



Rus', Cossacks and Ukraine's Identity



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Here we publish an English version of an interview he gave to Volodymyr Yermolenko (editor of this book) for Hromadske.ua, an independent Ukrainian media outlet. In this interview, we talked about why Ukraine is impossible without the steppe, why the Cossacks can be called “musketeers”, what lies behind the Shevchenko phenomenon, who*

* Original: <https://hromadske.ua/posts/mi-bi-ne-nazivalisya-ukrayinoyu-yakbi-ne-kozaki-istorik-sergij-plohiy>

has the right to the name “Rus”, and how Russian counterintelligence continues to this day to use the methods of Soviet counterintelligence.

When I read your books and books by other Ukrainian historians, I always have this question: where did the name “Ukraine” come from? What we call Ukraine today, used to have different names in the past: Rus’, Little Rus’, Cossack Hetmanate, etc. So, where does the name “Ukraine” come from?

The toponym “Ukraine” is used in the 12th century Kyiv Chronicle, a sequel to the *Povist Vremennykh Lit* (Tale of Bygone Years) [*an old Kyiv chronicle of the 11th-12th centuries – Ed.*]. It meant a part of modern-day Ukraine located at the edge of the steppe.

It is interesting that this term was also used in translated religious and Biblical texts. For example, these texts mentioned a Palestinian “Ukraine”. In both cases, the word “Ukraine” meant a border between settled and nomadic lands: steppes in the Ukrainian context, desert in the Palestinian context.

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Does “Ukraine” mean “a border”, or a wider designation of lands near a border?

The best word here would probably be “frontier” — it is an English word that originates from the French “frontière”. A frontier is not just a border, not a line; it is rather all territory adjoining it from both sides.

A frontier forms its specific “ethos”. In the Ukrainian context, the frontier creates a separate social group: *kozaky*, Cossacks.

Cossacks existed throughout the entire steppe border from the River Danube to the River Amur. But it was the Ukrainian part of this community that grew sufficiently strong to be able to try and create its own state.

Do you mean that we owe the name “Ukraine” to Cossacks?

I am sure that if the Cossacks had not existed, the name of the country would have been different.

During the medieval era the term “Ukraine” was the name of a territory, not related to any social or state structures.

Ukraine [as a state structure] arises in the second half of the 17th century, after Bohdan Khmelnytsky’s rebellion [*a Cossack rebellion in the Rzeczpospolita that took place in the mid-17th century – Ed.*]. This word was then used to designate the Cossack state, or Hetmanate.

But those lands did not call themselves “Hetmanate”, did they? You write that they called themselves *Vypsko Zaporizke*, “Zaporizhian Host”.

Yes, absolutely. “The Hetmanate” is the more recent name. It was used by Taras Shevchenko [*Ukraine’s major poet of the 19th century – Ed.*]. Before it the name *Vypsko Zaporizke* was used [*it contained a reference to Zaporizhian Cossacks – Ed.*].

Why? Because of the preferences, the rights given to this structure. Changing the name would have meant losing the rights. And, simultaneously, a new name was emerging – “Ukraine”.

Was the “Zaporizhian Host” a legal concept?

Yes, it was a legal concept. As of the 18th century, it was much less a military unit and much more of an administrative one.

Does that mean that the Cossacks created a new core, around which a Ukrainian community was forming? Before that these lands used to be called “Rus”, and the Cossacks brought in something completely new.

Yes, the Cossacks did bring in something new. Cossacks, and particularly Cossack hetmans, took the place of the remnants of the princely class [*i.e. families of kniazi: princes from the medieval Kyivan Rus – Ed.*]. This process ended in the 17th century.

The top representative of the princely tradition was Prince Kostyantyn Ostrozky.

I think you call him an uncrowned king of Ukraine.

He was called an uncrowned king of *Rus*'.

But it was after him that the new era of hetmans of *Ukraine* began. All this took place in the 17th century.

The Cossacks were a different social element. They were rebels, warriors, attackers, plunderers, traders, all in one. They were like Vikings during the era of Kyivan Rus'.

It would change later, and the 18th century would see the formation of the Cossack aristocracy.

The Cossacks began their history under the protection of princes. That is why we have this idea that Prince Dmytro Vyshnevetsky was our first Cossack. Dmytro Vyshnevetsky is the perfect example of how princely power and the emergence of Cossacks are related.

But the first Cossacks were Tatars, weren't they?

"Cossack" is a Turkic word. It means all I have mentioned earlier: a warrior, a guard, a plunderer and so on.

The emergence of the Cossacks is a phenomenon of the steppe, of the steppe frontier. Because if you look at the first maps — the ones from the early 17th century — such as the Radziwill map from 1614, you will see that the Cossacks lived in no-man's land. They lived on islands. They lived in the steppe, yet they weren't nomads.

A Tatar Cossack is a horseman, a nomad. Today, we sometimes imagine a Zaporizhian Cossack as a mounted warrior too.

But the word best describing Cossacks as they enter history is “musketeers”.

Fighting on horseback was expensive and required money. You needed more than one horse, and only nobility could afford it.

The Cossacks did not have that. But then the musket was invented. Back in the 17th century a musket was what a Kalashnikov rifle became for the 20th century. Look at the first prints with Cossacks: they stand on foot and shoot with muskets.

Their skills in defending a camp were strong.

That is why when Bohdan Khmelnytsky started the rebellion, he was well aware that he needed cavalry to beat the Polish Hussars. He got that cavalry from Crimea, from the Tatars. Therefore, the Cossack-Tatar army had both components: infantry and cavalry.

Is that why Khmelnytsky risked an alliance with the Tatars?

That is one of the reasons which people sometimes do not notice. They talk about the military-political component, because Khmelnytsky really wanted to avoid a strike from the South. Yet there was also this purely military component. Sometimes, it is hard to believe, because we have this image of a Cossack on horseback. But the reality of the 17th century was different, and the Cossacks needed the Tatar cavalry.

In your book *The Origins of the Slavic Nations* you quote Khmelnytsky, including his messages to the Russian Tsar. There, he called Ukraine “Rosia” or “Rusia”. You say these letters are translations, not the originals, so we don’t know exactly which words Khmelnytsky used. But if we assume that he did use those terms, why did he do so?

Because Khmelnytsky was just in the process of creating what was to be later called “Ukraine”. It is just like looking at Christ and St Paul

“ Khmelnytsky was just in the process of creating what was to be later called “Ukraine” ”

[and not seeing what later arose in the history of Christianity] and saying that they were not Christians. They were simply creating this new reality.

Khmelnytsky had, after all, created a state. He did not know, for example, where the borders

would be. These borders were set by the Treaty of Zboriv: the area encompassed Dnipro Region and the steppe frontier. But this state also includes the Chernihiv Palatinate. Chernihiv is far from the steppe [*the city is in Polissia, i.e. a forest region of current Ukraine* – Ed.]. Yet this understanding of Ukraine includes Chernihiv as well, because the phenomenon of Ukraine is related to the Cossacks.

Since the Cossacks acquired three palatinates, including Chernihiv (which had never been a steppe frontier), the name “Ukraine” was extended to include Chernihiv as well.

Let us go further, to the Mazepa era [*Mazepa was a Ukrainian hetman who rebelled against Russian Tsar Peter I, joined forces with Swedish King Charles XII. They both lost in Poltava to the forces of Peter I in 1709. — Ed.*], in your books you develop a very interesting thought: in the times of Pylyp Orlyk [*ally and follower of Mazepa* – Ed.] an attempt was made to connect the genealogy of Cossacks and Khazars. The reference was, therefore, made not to Rus', but to the Khazaria. It is very interesting, because it seems to be a common European trend of the 17th–18th centuries when people in many countries tried to justify the existence of the aristocracy by claiming that the nobility are descendants of the tribes of conquerors.

Yes, that is the part of this early modern trend. The closest parallel to this Cossack myth is the Sarmatian myth in Poland. According to this

theory, Polish nobility allegedly had ethnically different “Sarmatian” origins.

This was the so-called society of “estates” where nobility considered itself as an ethnos different from the ethnos of the “common people”, correct?

Yes, and when we discuss early modern nations, we mean a certain social stratum, the elites. The very idea that the elites should speak the same language as the common people comes to Ukraine quite late, in the mid-19th century.

Thanks to that, for example, Volodymyr Antonovych [*19th century ethnologist and historian – Ed.*] — a Catholic and a Pole — became an Orthodox believer and regarded himself a Ukrainian. Before that, it was normal for the elite and common people to speak different languages.

In Ukrainian intellectual culture there is a recurrent argument that Russia has “stolen” the name of “Rus” from Ukraine. This argument was developed by people like Yevhen Malaniuk [*a 20th century Ukrainian conservative intellectual – Ed.*]. But when I read your books I understand that the princes of Vladimir, Moscow and other “cities” of what later became Russia, also continued to call themselves “princes of Rus”. At the same time, Ukrainian lands were also called “Rus”. So, who has more rights to the name of Rus? And does this question actually contain any sense at all?

The biggest rights on the name Rus’ belong to Swedes and Finns. As we see it today, the word “Rus” comes from the Finnish language and means “oarsmen”.

That was how Vikings were called. “Our” Vikings came from Sweden. The Vikings who plundered the coastlines of the Britain and

France, and created their own states on those lands, came from the territory of modern-day Norway.

Rus' brought the dynasty commonly known as the Rurikids. In reality, those were the descendants of Yaroslav the Wise, a 12th century ruler of Kyiv. All Rurikids were, in fact "Yaroslavychi", the princes of Rus'. Only later did they transfer these features of the "Rus'" identity to the people that they ruled.

According to "The Tale of Bygone Years", there were different tribes – Dregoviches, Radimichs, Polianians (it is now disputed whether the Polianians were actually fictional). But Rus' united them under one common name, and united them politically as well. As there were Rurikids in Moscow, Novgorod and Kyiv, they all had equal rights to the name.

So is "Rus'" a dynastical term?

That is how it began, as a politonym. But later it became an ethnic designation.

For example, if we look at the 16th century, we very often see wars between one Rus' and another: for example, a war between the Rus' of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth — the future Ukrainian-Belarusian conglomerate — and the Rus' that would in future become Russia, and which in Western texts was called Muscovy.

They were fighting for succession to Kyiv because they believed they had rights to it. This is the origin of Muscovite claims to Kyiv: not because Muscovites wanted Kyiv immediately, but because they wanted to get control over Novgorod. They were saying: if we come from Kyiv, we have our rights to Novgorod too. It was a fight for the legacy of Kyivan Rus', and everyone was proud to claim to be "the real Rus'".

What does the term *Rossia* ("Russia") mean then in this context? Was it just a Greek translation of "Rus'"? Or something else?

This is the Greek form of the word Rus', yes. It became popular after the Pereyaslav Treaty was signed in 1654 — in particular, thanks to Kyiv-born intellectuals like Theophan Prokopovych and others. They referred to themselves in their writing as *Rossia*, “Russia”. I once wrote an article called “The Two Russias of Theophan Prokopovych”, which was included in the book *The Origins of Slavic Nations*. Before the Battle of Poltava in 1709, he was writing about the Dnipro “Rossia” and Kyiv “Rossia”. Later, after he’d moved to St. Petersburg, he spread this concept to the whole of the Russian Empire.

Theophan Prokopovych was a very strange character. He was a person educated at Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, with a Western-influenced Baroque mindset, yet after the Battle of Poltava he became a theorist of cruel absolutism of Peter I. Why did it happen in this way?

Such was the trend gaining speed in Europe.

Was this the trend of political absolutism?

Yes. Those who fell out of trend lost their state. This was the case of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

Today, we look at that Polish state and we like it — because we like democracy. But it could not stand the challenge of the absolutist age [*Poland was weakened in the 18th century and finally divided between Russia, Austria and Prussia – Ed.*].

It simply did not survive the age of consolidation of power...

... and centralization. The state-wide factor – centralized tax collection, mobilization of resources – becomes more important at that time. Centralized states became stronger than fragmented states of oligarchic groups (they were called “magnate” groups at the time) such as the ones competing in the Polish Sejm.

Let's get back to the topic of the Cossacks. You have a book called *The Cossack Myth* where you analyze genealogy and reception of the *Istoria Rusov* [*"History of the Rus"*: a book written at the turn of the 19th century by the heritors of Cossack elites] and its influence over Russians and Ukrainians. If this book had not been written, would Taras Shevchenko have probably never existed?

He would have existed, but he would have been different. "History of the Rus" became a window for him into a "true" history of Ukraine. I have no doubt that he would have also found other "windows" with different perspectives. But the historical vision of Shevchenko was, to a great extent, formed by "History of the Rus".

Another important factor: during his exile [*Shevchenko was sent into exile by the Russian regime in 1847 – Ed.*], because it was difficult to get hold of new materials, he remained under the charms of this book. It was the last thing he read before going to jail.

His fellows from the *St Cyril and Methodius Brotherhood* [*a Ukrainian underground organization oppressed by the Russian regime in 1847 – Ed.*] Kulish and Kostomarov became more skeptical about "History of the Rus". Kostomarov, for example, understood that the book represented the views of Cossack nobility and social elite, and not those of common people. Kulish was disappointed because of other reasons: he thought "History" was an unreliable document. Yet Shevchenko, in the Kazakh steppe, remained a fan of "History of the Ruthenians". After returning from the exile he wrote a novel called *Bliznetsy* ("Twins"), where he presented a character typical to the post-Hetmanate Ukraine, who was in love with that text.

Don't you think that, while Shevchenko brought the Cossack myth to its peak, it was Panteleimon Kulish [*a Ukrainian writer and historian of the 19th century, author of the first Ukrainian historic novel, "The Black Council" – Ed.*] who was the first to

deconstruct it? Kulish showed that the Cossack era were not just about courage and bravery, but also about anarchy and a war of all against all.

Absolutely. Shevchenko was one of the creators of this myth; Kostomarov also played a big part. But Kulish was its biggest deconstructor. You can also find some of this deconstruction in the writings of Kostomarov, who perceived the Cossack nobility very negatively and associated himself with common people.

But that begs the question: were Cossacks “common people” or another group of a “higher” status?

When the populist movement, or *narodnytsstvo* began in Ukraine, the Cossacks — especially the higher strata of them — were heavily criticised. The young Hrushevsky [*prominent Ukrainian historian and politician – Ed.*] started with a very critical attitude — both towards Khmelnytsky and Cossack nobility. Hrushevsky focused on the popular masses. But it is a big question as to what extent the Cossacks belonged to the masses.

There is a reverse side to this *narodnytsstvo* in the 19th century: Ukrainians forgot about the aristocracy, the elite. We know that after Hrushevsky came Lypynsky [*a prominent Ukrainian politician and political thinker, who had Polish origins – Ed.*], who was critical of *narodnyky*.

Yes, Lypynsky is one of the prominent figures in this story. He tried to rehabilitate the elite. To achieve this goal, he tried to rethink the history of the elite and rehabilitate that part of the elite that had been Polonized both culturally and religiously. Lypynsky himself comes from this group. But the rehabilitation of the elite began when the “populist” narrative had already been formed. Only then did it begin expanding to encompass the elites and their historical territory.

Skoropadsky [a leader of the independent Ukrainian State of 1918, who called himself a hetman. His rule is known as “Hetmanate” – Ed.] was an important figure in this process of rehabilitation of the elites and bringing them back to Ukraine. But he emerged as a political and cultural phenomenon when there was already another, “elitist”, way of thinking, particularly that of Lypynsky. Later, with Dontsov, the *narodnyky* populist doctrine was completely rejected.

When we enter the 1920s and especially the 1930s: Dontsov, Malaniuk, “Visnyk” — all these ideas were putting forward a new, “elitist” approach to Ukrainian identity. But the result was not very good, was it?

In historiography, there was this struggle between the school of *narodnyky* (to which Hrushevsky is normally assigned, which is not exactly correct) and another school, the school of Hrushevsky’s followers, predominantly from Galicia, which were called *derzhavnyky* (supporters of state-building).

Actually, that school was not about limiting Ukrainian history to the history of the state, but rather about including in it a history of the elites. But even after wars for independence and revolution, it was not very popular to claim your support for elites in historical terms, or to be an “elitist” in politics. This so-called *derzhavnyky* school was started by Lypynsky and his attention towards the elites.

Dontsov proposed a modern, “integral” version of nationalism. He rejected the *narodnyky* populist stage and fought against it. But it was a common trend. That happened all around Europe. It was the age of dictators, fascism, Nazism, and radical nationalism.

It was also an era when the idea that a nation is impossible without a leader or an elite was widespread.

They also believed that with the will and decision of a small group of passionate leaders they could achieve their goals. It was a true

breakaway from the *narodnyky* doctrine. The previous generation, founders of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, Yevhen Konovalets, were not followers of Dontsov's ideology. But the new generation — the ones who came with Stepan Bandera, Rebet and others — did follow it. It was a new ideology in the early 1930s. New to Ukraine, but part of the European trend of the time.

In your book, *The Man with the Poison Gun*, you write about Bohdan Stashynsky, who assassinated Bandera and Rebet [exiled leaders of Ukrainian nationalist movement – Ed.]. Why did you decide to write about him?

Because I got access to CIA archives on Bandera's assassination. These materials are now available online, but at the time I worked with real documents.

In the new sources I discovered a lot of things that contradicted the previous version of events. For example, the version according to which the Americans took Bohdan Stashynsky, gave him plastic surgery so that he could not be recognized and kept him under their protection. The new documents showed they had had nothing to do with it. They also showed that when he came to West Germany, he did not want to talk with the Germans, he was seeking contact with the Americans, with the CIA — but they did not believe him. So there were a few points that contradicted the generally-accepted version of events.

You depicted Stashynsky as a victim of circumstances. You showed how he was recruited by the NKVD through threats to his whole family, and he had no choice to make. And despite his crime, despite killing key figures of the Ukrainian underground he commits a brave act: he flees [from Communist-controlled East Berlin] to West Berlin. Ukrainian writer Yuri Andrukhovych also published a book, *Darlings of Justice*, which includes

an essay about Stashynsky. Why is there such great simultaneous interest in the person who murdered Bandera?

Stashynsky appeared in the Ukrainian media environment not thanks to Andrukhovych or me. He appeared there after the poisoning of Litvinenko [*Aleksandr Litvinenko was poisoned with radioactive polonium in London in 2006. British investigators accused Russia – Ed.*]

Then, for the first time, an official spokesperson of Russia's FSB claimed that their agency has not been assassinating people since Bandera's murder. In Lviv, posters appeared stating that treason begins with failure to pay for a ticket [*reference to the fact that Stashynsky was allegedly recruited by the NKVD after being arrested for fare dodging – Ed.*]. Then some groups in Kharkiv wanted to name a park after Stashynsky. Stashynsky appears like a torpedo aimed at destroying the cult of Bandera that was regaining popularity in certain circles of Ukrainian society. He was used to "troll" Bandera.

The interest had been there earlier, but it grew after the Cold War spirit and the context returned, with its targeted assassinations.

It's also important that that was a poisoning. We see it again now in the Skripal poisoning case.

It was poisoning using new technical means. Stashynsky killed by using new technical means.

In your book about Bandera's killer and in your book about Yalta [*Yalta: The Price of Peace*], there is a common theme: the strength and cunning of Soviet counterintelligence. In the Yalta book you show that Stalin knew what Roosevelt and Churchill thought and wanted. Soviet counterintelligence worked much more effectively than their Western opponents. Do you think we've returned to the days when Russian special operations in the West overcome their counterparts?

To answer this question, we need to wait for 50 years, dig in the archives and learn what actually happened. Intelligence and counterintelligence operate in silence. If media outlets write about them, it means counterintelligence has failed. So it's hard to say who is winning today.

“ **Extremely aggressive intelligence was part of Soviet foreign policy, and remains part of Russian foreign policy.** ”

But you do not need to wait for 50 years to understand that extremely aggressive intelligence was part of Soviet foreign policy, and remains part of Russian foreign policy. I think this is obvious.

| **And this is an old tradition.**

Yes, this is an old tradition. When I was writing *The Man with the Poison Gun*, I was astounded to see how many things introduced back in the late 50s and 60s, are still working today.

UKRAINE

IN HISTORIES AND STORIES

ESSAYS BY UKRAINIAN INTELLECTUALS

Edited by *Volodymyr Yermolenko*

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Introduction by *Andriy Kulakov*



Kyiv
2019

The book is published with the support of Ukrainian Cultural Foundation.

The ideas expressed in this book belong exclusively to the individual authors of the texts and due not necessarily coincide with the views of the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation



Ukraine in histories and stories. Essays by Ukrainian intellectuals —
Kyiv: Internews Ukraine, UkraineWorld, 2019. — 304 p.

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ISBN 978-617-684-243-9

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