways Cossackdom was perceived in Russian and Ukrainian public opinion from the late 18th century to the first half of the 19th century.

My current project still concentrates on the first half of the 19th century, but now I deal with another region – Galicia, Western Ukraine – which in that period belonged to the

Habsburg Empire. Even in the 17th century, during the period of the Cossackdom's flourishing, Galicia was not a land of Cossacks; there was no Cossack tradition there. But, since the 1860s, a real "cult" of the Ukrainian Cossacks emerged in Galicia. They became very popular heroes for the local Ukrainian youth, and no less popular than in Dnieper Ukraine, which was a former Cossack land. In his publications, Ostap Sereda showed that the literature from Dnieper Ukraine, which diffused into Galicia in this period, played a significant role in this process. In my research, I turn to an earlier period of the 1830s and the 1840s, when the groundwork for the "cult" of Cossacks was being prepared by the first generation of agents of the Ukrainian national awakening.



Denys Shatalov. Photo: private.

Why are you particularly interested in the spread of the Cossack myth in Ukrainian regions where there had been no Cossacks?

Studying this process gives us a better understanding of the formation of the modern Ukrainian nation. For modern Ukrainian identity, cossackophilia and ukrainophilia are practically the same. The myth is also a very interesting issue from the perspective of the history of ideas. Most parts of Ukrainian regions had a real Cossack background: the "glorious Cossack past" was commemorated by local populations through local narratives in towns and villages. But in Galicia, Cossack

structures never existed. The acceptance and spread of the myth in Galicia is a very interesting case of how a mixture of representations from Dnieper Ukrainian, Polish romantic literature and Ukrainian folklore had influenced specific Ukrainian regions.

The Ukrainian-Galician population was mostly Greek-Catholic by confession, but, in the Dnieper Ukraine version of the mid-19th-century myth, the Cossacks were presented as the main opponents of the Union of Brest in 1596 (as a result of which the Greek-Catholic Uniate Church emerged). Even more, during the Uman' Massacre in 1768, among the victims of the Haidamaks, who were often presented as bandits or rebels (depending on one's general attitude to their case), were not only Poles and Jews, but also Greek-Catholics. Despite this, the students of the Lviv seminary – future Greek-Catholic priests – introduced the Cossacks as heroes in the Galician-Ukrainian literature. The Cossack theme was used by them as a tool for the cultural emancipation of Ruthenian-Ukrainians from the Polish cultural field. The initial perception of the Cossacks in Galicia in this period was based, then, not on Dnieper Ukrainian cultural patterns, but more so on the Polish romantic myth of the Cossacks and their representations in Ukrainian folklore. From the Dnieper Ukrainian version of the myth, Ukrainians from Galicia primarily borrowed the idea of the Cossacks' hostility to the Poles and neglected the religious issues.

What is the peculiarity of the Ukrainian Cossack myth among other national myths in Eastern and Central Eastern Europe?

I think that the Ukrainian Cossack myth is the most influential and most universal among other Eastern European myths. It is inclusive, unlike, for example, the Polish myth of *szlachta* (nobility). As it was believed in Ukrainian tradition, everybody could have become a Cossack, regardless of their nationality and social status; the main condition for it was an acceptance of Cossack values. As well as this, the Ukrainian Cossack myth was and is very flexible. As I have mentioned above, very different political forces – nationalists, communists, monarchists – could simultaneously appeal to the myth in their propaganda. The specific content of these references depended on the situation – for example, the Russian Black Hundreds stressed the Cossacks' hostility to the Catholics and Jews and emphasized their loyalty to the Russian Tsars; Ukrainian nationalists stressed the Cossacks' struggle with Poland and/or with Russia. In political versions of the myth, Crimean Tatars were presented among the enemies of Cossacks as well. With Ukrainian independence in 1991, and even more with the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Ukrainian national narrative began to stress Cossack-Tatar alliances, especially against Russia.

It is also important to understand the deep differences between the Ukrainian and Russian versions of the Cossack myth. They are sometimes treated only as regional versions of the same phenomenon. But for Ukrainians, the Cossacks represented the whole nation – or, in other words, the whole Ukrainian nation is treated as the Cossacks. Russian Cossacks represent themselves as a special social estate within the Russian state, sometimes even as a separate ethnos, whose duty is to serve the state. We plan to discuss these distinctions between the Ukrainian and the Russian Cossack myth during the workshop.

Denys Shatalov is Visiting Fellow 2019 of Prisma Ukraïna – Research Network Eastern Europe, a research program of the Berlin-based Forum Transregionale Studien. He obtained his PhD in History in 2016 from Oles Honchar Dnipro National University, Ukraine, with a thesis on Ukrainian Cossacks in public discourse during the second half of the 18th to the first half of the 19th century. Since January 2015, Denys has been a Research Fellow at the “Tkuma” Ukrainian Institute for Holocaust Studies and the Jewish Memory and Holocaust in Ukraine Museum. Since December 2018, he has been the Head of the Research and Museum Department at the “Tkuma” Institute. His main focus is on the Ukrainian Cossacks and how they are imagined in Ukrainian national myths. His recent publications include: *Notions of the Appearance of the the Cossacks from the Late-Eighteenth to Mid-Nineteenth Century: Texts, Graphics and Everyday imaginations. Part 1–3* (2018) and *Non-nipped Memory: The Holocaust in the Soviet War Memoirs* (2019).

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