

Roxolana's Children:

A Ukrainian Identity for the Modern Age?

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In May and June of 1997 Ukrainian television broadcast the 26 episodes of the first national soap opera, the historical serial *Roxolana*. A fictional story line was based vaguely on what little is known about the life of a sixteenth-century Ukrainian woman, Nastia Lisovska, who at fifteen years old was captured by Tatars, ending up as the wife of the great Ottoman ruler, Sultan Süleyman the Lawgiver (known in the West as "Süleyman the Magnificent"). According to Ukrainian newspapers, an estimated 22 million people, out of the total population of approximately 48 million, watched *Roxolana*, which immediately gave rise to passionate debates in the press.² Filmed on a beggar's budget of only US\$600,000, the first national soap opera was severely criticized for the low quality of production and weak script. (Instead of the enormously popular novel *Roxolana* by the contemporary writer Pavlo Zahrebelny, the script was based on a weaker early-20th-century book by Osyp Nazaruk.)

But more importantly, the film inspired both critics and the general public to comment on the issues that went far beyond the scope of the soap opera itself. In the

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² For the number of viewers, see *Den*, 27 June 1997, p. 7.

months following the showing, Ukrainian newspapers published a number of critical essays and readers' letters arguing both in favor and against seeing Roxolana as a national heroine. She was labeled the most famous Ukrainian woman in history, the victim of a kidnapping; a protectress of her native land; a traitor who changed her religion, as well as a powerful wife of the sultan, who did nothing to prevent Tatar raids. She was called an incarnation of the "national idea"--and a predecessor of the "Natashas," whom the members of a brutal international mafia import from Ukraine into the brothels of Western Europe and North America.

If anything, the public debate about *Roxolana* revealed tensions that are accompanying identity changes in today's post-communist Ukraine. The political, social, and cultural redefinition of such societal borderlines as nationality, class, and gender found its magnified reflection in the public reaction to a fantasy about the life of a sixteenth-century woman. The constructed nature of modern identities was perhaps at its clearest in these debates, although not necessarily appreciated by its participants. But the scandal over a piece of fiction highlighted, in fact, what has long been appreciated by scholars.

Thinking Theoretically about Ukrainian Identities

Modern students of nationalism have little patience with older scholars who saw 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.³ Ernest Gellner contributed an influential proposal: although national high culture is a recent invention, nationalists always insist on its primordial character and folk roots.⁴ 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.⁵

Without rejecting the nation’s “discursivity,” 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 because, as Arjuna Appadurai noted back in 1981, history is not “a limitless and plastic symbolic resource.”⁶ The continuous veneration of the glorious Cossack past in Ukraine since the eighteenth 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 inherited notions or emotions.⁷

Even if granted a free hand in their manipulation of historical narratives, modern nation-builders (and empire-builders) still have difficulty enforcing their interpretation

³ Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication*; Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*; Hobsbawm and Ranger, *Invention of Tradition*; Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

⁴ Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 57.

⁵ See especially H[artley], “Nation,” in *Key Concepts in Communication and Cultural Studies*; Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*.

⁶ Appadurai, “The Past as a Scarce Resource.”

⁷ Thus, I share Anthony Smith’s and Rudy Koshar’s criticisms of the “constructivist” argument. See Smith, *Ethnic Origins of Nations*; idem, “The Nation”; Koshar, *Germany’s Transient Pasts*, 8-10.

outside the public domain. Prasenjit Duara suggests that “nationalism is rarely the nationalism of *the nation*, but rather marks the site where different representations of the nation contest and negotiate with each other.”⁸

Most of these conceptual reservations are equally relevant to the discussion of identity. I understand “identity” as never complete, multifaceted, and always constituted within representation. Rather than seeing political and social identities as fixed and objective, I follow Stuart Hall and others in defining them as collective representations of political, social, and cultural boundaries and thus not simply characteristics of the self, but also aspects of the societal practices of domination and resistance.⁹ This applies equally to “class,” “ethnicity,” and “gender,” which, following Joan Wallach Scott, I understand not as a code word for women but as historically specific knowledge about the social construction of sexual difference.¹⁰

How, then, does one write Ukrainian history with these theoretical suggestions in mind? A quick look at the literature provides a number of excellent examples of how attention to both the social construction of identities and its limits enrich our understanding of Ukraine’s past and present. For the nineteenth century, let us look at three articles published between 1989 and 2001. In 1989, Paul Robert Magocsi suggested in his article “The Ukrainian National Revival: A New Analytical Framework” that the traditional view of the Ukrainian national movement as belated and unsuccessful in securing its ultimate aim (political independence) is misleading. He proposes instead to see the activities of nineteenth-century Ukrainian patriots as reflecting a slow transition

⁸ Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation*, 8.

⁹ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in J. Rutherford, ed., *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, 222-37.

¹⁰ Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, 20-22, 32.

from a complex hierarchy of multiple loyalties or national identities to a framework of mutually exclusive ethnic identities. Instead of a “preordained” political outcome, a Ukrainian nation-state, this competition of identity projects is relatively open-ended. Indeed, Magocsi rightly proposes that this process continued in Soviet Ukraine.¹¹

In his contribution to an influential collection of articles, *Intellectuals and the Articulation of the Nation*, John-Paul Himka also questions the traditional—and teleological—narratives of nation- building in Galicia during the nineteenth century. The reader gets his or her early warning from the article’s title, “The Construction of Nationality in Galician Rus’: Icarian Flights in Almost All Directions.” Himka does not limit himself to the obvious discussion of why the Ukrainophiles eventually defeated the Russophiles. Previous scholars have assumed that it was only natural that the Ruthenians of Galicia (who in the twentieth century will call themselves Ukrainians) did not assimilate into Polish culture, but Himka carefully discusses the religious, cultural, political, and social causes of why this did not happen. Moreover, he entertains two other options—a local Galician nationality and a common Eastern Slavic nationality uniting the present-day Ukrainians and Belarusians. (The first national orientation, known as Rusynism, actually existed at some points during the nineteenth century and received a new lease on life in present-day Transcarpathia. The second is completely hypothetical, but this does not make Himka’s analysis of its pluses and minuses any less interesting.)¹²

The third article that I would like to mention here is by the prominent Lviv historian Yaroslav Hrytsak. His study of given names among Ukrainian activists in

¹¹ Paul Robert Magocsi, “The Ukrainian National Revival: A New Analytical Framework,” *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism* 16, no. 1-2 (1989): 45-62.

¹² John-Paul Himka, “The Construction of Nationality in Galician Rus’: Icarian Flights in Almost All Directions,” in Michael D. Kennedy and Ronald Grigor Suny, eds., *Intellectuals and the Articulation of the Nation*, pp. 109-67.

Galicia during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is valuable not only as a case study of the construction of national identity and historical memory. It also stresses the limits to patriotic manipulation of personal identities. Hrytsak shows that the princely names of Kyivan Rus' were almost completely absent in Galicia until the 1850s, when the first Volodymyrs, Yaroslavs, and Olhas appeared. By the 1890s these names were seen as “national” ones, and they became popular in the cities—a process that spread to Ukrainian villages after the Revolution. Yet other patriotic Slavic names that had been introduced in Galicia during the mid-nineteenth century, such as Ruslan or Dalibor, failed to take root because they lacked a connection to specifically Ukrainian national mythology, which by the late 1880s had emerged victorious over other national orientations.¹³

Moving very quickly into the twentieth century, one cannot fail to notice the refreshing revisionist view of the Ukrainian Revolution in Andrew Wilson's *The Ukrainians: Unexpected Nation*. (Although it offers a more subtle vision of Ukrainian history than the author's previous *Ukrainian Nationalism in the 1990s: A Minority Faith*, Wilson's new book still contains a number of controversial interpretations and quite a few minor errors.) In his analysis of the revolutionary period, however, Wilson makes several good points. He warns that were “plenty of other dramas unfolding on Ukrainian territory at the time” and that the revolution did not necessarily have a Ukrainian adjective in front of it. (This is particularly true of Eastern Ukraine. Too much is left out when events there are interpreted as the Ukrainian nation's struggle for statehood.) He cautions the reader against the assumption in the “national awakening” model that

¹³ Iaroslav Hrytsak, “Iakykh-to kniaziv byly stolytsi u Kyievi? Do konstruiuvannia istorychnoi pam”iati halyts’kykh ukrainsiv u 1830—1930-ti roku,” *Ukraina moderna* 6 (2001): 77-95.

peasants were always latent nationalists—in fact, their chief interest was in obtaining land. Finally, Wilson aptly labels the UNR a “virtual republic.” Indeed, “[i]ts existence was brief, its boundaries variable and its power limited, but it still left a durable mythology behind it...”¹⁴ In other words, the UNR’s very existence, no matter how brief and “virtual,” was a major factor in the development of modern Ukrainian identity.

In his book *The Affirmative Action Empire*, a monumental study of the Soviet nationality policies during the interwar period, which uses the Ukrainian SSR as a case study, Terry Martin sheds interesting new light on the Ukrainization. Previous scholars interpreted this policy as a success resulting, for the first time in modern history, in the emergence of a hegemonic Ukrainian identity in the cities. This, in turn, provided a ready explanation for the 1933 terror against the Ukrainian intelligentsia. It was seen as the Kremlin’s alarmed response to the Ukrainization of urban and working-class environments. Yet Martin’s archival research proves that by 1932, the project of comprehensive linguistic Ukrainization had failed. The Russian language remained dominant in the factory and the office. Russian predominated in the economy and serious decision-making, while the Ukrainian language predominated in the sphere of culture, rural areas, and ceremonial politics. A Soviet Ukrainian identity was emerging as a bilingual territorial identity, which was bilingual and open to adoption by ethnic Russians. The terror of 1933, Martin explains, was caused by the political consequences of the Ukrainization, rather than its social outcomes.¹⁵

¹⁴ Andrew Wilson, *The Ukrainians: Unexpected Nation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 122-25.

¹⁵ Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923—1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), pp. 122-23.

Moving from the terror wave of 1933 to the Great Terror of 1937-38, Hiroaki Kuromiya in his book *Freedom and Terror in the Donbas* provides one of the most detailed case studies of the Stalinist purges. Their implications for identity politics were far from straightforward, however. Kuromiya shows that national minorities residing in Ukraine, such as the Poles and Germans, were also targeted during the Great Terror. (This is confirmed by Martin's statistical calculations regarding the so-called "diaspora nationalities.") Compared to them, ethnic Ukrainians were "underrepresented" among the Terror's victims.¹⁶) Kuromiya shows that the Ukrainian intelligentsia was also a targeted group, as were various church activists.¹⁷ But if the "diaspora" minorities suffered disproportionately, the Terror unwittingly increased the general homogeneity of Ukraine's population, and allowed—perhaps not so accidentally—for the Russian culture's increased prominence in the republic.

World War Two, as Amir Weiner argues in his book *Making Sense of War*, frequently structured policies and organized violence along the ethnic lines. In Vynnytsia oblast, which Weiner uses as a case study, the Nazis' racial policies, Ukrainian guerilla warfare, and the Soviet terror (which was increasingly "ethnicized") irrevocably changed the region's ethnic mosaic. Those who survived used the war to assert themselves as legitimate members of the Soviet polity, but together with ethnic Russians the republic's titular nationality was best poised to use the cult of the war to consolidate its national identity.¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 426-27.

¹⁷ Hiroaki Kuromiya, *Freedom and Terror in the Donbas: A Ukrainian-Russian Borderland, 1870s-1990s* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 231-39.

¹⁸ Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

Works discussing the cultural construction of identities in postwar Soviet Ukraine have been slow to appear—in contrast to the abundance of publications on the period of *perebudova* and the post-Soviet decade. (William Risch’s Ph.D. dissertation on postwar Lviv as Ukraine’s cultural window to the West fills an important blank spot, but it still awaits publication). The Ukrainian philosopher Myroslav Popovych in his often sophisticated and original *Survey of the History of Ukraine’s Culture*--not just Ukrainian culture—is obviously struggling in his chapter on the Brezhnev period. Much of the chapter is a simple retelling of all-Union political developments, together with the history of Ukrainian dissent, some statistics on internal migration, and anecdotes from the life of Ukraine’s prominent intellectuals.¹⁹ Much more fascinating are several chapters in the collection *Essays on Ukrainian Popular Culture* (1998), which concentrates on the twentieth century and includes longer entries on anecdotes, open markets, feminine ideal, gardening, self-publishing, church, and television.²⁰

Ievheniia Kononenko’s chapter on the “Feminine Ideal” is worth noting for its open critique of what she calls a “folkloric-patriarchal-populist” ideal of a beautiful, thrifty, and virtuous woman with black hair and brown eyes.²¹ Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak’s *Feminists Despite Themselves* (1988) remains the standard book on women’s organizations in prewar Ukraine (with an emphasis on Galicia), but there is still a room for works on the complex entanglement between Ukrainian nationalism and patriarchy. Recent archival-based works, such as Mark Baker’s article on Ukrainian soldiers’ wives or widows (known as *soldatky*) during the revolution and Yoshie Mitsuyoshi’s Ph.D.

¹⁹ Myroslav Popovych, *Narys istorii kul'tury Ukrainy*, 2nd ed. (Kyiv: ArtEk, 2001), pp. 671-714.

²⁰ Oleksandr Hrytsenko, ed., *Narysy ukrains'koi populiarnoi kul'tury* (Kyiv: UTsKD, 1998).

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

thesis on Soviet policies towards Western Ukrainian women in 1939-1950 indicate a welcome turn toward serious study of the social construction of gender.

Rather than discussing the literature on identity-construction during the last two decades, a subject with which many in the audience are more familiar than me, and rather than answering questions about my position in the “nationalizing states” debate, in the second part of this paper I will present a case study of identity construction in Ukraine during the late Stalin period.

Imagining Stalin’s Ukrainians

Chapters from Natan Rybak’s historical novel *The Pereiaslav Council* began appearing in Soviet Ukrainian press in the fall of 1947. As a result of two campaigns against the “idealization” of the Ukrainian past (1946-47), ideological control over the historical genre in the republic was already tight. Although one could hardly find a timelier historical topic than Ukraine’s union with Russia, the press welcomed the 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 modest print run of 20,000 copies, the same newspaper noted the publication but did not run a book review for several months.²²

The novel presents an epic picture of the Khmelnytsky Uprising, ending with the Pereiaslav Council 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. Like many other positive historical characters in Stalinist literature, Rybak’s Khmelnytsky appears

²² *Literaturna hazeta*, 7 August 1947, 2; 6 December 1948, 3.

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 had 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 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 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 in conversation, Lavryn Kapusta [the head of the secret police] could only shrug his shoulders noncommittally.²³

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 toward reunification with Muscovy, while at the same time expressing care and concern for the common people through periodic cleansings of the upper classes.

More important, Rybak struck a fine balance between national history and class history by representing reunification 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 Ivan Bohun, who had neither attended the Pereiaslav Council nor

²³ Rybak, *Pereiaslavska rada*, 45.

taken an oath to the tsar. In his book *Fighters for Freedom*, the pre-revolutionary nationalist novelist Adrian Kashchenko portrays Bohun as an opponent of the union with Russia. In *Bohun*, the early Soviet Ukrainian writer Oleksandr Sokolovsky depicts 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 chose not to mention Bohun at all in his description of the Pereiaslav Council and 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.²⁴

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—Natan Rybak's weighty historical novel, *The Pereiaslav Council*, stands at the vanguard of Soviet Ukrainian prose." Dmyterko went on to approve the topic and the style, as well as to read aloud extensively from the book's description of the Pereiaslav Council. The novel earned its author a Stalin Prize, Second Class.²⁵

With the 300th anniversary of the Treaty of Pereiaslav looming large, the publication of volume 2 of *The Pereiaslav Council* was the major event in Ukrainian literary life in 1953. Contemporary critics agreed that the sequel was artistically superior

²⁴ On different writers' portrayal of Bohun, see Syrotiuk, *Ukrainskyi radianskyi istorychnyi roman*, 295-9. On p. 295 Syrotiuk announces, "The *Pereiaslav Council* conclusively disproves the statement of some bourgeois historians and novelists about acute contradictions and conflicts between Ivan Bohun and Bohdan Khmelnytsky."

²⁵ L. Dmyterko, "Ukrainska radianska literature," 74-5; *Literaturna hazeta*, 9 March 1950, 1 (award).

to the original even though Rybak had further developed elements of adventure, intrigue, and espionage not considered proper in a serious historical novel.²⁶

The tercentenary celebrations in May 1954 marked the culmination of the historical genre's rehabilitation. As the best novel embodying the new official memory, *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* on the history of the party). Between January and May 1954 all Ukrainian oblasts reported the organization of public readings, readers' conferences, study workshops, and amateur dramatizations of the novel. In Stanyslaviv oblast alone, more than a hundred readers' conferences took place. The village of Vovkovyi in Rivne oblast, 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*, may serve as a typical example.²⁷

The *Pereiaslav Council* went through several mass editions during 1953-4, including a luxurious two-volume set in Ukrainian with color illustrations by A. Riznychenko. Three Moscow publishers planned to issue a Russian translation of the novel in 1954, causing the CPSU Central Committee to intervene and decide that Goslitizdat would print the jubilee edition.. As if all this 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.²⁸

²⁶ TsDAMLM, 590/1/204, ark. 3 and *Literaturna hazeta*, 12 November 1953, 3-4.

²⁷ TsDAHO, 1/70/2247; 1/30/3681, ark. 113 (Stanyslaviv oblast), 124 (Vovkovyi).

²⁸ Rybak, *Pereiaslavska rada* (1953); TsKhSD, 5/17/454, l. 1 (Moscow publishers); TsDAHO, 1/30/3631, ark. 4, 8; *Literaturna hazeta*, 6 May 1954, 3 (radio).

Following in Rybak's footsteps, many other writers speedily produced novels about the Ukrainian, mostly Cossack, past that emphasized the Russians' help and the Ukrainians' age-old desire to unite with their Russian brethren. Ukrainian writers had so successfully recovered from the official purge of the historical genre in 1946-7 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 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."²⁹

As for regimenting the public's perception of these books, it was beyond even the Communist Party's capabilities. The numerous letters from readers, which may be found in Natan Rybak's personal archive, allow 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 educational impact. Petro Zhytnyk, from the village of Mykolaivka of Nekhvoroshcha district, Poltava oblast, wrote to Rybak on 27 February 1952:

²⁹ TsKhSD, 5/17/402, l. 78; *Literaturna hazeta*, 22 May 1954, 4 (conference); TsDAMLM, 590/1/199, ark. 23-4; *Literaturna hazeta*, 28 October 1954, 2 (congress).

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 for a long time I was not able to free myself from those ideas. Much later, in 1943, after reading O. Korniiichuk's play *Bohdan Khmelnytsky*, watching the film of the same name, and reading your novel *The Pereiaslav Council* for the first time in 1949, I finally profoundly understood 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!³⁰

Ideologically correct as it is, the letter reveals that this reader was not interested in the notions of friendship of peoples, class struggle, and the fraternal aid of the Russian elder brother so dear to Soviet ideologues' hearts and scattered 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 that glorified their nation's heroic past, as if the "friendship of peoples" paradigm had never existed. Ivan Burlaka, from the village of Erazmivka in Oleksandrivka district, Kirovohrad oblast, 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

³⁰ TsDAMLM, 687/1/47, ark. 23 zv (anonymous note) and 29 (Zhytnyk).

book that explains the state-building aims and humane ideals of the heroic Ukrainian people's national liberation movement.”³¹

Most striking is the number of letters that Rybak received from ethnic Ukrainians living in other Soviet republics. All his correspondents from the Kuban region, Sverdlovsk oblast, 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 author that the local bookstore had sold out its allotment of *The Pereiaslav Council* in one week. Krykun considered himself lucky to have procured a book in a second-hand shop; although only volume 1 was available, at least it was in Ukrainian.³²

After reading 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.”³³

Apparently, readers could interpret selectively even this 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. Reading a Ukrainian historical novel did not always mean swallowing wholesale a text that had been ideologically sweetened with the right measures of class and national

³¹ Ibid., ark. 11-12.

³² Ibid., ark. 7, 9-9 zv, 20-20 zv, 21 zv, 37-8 (Krykun), 54 zv.

³³ Ibid., ark. 18.

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.

* * *

What lessons may be drawn from this episode? Perhaps it is a warning that even an identity-shaping project backed by an intensely ideological state with totalitarian ambitions can go wrong. Or perhaps it may be viewed as a more general conceptual reservation about the need to analyze the cultural construction of identities as *practice* involving the input of those whose identities are ostensibly being “shaped”? Finally, it may be an encouragement to see nationalism not as an attribute of the nation (and class and gender not as expressions of some “natural” social or biological forces), but rather as discursive sites, where modern societies acquire their cultural languages and fight over political notions. Roxolana’s children are constantly re-imagining themselves as Ukrainians or Russians, workers or the new middle class, men or women, but the point is to worry less about the image than about their freedom of imagination.