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Author(s): Serhii Plokhy

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Poltava: The Battle That Never Ends

SERHII PLOKHY

ON THE MORNING OF 27 JUNE 1709, two armies faced each other in the fields near the Ukrainian city of Poltava. One was led by the young and ambitious king of Sweden, Charles XII, the other by the not so young but no less ambitious tsar of Muscovy, Peter I. Both were backed by detachments of Ukrainian Cossacks—one led by Hetman Ivan Mazepa, who had rebelled against Peter and joined Charles, the other by Hetman Ivan Skoropads'kyi, appointed by the Russians to replace Mazepa. The ensuing battle has often been regarded as a significant turning point in Russian and, indeed, European history. Peter won, defeating his archenemy, saving his country, securing his hold over the Hetmanate (a Cossack polity subordinated to Moscow), and turning the tide of the long Northern War. Charles lost and had to seek refuge on the territory of the Ottoman Empire. At the end of the war Peter proclaimed himself emperor of Russia, and his country became a major European power. In time, Russia not only put an end to Swedish dominance in the Baltic region and Northern Europe but also embarked on a prolonged course of westward expansion that took its troops all the way to Paris during the Napoleonic Wars of the next century.

Three hundred years later, on 27 June 2009, close to fifty thousand citizens of Poltava and their guests gathered on the historic site to watch a reenactment of the battle. Representatives of the Ukrainian, Russian, and Swedish governments took part in unveiling a monument, the Arch of Reconciliation, on the site. The inscription on the monument, written in Ukrainian, Russian, and Swedish, reads: "Time Heals Wounds." Events pertaining to the ceremony suggest that those words were addressed not so much to the Russians and Swedes as to the Russian visitors and their Ukrainian hosts. While the Russian government was eager to celebrate the anniversary of a battle that propelled Russia to the status of a European power, the Ukrainian leadership was more than reluctant to mark an event that buried the hopes of Ivan Mazepa and his supporters to make Ukraine independent of Russia. Thus, President Dmitrii Medvedev of Russia was represented at the event by his head of administration, but the Ukrainian president, Viktor Yushchenko, sent only a deputy head. On the eve

of the commemorations, Ukrainian nationalist organizations began putting up posters in the city bearing Mazepa's image and the words: "Mazepa won! A Ukrainian state exists!" On the day of the reenactment, a thousand people attended a memorial service for the Cossacks who died in battle, and local residents took part in a hunt for "Mazepa treasure" planted in a secret location by the city authorities. The effigy of Mazepa that was brought to the field by Russian nationalists to be burned was confiscated by the local police—close to nine hundred of them were mobilized to ensure the orderly conduct of the reenactment. Despite the tensions preceding the event, it went off without a hitch. But the commemoration did little to bridge the gap between those who came to Poltava to celebrate the Russian victory and ascent to Great Power status and those who came to mark the anniversary of Mazepa's revolt and mourn the dead.¹

The Battle of Poltava remains an important component of Russian and Ukrainian historical mythology. It also continues to generate interest among scholars, writers, and the public at large. From the historian's viewpoint, the battle itself is a fascinating research topic, as are its military, political, and social ramifications and the many different manifestations of its "afterlife." That "long" history of the battle—the actual event and the multiple myths to which it gave rise—is the subject of this volume. It is the outcome of a conference organized in November 2009 by the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute with the cooperation of the Kennan Institute at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, D.C., and the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies at the University of Alberta. The conference, entitled "Poltava 1709: Revisiting a Turning Point in European History," brought together scholars from the United States, Canada, Russia, Ukraine, Scotland, Italy, Austria, and Sweden. Most of them contributed to this volume. We also asked three colleagues who did not attend the conference to contribute papers. The volume is divided into five sections, each dealing with a particular stage in the "long" history of the battle: its prehistory; the battle and its immediate impact; the origins and transformation of Poltava mythology in the Russian Empire; the development of a countermyth of Poltava centered on Hetman Ivan Mazepa; and, finally, the image of Poltava in modern historiography and the contemporary politics of memory.

THE ROAD TO POLTAVA

There is a consensus among historians that although a major military clash between Sweden and Russia was probably bound to happen sooner or later, there was nothing inevitable about the location where it actually took place. Why the battle over Baltic region was fought on the margins of the Black Sea

steppes is a question best answered by focusing not on Sweden or Russia but on Ukraine. Charles XII's arrival in Poltava was the result of a detour. As he made his way toward the Russian heartland in the fall of 1708 to confront Peter I, the Swedish king decided to turn south to Ukraine in order to replenish his supplies and avail himself of Ivan Mazepa's hospitality. He intended to spend the winter resting and preparing for the decisive battle in the following year. But why would Mazepa, until then a loyal subject of Peter, extend his hospitality to a faraway king? The essays by Zenon Kohut and Tatiana Tairova-Iakovleva add to our understanding of Mazepa's motives for breaking with Peter and allying himself with Charles. The first of these essays painstakingly reconstructs the territorial visions of Ukraine that Mazepa inherited from his predecessors, the seventeenth-century hetmans of Ukraine. Those visions of a Ukraine extending far beyond the boundaries of the Hetmanate were severely threatened by Peter's encroachments on Cossack autonomy, which began with the outbreak of the Northern War. As Tairova-Iakovleva convincingly demonstrates on the basis of new archival findings, the tsar had already enacted a number of reforms that challenged the power of the hetman as commander of the Cossack army and ruler of an autonomous realm. These reforms were not specifically directed against Mazepa, who was still very much trusted by the tsar. Nevertheless, Peter's implementation of his reforms in the Hetmanate would not only bury Mazepa's dreams of extending his control to Right-Bank Ukraine, but also subsequently diminish his powers in the Left-Bank Hetmanate.

The siege and capture of Baturyn, Mazepa's capital and supply depot, by Russian forces in November 1708, soon after the hetman switched his allegiance to Charles, was a major military success for Peter in the months leading up to Poltava. It left Charles and Mazepa without badly needed ammunition and food supplies and had a major psychological impact on the Cossack army and the population at large, who were not sure which side to join. For centuries afterward, Ukrainian chroniclers described in detail the horrendous crimes perpetrated by the victors, who allegedly did not spare not only the military garrison of the fortress but also the civilian men, women, and children who fell into their hands. Was the massacre of the Baturyn population a reality or a myth—a public-relations victory for Mazepa, who managed to plant the image of his enemies as cruel butchers in the minds of generations of Ukrainians? Volodymyr Kovalenko seeks to answer this question on the basis of archeological excavations that he and his colleagues have been conducting in Baturyn for more than a decade. The skeletons of women and children that they have unearthed confirm the gruesome accounts of the Ukrainian chronicles and other eighteenth-century sources: what happened in Baturyn was indeed a large-scale massacre of the civilian population. The fate of Baturyn became a warning to the rest of Ukraine about what would happen to those who decided to join Mazepa and oppose Peter. Aleksandr Menshikov, who was sent by the

tsar to crush the revolt, managed not only to capture Baturyn but also to score a psychological victory in the struggle for the loyalty of the Ukrainian population in the months leading up to the decisive battle at Poltava.

THE BATTLE AND ITS AFTERMATH

Why did Peter win the battle, and how did he manage to defeat the formerly invincible army of Charles XII, the conqueror of half of Northern and Eastern Europe? Should the victory be attributed to the long-term evolution of Russian military doctrine and expertise or to the modernization of the armed forces undertaken by Peter along European lines in the years immediately preceding the battle? In answering this question, Donald Ostrowski argues against the conventional view, which attributes the victory to Peter's successful reform of his armed forces after the defeat at Narva (1701). He maintains that the Russian victory at Poltava was due largely to the deployment of dragoons (pikemen), whose numbers were dramatically increased by Peter in the years leading up to the battle to match the disproportionately high number of dragoons in the Swedish forces—in each army, they accounted for close to one-third of its manpower. Ostrowski points out that the reliance on pikemen in both armies ran against the grain of modernization and that Peter reduced their numbers after the battle of Poltava, as he no longer needed so many of them. Peter Brown, by contrast, takes a long view of the Russian victory at Poltava, placing it in the broad context of the transformation of the Russian military and society that accompanied the Military Revolution or, as Brown calls it, the early modern arms race. Comparing the military strategies and command-and-control structures employed by Peter's father, Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich, in the early stages of the Thirteen-Year War of 1654–67 with Peter's actions on the eve and in the course of the Poltava battle, Brown discusses both continuity and change in Russian military strategy of the period. His conclusions suggest that the Russian victory was the result of “more than two hundred years of firearms’ technological commitment” on the part of the Muscovite state and its rulers.

Was the Battle of Poltava a turning point in European history? This question, placed on the agenda of the conference by its organizers, is answered in a set of revisionist papers dealing with the immediate and long-term impact of the battle. Few scholars disagree with the conventional wisdom that Mazepa's revolt and the subsequent defeat of Charles had major negative consequences for the Hetmanate—the polity in which the battle was fought. While Mazepa had hoped to increase the autonomy of the Cossack state under the nominal rule of a distant sovereign, his defeat led to its severe curtailment. The hetman's right to appoint colonels was taken away by the tsar, who later availed himself of Hetman Skoropads'kyi's death to abolish the office altogether and place the

Hetmanate under the rule of the Little Russian College. Many scholars have attributed these changes not only to the impact of Poltava but also to Peter's general tendency to centralize power, but Paul Bushkovitch disagrees with this standard account. Comparing Peter's policies in the Hetmanate, where autonomy was significantly restricted, with his policies in the Baltic region, where the autonomy lost under the Swedes was restored under the tsar, he argues that Peter was not a principled opponent of autonomy. According to Bushkovitch, the tsar simply needed good order to modernize his empire: Baltic autonomy promoted that goal, while the autonomy of the Hetmanate did not. Robert Frost offers an equally revisionist argument concerning the impact of Poltava on Russian influence in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Scores of historians have drawn a direct line between Peter's victory in 1709 and the Silent Sejm of 1717, which strengthened Russia's grip on the Commonwealth by significantly reducing its armed forces. Frost argues that there was no direct connection: while the Russian victory at Poltava helped remove Charles's and Mazepa's ally, Stanisław Leszczyński, from the Polish throne, the decisions of the Silent Sejm were more influenced by the subsequent errors of Leszczyński's rival, Augustus II, than by the outcome of the battle.

John LeDonne puts Poltava into an even broader chronological and geographical context, seeing it as a pivotal event that released "a tremendous amount of collective energy" and helped fuel the geopolitical expansion of Russia until the mid-twentieth century. But for LeDonne, seeing Poltava only as a turning point in European history means missing an important part of Russian imperial history and world history in general. LeDonne goes beyond the borders of Europe as defined either by Strabo, who placed them at the Don River, or by Peter's eighteenth-century successors, who moved the eastern borders of the European subcontinent to the Urals. Instead, he considers the Russian Empire in the context of Eurasia, which he defines as the region between the Oder River in the west and the Yenisei basin in the east. According to LeDonne, as a result of the victory at Poltava and the defeat of Sweden in the Northern War, Russia became not only a European but a great Eurasian power, dominating the vast territory between Europe and China. In geostrategic terms, he argues, the Northern War brought Russia control not only over the rivers flowing into Lake Ladoga and the Western Dvina but also over the valleys of the Dnieper and the Don, as well as securing access to Central Asia.

THE MAKING OF THE MYTH

If one understands myth in the broadest terms as a phenomenon that helps large collectivities define the foundations of their identity and system of values, then the term is clearly applicable to the verbal and visual presentation of the

Battle of Poltava over the last three hundred years. It can even be argued that the “Myth of Poltava” is one of the founding myths of the Russian Empire. Its origins can be traced back to the months, if not weeks, following the battle. Many elements of the imperial myth of Poltava were first laid down by Feofan Prokopovych in his sermon delivered before Peter I at St. Sophia’s Cathedral on 22 July 1709, less than a month after the tsar’s victory. Prokopovych’s sermon includes themes that later became standard: the role of the tsar not only as a great military victor but also as the savior of Russia and father of his fatherland, and a portrayal of his enemy, Hetman Ivan Mazepa, as a traitor and instrument in the hands of foreign powers. Prokopovych and his fellow intellectuals from the circle of the Mohyla Academy in Kyiv were by no means the only creators of that myth. In his sermon, Prokopovych used many themes already introduced into public discourse by Peter himself. The future emperor was an indefatigable builder of the myth that not only glorified the Russian victory but also provided ideological legitimacy for the new empire that he was creating. From providing basic ideas for texts penned by the Kyivans to editing their work, ordering the construction of churches, and initiating numerous commemorations of Poltava and its representation in the visual arts, Peter was as much involved in writing the Battle of Poltava as in fighting it.²

Alexander Kamenskii takes the long view of the Poltava myth, from its origins in Peter’s initiatives through its metamorphoses in the course of Russian imperial and Soviet history, concluding with a discussion of its current incarnation in post-Soviet Russia. The essay casts light on the discrepancy between the importance of the Poltava myth for state propaganda and its marginal role in the historical identity of present-day Russian society. It also serves as an excellent introduction to the essays that discuss specific aspects of the creation of the Poltava mythology in the Russian Empire. The role of Peter and his willing (or not so willing) assistants in the creation of the Poltava myth is at the center of a number of articles in this collection.

Giovanna Brogi Bercoff compares the Prokopovych sermon of 1709 with the one delivered on 12 November 1708 by Stefan Iavors’kyi, a Kyivan who was the de facto head of the Russian Orthodox Church. The sermon was delivered ten days after the sack of Baturyn, in connection with the anathema declared against Mazepa on the orders of the tsar. A former panegyrist of Mazepa and a beneficiary of his patronage, Iavors’kyi presented a highly ambiguous image of the hetman that could be read in various ways. Taking his lead from Peter’s own characterization of Mazepa’s actions as an infamous betrayal, Iavors’kyi condemned the hetman in largely religious terms, appropriate to the genre in which he was writing. Mazepa’s switch from the suzerainty of an Orthodox tsar to that of a Protestant king could not evoke sympathy from an Orthodox hierarch, however indebted to Mazepa he may have been. But Brogi also points out those parts of the sermon where the apostate hetman is praised for his

former devotion to the Orthodox Church. This “crypto-celebration” of Mazepa puts Iavors’kyi’s sermon at odds with the one delivered by Prokopovych after Poltava. Unlike Iavors’kyi’s sermon, written in a largely pessimistic tone, Prokopovych’s is brimmed with optimism. Interestingly enough, it condemned Mazepa not only as a traitor but also as a bad politician without ever mentioning him by name. Brogi characterizes these sermons as windows on two very different worlds. What links them, however, is the heavy reliance of both authors on the assessment of the hetman given by Peter himself in his personal letters and appeals to the Ukrainian population.

The same applies to Feofilakt Lopatyns’kyi, another Kyivan and the author of the church service celebrating the tsar’s victory at Poltava. That service is the subject of Nadieszda Kizenko’s essay, which includes an English translation of its text. Peter personally edited and reedited the liturgy, which was reprinted numerous times and celebrated all over the empire until its fall in 1917. In premodern Europe, church services were the best means of reaching large numbers of people, and in that regard it is hard to imagine a text more influential in disseminating the basic elements of the Poltava myth than Lopatyns’kyi’s liturgy. Like Iavors’kyi, Lopatyns’kyi regarded Mazepa’s alliance with a Protestant king and his betrayal of an Orthodox monarch as his gravest sin. Admittedly, Mazepa was a distant second to Charles in the hierarchy of villains, but, as Kizenko writes, “the strong language may offset the meager number of references” to the hetman. As Peter reedited the service after Russia’s victory in the Northern War, he toned down the anti-Protestant rhetoric of the text, making it more acceptable to the Russian elites and foreigners in the imperial service at a time when the Russian Empire was embarking on the path of progressive Westernization.

If the basic elements of the Poltava mythology often came from Peter himself, their translation into the sacred language of the church, which endowed the military victory and the empire it helped create with new legitimacy, was done by his Kyivan helpers. Many of them were “contaminated” by their earlier close association with Mazepa, and they now sought to prove their loyalty to the supreme ruler. The same people, or members of their milieu, also played an important role in disseminating the visual image of Peter as imperial victor. Elena Boeck draws attention to the ways in which Ukrainian artists promoted that image by transforming traditional Orthodox iconography, enriching it with elements of baroque visual culture, and combining historical and religious elements in an icon celebrating Peter’s victory over the Ottomans at Azov (1696). Feofan Prokopovych was behind an engraving of 1717 showing Peter as a victorious descendant of the Muscovite tsars and father of the fatherland—a work that fused elements of Muscovite historical narrative with Western forms of representation. The Kyivans, however, had no monopoly on the visual representation of Peter and his victorious exploits. As Liliya Berezhnaya has shown,

Ukrainian exclusivity in the production of celebratory prints had all but expired by the turn of the eighteenth century. That shift coincided with a change in the main direction of Peter's foreign policy—from south to northeast—and a consequent shift in the identification of the enemy. Muslims, who dominated Ruthenian prints of the seventeenth century, gave way to Westerners and even to Ukrainians themselves, who symbolized Mazepa's treason in images celebrating the Russian victory at Poltava.

"The two and a half decades spanning Peter's capture of Azov in 1696 and the Peace of Nystad concluded in 1721 were not only the years of Russia's strategic military advances but also the decades heralding the Russian appropriation of Western pictorial symbolism and the domestication of many new forms and genres of art," writes Tatiana Senkevitch. Her comparison and detailed analysis of two Poltava tapestries, one produced on Peter's orders in 1722 and the other (ca. 1764) related to the second official commemoration of the Poltava victory, points not only to the adoption of new modes of visual representation but also to the changing image of Peter and Poltava in the imperial historical imagination of the eighteenth century. If the tapestry of 1722 celebrated a living tsar and a pivotal event of his reign, the one of 1764 celebrated the founder of the new Russia and, one might add, the moment of birth of the Russian Empire.

Given the Westernizing efforts of Peter himself and the heavily Western-influenced (either directly or through Kyivan intermediacy) language of verbal and visual representation of his victory at Poltava, one cannot help being surprised by Boeck's conclusion that the one image of Peter's victory at Poltava that has maintained its mass appeal to the present day has nothing to do with Western traditions of visual representation. In 2009 the main object of veneration during the commemoration of the Poltava anniversary in St. Petersburg was the Icon of the Kaplunivka Mother of God, a traditional Orthodox representation of the Kazan Mother of God linked by legend to the battle fought three hundred years ago. "Traditional visual culture," writes Boeck, "which Peter had so assiduously striven to corral and control, succeeded in reshaping and reframing the tsar by reclaiming his reign and acclaiming his greatest triumph as the will of the Mother of God of Kazan."

GRAPPLING WITH MAZEPA

An essential element of the imperial myth of Poltava is the image of the "second Judas," the Cossack hetman Ivan Mazepa, first denounced with that epithet by Peter himself. Condemned by the tsar, abandoned by many of his followers, and anathematized by church hierarchs he had patronized in churches he had helped build, Mazepa was turned into a symbol of treason whose infamy outlasted that of the primary villain of Poltava, King Charles XII. But the power

of imperial mythology had its limits. Simultaneously with the formation of the imperial myth of Poltava, its countermyth was born in Ukraine, presenting Mazepa not only as a protector of the Orthodox Church but also as a defender of the rights and freedoms of his people. Like the imperial myth, this countermyth of Mazepa began its life in the war of manifestos between Peter, Charles, and Mazepa on the eve of Poltava. As the essays published in this volume demonstrate, it survived the most difficult post-Poltava years and took on new characteristics in nineteenth-century Ukraine, Russia, and, quite unexpectedly, in Western and Central Europe. It culminated in the twentieth century with Mazepa's rise to the status of a Ukrainian national hero, pitting the countermyth of Mazepa against the imperial myth of Poltava in the struggle for Ukrainian independence.

How Ukrainian was Mazepa, though, not only in his political aspirations but also in his cultural practices and preferences? What language did he use in his official and private correspondence? Mazepa's upbringing and his service at the Polish royal court might suggest a preference for the Polish language, while some of his texts published in the nineteenth-century Russian Empire attest to his familiarity with Russian. Mazepa was indeed a man of many political, cultural, and linguistic worlds. Nevertheless, as Michael Moser demonstrates on the basis of Mazepa's proclamations and the original texts of his letters to Muscovite correspondents, he used Ukrainian to give orders, grant privileges, or ask the tsar's help and advice. But could this have been the preference of Mazepa's scribes rather than of the hetman himself? Michael Flier confirms Moser's findings on the basis of the hetman's private correspondence, publishing Mazepa's love letters to Motrena (Motria) Kochubei from a manuscript in the Russian Archive of Ancient Acts and thereby presenting their first accurate texts, free from later Russian accretions. "Mazepa," writes Flier, "was waging his battle for Motria's love in the most polished Ukrainian that the sixteen-year-old object of his affection could understand. The rhetorical clichés, the folkloric rhythms, the Polonisms, and occasional Slavonicisms do not alter this basic premise. Russian appears to have played absolutely no role in these missives...."

Volodymyr Mezentsev notes another important feature of the cultural world of Ivan Mazepa and his milieu: their readiness to blend traditional Ukrainian culture with elements of Western baroque style. Mezentsev analyzes the architecture and ornamentation of the hetman's palace in Honcharivka near Baturyn, which was burned down by Menshikov's army in the fall of 1708. Mezentsev argues convincingly that the Honcharivka palace combined features of baroque mansions of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania with architectural design and embellishments used in the construction of seventeenth-century churches in the Cossack Hetmanate. In her discussion of recent reconstruction projects in Ukraine, Olenka Pevny maintains that many elements of Mazepa-era high

culture in general, and the architectural legacy of the Hetmanate in particular, have been misinterpreted by scholars and architects who tried to fit them into preestablished patterns according to modern agendas and understandings of the period. The authors of the imposing reconstructions of St. Michael's Cathedral in downtown Kyiv and the Dormition Cathedral of the Kyivan Cave Monastery, while distancing themselves from the Russian imperial and Soviet tradition of ignoring elements of Ukrainian baroque in architectural monuments that trace their origins to Kyivan Rus', fall into the same trap as their predecessors when, according to Pevny, they "obfuscate the complex and continuous cultural negotiations that constituted difference in transformative periods of Ukrainian history." Mazepa-era Cossack culture and architecture are no longer taboo in Ukraine, but scholars and architects seeking to recover their authenticity still have much work ahead of them.

The origins of the countermyth of Mazepa in eighteenth-century Ukraine can be traced through Russian court documents dealing with high treason in Ukraine, analyzed here by Andrii Bovgyria. The treatment of Mazepa in official discourse of the Russian Empire was somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, he figured prominently in texts associated with the Battle of Poltava as a traitor par excellence—one who betrayed not only his tsar but also his church and people. On the other hand, his name was not mentioned at all in Prokopovych's sermon and was effaced from the walls of churches he helped build or restore. Images of him, even those included in icons, were tracked down and destroyed. Bovgyria's research indicates that the imperial authorities' efforts to make Ukrainians forget Mazepa or remember him exclusively as a villain were only partially successful. Many Ukrainians continued to think of him as a liberator of the Hetmanate from oppressive Muscovite rule, his main shortcoming being the way in which he raised the uprising, without informing the Cossacks or the people at large of his intentions.

The liberation of Ukraine from foreign oppression, which figured prominently as a charge against supporters of Mazepa after Poltava, emerges as one of the dominant themes in a Ukrainian school drama of 1728, *The Grace of God*, analyzed by George Grabowicz. Written in connection with the restoration of the office of hetman, which had been abolished a few years earlier by Peter I, the drama features as one of its central characters Hetman Bohdan Khmel'nyts'kyi, a ruler of Ukraine who was allegedly loyal to the Russian tsar and who acquired many of the rights and privileges that were taken away after Mazepa's revolt. In post-Poltava Ukraine, the cult of Khmel'nyts'kyi as a loyal hetman was counterposed to the image of Mazepa purveyed in the imperial mythology of Poltava. Mazepa's name is never mentioned in the text of *The Grace of God*, but the image of "my mother and homeland, poor Ukraine," invoked by Mazepa in 1708 in his call to revolt, becomes the focal point of the drama. Grabowicz offers an original reading of the drama, which he identifies as a "missing

link” in the continuum of Ukrainian literature, “the work that culminates the tradition of the Cossack chronicles and serves as the key moment of textual and conceptual transition between the early modern and the modern stages of Ukrainian national consciousness-building—that is, *Istoriia Rusov*.”

The *History of the Rus* (*Istoriia Rusov*), a mysterious text that began to circulate in the first decades of the nineteenth century, came to the Ukrainian reader at a time of revived interest in Mazepa and his story in Russia and Western and Central Europe. As I argue in my essay, which deals with this important monument of Ukrainian political and historical thought, it exemplifies the challenge faced by the Ukrainian elites of the period as they sought to reconcile the imperial myth, which presented Mazepa as a traitor to his tsar, religion, and people, and the countermyth, which portrayed him as a defender of the rights and privileges of his homeland. Ambiguity in Ukrainian writings about Mazepa in this period is explored in Taras Koznarsky's contribution to the volume. He argues that “Ukrainian literary texts on Mazepa should be viewed as minefields of identity artifacts, laden with the required declarative rhetoric of loyalty and tempered by the poetics of treason—the obsessive Ukrainian connection with Mazepa as a complex of shame and nostalgia, guilt and affinity.” Koznarsky examines the image of Mazepa and its role in the shaping of Russian-Ukrainian reciprocity by taking a close look at Russian and Ukrainian texts of the Romantic era, including Pushkin's *Poltava* and responses to this Russian national reading of the battle among Pushkin's Ukrainian contemporaries. As Koznarsky writes, the way in which Ukrainian intellectual elites dealt with the challenge presented by the image of Mazepa was as essential to the formation of Ukrainian national identity as was the image of Peter to the formation of Russian identity. In their original form, both images were products of the mythology and countermythology of Poltava. While the imperial myth of Poltava made it difficult for Ukrainian intellectuals to accept Mazepa as a positive part of their heritage, it made him a central figure in the definition of that heritage.

In Central and Western Europe, the image of Ivan Mazepa as a traitor, popularized by Pushkin's poem, came into conflict with a much more positive depiction of the hetman that went back to the writings of Voltaire. Alois Woldan, who analyzes responses to Pushkin's epic poem in nineteenth-century German literature, points out that such authors as Andreas May and Rudolf Gottschall, while “taking over Pushkin's plot model, did not share the Russian author's attitude to his hero. Their view of Mazepa demonstrates critical distance not only from Pushkin's judgment but also from Russian tsarist ideology in general, which branded Mazepa as a traitor.” They endorsed the view of Mazepa as essentially a Machiavellian character. In France, as Ksenya Kiebusinski argues, Pushkin's interpretation of Mazepa is taken up by writers and artists only toward the end of the nineteenth century, replacing the much

more sympathetic depictions of the hetman that were introduced to French culture by Voltaire, Byron, and Hugo.

A NEVER-ENDING PAST

In his essay on the Battle of Poltava in Russian historical memory, Aleksandr Kamenskii remains skeptical on the question of whether present-day Russians consider it an essential part of their national history—this despite the fact that the Russian government included the battle in the official calendar of days of Russian military glory and showed itself eager to celebrate, not merely commemorate, the tricentennial in the summer of 2009. Ukraine appeared to take the opposite attitude, as the government tried to downplay the importance of the commemoration; nevertheless, the anniversary produced a lively discussion in the media and mobilized a significant part of Ukrainian society.

Guido Hausmann notes political overtones in events associated with the Poltava tricentennial in Ukraine. He discusses the commemorations of 2009 as an encounter, confrontation, and negotiation of imperial, national, and local historical narratives and a modest step toward deimperializing the traditionally imperial site of Poltava memory—the museum complex on the battlefield. Kristian Gerner puts the 2009 commemorations and related events in Ukraine into a broader historiographic, cultural, and geopolitical context by considering discourses of commutation not only in Ukraine and Russia but also in Sweden, which turned out to be an important participant in 2009, as in 1709. According to Gerner, the Ukrainian debate about Poltava in 2009 was influenced by the country's attempt to distance itself from Russia and draw closer to the European Union. Sweden thus emerged as a symbol of Europe, and, as Gerner argues, by emphasizing Mazepa's alliance with Sweden rather than his revolt against the tsar or the battle itself, the Ukrainian government presented the events of 1708–9 as “proof of Ukraine's historical bonds with Europe.”

Today it is difficult, if not impossible, to understand the context in which the Battle of Poltava took place, reconstruct its course, or assess its importance without taking account of the enormous scholarly literature on the topic and feeling the burden of its enormous and well-elaborated mythology. In fact, the short- and long-term impact of the battle cannot be comprehended without grasping the ways in which that mythology was created, transformed, and perpetuated. As each new generation of historians, writers, artists, community activists, and politicians revisits the events of 1709, they continue to be influenced by perceptions and myths shaped by the political and cultural confrontations of the past. They also adapt those myths to help them confront the challenges of their own age. This volume is probably the first to attempt

an analysis of the Battle of Poltava not only in its immediate historical context but also in relation to the complex historical and cultural myths associated with it. To be sure, there are numerous ways not only to remember Poltava but also to read the essays collected in this volume, which are significantly richer than this or any other introduction might suggest. The contributions of the individual authors must be read in detail to appreciate their full value. Taken together, they present a much more comprehensive account of the battle and its historical significance than we have yet had, and I hope they will stimulate further research on the age of Poltava and the historical memories and myths to which it gave rise.

NOTES

1. "U Poltavi zaboronyly zovnishniu reklamu z zobrazhenniam Mazepy," *Poltavs'ki novyny*, 24 June 2009, <http://bi.poltava.ua/index.php?go=News&in=view&id=2674> (accessed 21 Dec 2011); "Na poli Poltavs'koï bytvy zdiisnyly sprobu provokatsii," *Poltavs'ki novyny*, 27 June 2009, <http://bi.poltava.ua/index.php?go=News&in=view&id=2695> (accessed 21 Dec 2011); "Vidkryly rotondu pry-myrennia," *Poltavs'ki novyny*, 27 June 2009, <http://bi.poltava.ua/index.php?go=News&in=view&id=2696> (accessed 21 Dec 2011).
2. I refer here to the broad definition of myth employed by George Schöpfung in his article "The Functions of Myth and a Taxonomy of Myths," in *Myths and Nationhood*, ed. Geoffrey Hosking and George Schöpfung (London, 1997), 19–35.