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The Reemergence of the Ukrainian Nation and Cossack Mythology

BY FRANK SYSYN

FROM September 1989, when the Communist party boss Volodymyr Shcherbyts'kyi was finally forced out, to August 1991, when independence from the Soviet Union was declared, momentous changes swept the Ukraine as they did so much of Eastern Europe and the disintegrating USSR. Glasnost and perestroika came later to the Ukraine than to other areas of the Soviet Union, but when they did take root they shook the cultural and ideological foundations of Soviet rule even before the political structures changed. Traumatized by the Chernobyl nuclear disaster of 1986 and enraged by the Soviet government's cover-up, the inhabitants of Ukraine founded an ecological movement and strove to form a nuclear-free zone on their land. Demands for the restitution of the Ukrainian language to a place in public life culminated in its proclamation as the language of state in October 1989. Religious revival led to the surfacing of the Ukrainian Catholic church from the underground and the rebirth of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox church. The movement for the restoration Ukrainian culture and historical inheritance proceeded apace, rehabilitating the victims of Stalin, including the millions who perished in the man-made famine of 1932–33. All these changes combined to stimulate the

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inhabitants of the Ukraine to strive for self-rule and to affirm their loyalties to Ukraine rather than the Soviet Union as their homeland.¹

Amid the plethora of new political, cultural, economic, and religious movements sweeping the Ukraine, the celebrations of the 500th anniversary of the Zaporozhian Cossacks in 1990–91 might seem a peripheral and antiquarian endeavor. Indeed, to some Western observers, the staging of Cossack pageants in full-dress, including cavalry units, might appear as opera buffa, of little relevance to the struggles and issues of contemporary Ukraine. Yet even the most skeptical witness to the hundreds of thousands who gathered at the battlefield of Berestechko in May 1991, or who read of the discussions of whether the head of the Ukrainian state should be called hetman, had to recognize that more than mere antiquarianism drove the movement.² The Zaporozhian Cossacks and their legacy were at the center of political and cultural struggles in the Ukraine that fundamentally determined the processes of nation-building and state-building in modern Ukraine. The pervasiveness of the Cossack past and its ramifications for so many different issues, movements, and segments of the population in the Ukraine call out for its intensive examination.

The most obvious explanation for the interest in the Cossacks among historians and readers of history is that a topic of research and writing that had been greatly restricted, and at times virtually taboo, has returned to public discourse. The Cossacks had played a major role in Ukrainian history from the late fifteenth to the early nineteenth century. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries they had established polities that served as centers of Ukrainian political and

¹ For recent events in Ukraine, see David Marples, *Ukraine under Perestroika: Ecology, Economics and the Workers' Revolt* (Edmonton, 1991). Political and cultural events are covered in the Radio Liberty Reports of Roman Solchanyk and Bohdan Nahaylo, reprinted in *The Ukrainian Weekly* (Jersey City, N.J.).

² See Marta Kolomayets, "Battle of Berestechko, Glorious Kozak Legacy Recalled by Thousands," *The Ukrainian Weekly*, 6 June 30, 1991, pp. 1, 3, 14.

cultural life. Yet Ukrainian historical research after the 1920s had been circumscribed to the extent that even the publication of an inventory of the archive of the Zaporozhian *Sich*, the Cossack center and later polity on the lower Dnieper, had not been permitted. Far from loosening in the post-Stalinist period, the restrictions on writing about the Cossacks and early modern Ukrainian history became so severe after 1972 that the very training of competent researchers was halted. For the general public the consequences had created a pent-up demand for reading material. The only scholarly biography of a Ukrainian hetman, or leader of the Ukrainian Cossacks, was one of Bohdan Khmel'nyts'kyi published in 1954.³ Readers had to be content with historical fiction, since almost no historical works existed. Those that were published were devoid of original materials or characterizations of events and people, concentrating instead on simplistic descriptions of social tensions among the Cossacks or on the purported longings of the Ukrainian people to be united with their Russian brothers. General historical works were even more devoid of information, since major figures and events could be dispensed with if they did not fit into the accepted scheme. School texts barely dealt with Ukrainian history at all.⁴

When the lid of censorship was removed, the demand for material on the Cossacks was enormous. Regrettably the years of persecution had thinned the ranks of researchers and even the store of manuscripts written for the drawer that could now be dusted off and published. Instead of publishing new research, many historians have concentrated on producing popular syntheses and on discussing historical questions in the popular press.⁵ These works, hastened by public demand and

³ I.P. Kryp'iakevych, *Bohdan Khmel'nyts'kyi* (Kiev, 1954).

⁴ On the general state of writing in the Soviet period, see John Basarab, *Pereiaslav 1654: A Historiographical Study* (Edmonton, 1982), pp. 162–213.

⁵ For articles in the popular press, see *Pam'iatky Ukrainy* and *Ukraina* as well as the specialized newspaper *Starozhytnosti*.

publishers' pressures, have been of very uneven quality.⁶ Generally of more substantial scholarly merit have been the reprints of older scholarly works and of source materials.⁷ Public concern has also supported activities of archaeologists, ethnographers, and art historians and their efforts to collect, exhibit and publish materials.

The interest in the Cossacks goes far beyond the mere restoration of historical scholarship and Ukrainian studies. Among the whole gamut of "blank spots" in Ukrainian history from the Christianization of Kievan Rus' in 988 to the Chernobyl explosion, the Cossacks and the period of their apogee occupy a special position. For the Ukrainian national movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Cossacks and their political entities, the Zaporozhian *Sich* and the hetmanate, have served as a focus for national self-identification.⁸ The leaders of the Ukrainian national revival of the early nineteenth century faced the difficulties of inspiring national consciousness in a stateless people that did not even live in a single administrative unit named Ukraine. They also had to build a Ukrainian nation out of a society in which there were only a few representatives from the upper classes who had not been assimilated to other cultures with other languages and identities. In forming a Ukrainian higher culture, they had to overcome the decline of Ukrainian artistic and literary traditions that had occurred at the end of the eighteenth century. For them the political traditions of the hetmanate and the Zaporozhian *Sich*, the social stratum of the

⁶ Some of the better of these books are Iurii Mytsyk and Ivan Storozhenko, *Zasvit, vstany Kozachen'ku* (Dnipropetrovs'k, 1990) and Iurii Mytsyk, Serhii Plokhii, Ivan Storozhenko, *Lak kozaky voiuvaly: Istorychni rospovid pro zaporiz'ke kozatstvo* (Dnipropetrovs'k, 1990).

⁷ In addition to the works of Mykhailo Hrushevs'kyi, which are widely being republished in the Ukrainian press, and Ivan Kryp'iakevych's *Bohdan Khmel'nyts'kyi*, 2nd ed. (Lviv, 1990) (corrected by removing the censor's insertions), see *Het'many Ukrainy: Istorychni portrety zbirnyk* (Kiev, 1991), Dmytro lavornyst'kyi, *Dniprovi porohy* (Dnipropetrovs'k, 1989) and his *Istoriia zaporiz'kykh kozakiv*, vol. 1 (Lviv, 1990).

⁸ See O.W. Gerus, "Manifestations of the Cossack Idea in Modern History: The Cossack Legacy and its Impact," *Ukrains'kyi istoryk* (1986), no. 1–2, pp. 22–39.

Cossacks and their leading group or *starshyna*, and the literary and artistic traditions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, ultimately defined as Cossack baroque, provided Ukrainian political, social, and cultural models. Because these models were living memories among substantial strata of the population of Ukraine in the early nineteenth century, they proved especially potent.

The image of the Cossacks, and more especially the Zaporozhian *Sich*, also filled a need in the social agenda of the Ukrainian national movement. Directed toward a largely peasant people, the Ukrainian national movement, especially in the Russian empire, was imbued with a populist tinge and a sense of social grievance. For the national activists the Cossacks and the Zaporozhian *Sich* represented a popular movement against serfdom and social inequity. This identification of the Cossacks with resistance to social oppression was usually combined with a vision of the *Sich* as an egalitarian and democratic brotherhood. In the early populist phase of the Ukrainian movement, the resistance of the *Sich* to rulers and states was seen as a positive tradition. Positive echoes of the Cossacks and the *Sich* in Ukrainian folklore further reinforced the association with Ukrainian self-identity.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the image of the Cossacks changed, but they remained an enduring part of Ukrainian self-definition. The first major modern political tract, *Istoriia Rusov* (circa 1800), defended Ukrainian political and historical rights and propagated the French Enlightenment through a depiction of the Cossack past. The first modern Ukrainian political organization, the Cyril and Methodian Brotherhood of the 1840s, in its *Books of the Genesis of the Ukrainian People*, based its message of Slavic brotherhood and the Ukraine as the savior of the Slavic world on the democratic tradition of the Cossacks, and contrasted this with Polish oligarchy and Muscovite autocracy. In the romantic poetry of Taras Shevchenko (1814–1861), the Cossack past assumed a mythic significance, placing Ukrainians in world

history. Although the political, cultural, and social environments changed, the overwhelming association of Ukrainian identity with the Cossacks remained. When Ukrainian political groups aspired to establish a national state and took up arms to do so after World War I, greater attention was paid to the state-building and national character of the hetmanate and the military prowess of the Cossacks. One of the Ukrainian independent governments was called the hetmanate and ruled by the descendant of an eighteenth-century hetman. All Ukrainian political groups, including the early Soviet Ukrainian republic, used Cossack symbols. For those who adhered to the national camp, the Cossacks were remembered every time the second line of the national anthem was sung: "We are still the young brothers of the Cossack clan."

The association of the Cossacks with Ukrainian national identity in part explains why the Soviet government came to oppose historical study and the maintenance of artifacts in its campaigns against "Ukrainian nationalism." While not necessarily planned as an attack on Ukrainian identity, the creation of the great Dnieper Sea, which began in the 1930s, flooded numerous historical sites. At a time when brutal destruction of Ukrainian churches, including the Cossack baroque edifices, and the physical annihilation of millions of peasants were being undertaken, few voices could be raised in opposition. The attack on the past, on the village, and on religion was a general Soviet phenomenon, but it had a very different impact in the Ukraine than in Russia. For Ukrainians, despite the defeat of the Ukrainian independence movement in 1917–21, the 1920s were a period of national consolidation and renewal, a break with the past of czarist Russia, when Ukrainian culture had been persecuted. Although Russian cultural life was vibrant in the 1920s, it was not specifically national, as it was during the great golden and silver ages under the czars. Condemnation of Great Russian chauvinism and the czarist past contrasted with a certain permissiveness for Ukrainian patriotic and national activities. With Stalinism in the 1930s

came a ferocious campaign against Ukrainian nationalism and a steady increase in Russian nationalism, even including a positive appraisal of various czars. Throughout the Stalinist period, Ukrainian history was reinterpreted so that not only Hetman Ivan Mazepa's attempt to set up a Ukraine independent of Russia was condemned, but even the Russian imperial army's sacking of the Zaporozhian *Sich* in 1775 was praised. Economic determinist and class justifications might have been added to the condemnation of the Cossacks, but it was essentially Russian imperial and Russian nationalist in orientation.⁹

During the thaw of the late 1950s and 1960s, Ukrainian historians began to renew research on the Cossacks, to question cautiously official interpretations, and to rehabilitate earlier historians. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, the boss of the Ukrainian Communist party, Petro Shelest, had even begun a limited program to restore Ukrainian identity and culture, and therefore the underpinnings of Ukrainian political existence. Turning to the Cossacks as the symbol of Ukrainian identity, Shelest permitted mention in literary works of the destruction of the Ukrainian cultural legacy (Oles' Honchar's *Sobor*), allowed plans for the restoration of plundered historical sites and museums, and even propagated respect toward the Cossack legacy in his own writings. Therefore, when the central government moved against Shelest in 1972, they condemned his *Ukraine Our Soviet* for its nationalist glorification of the Cossacks. With this began a campaign against historical studies on the Cossacks that later spread even to the singing of songs about Cossacks or mentioning them at all. As centralist and Russificatory policies increased in the Ukraine in the 1970s and 1980s, the

⁹ See the chapter "Soviet Interpretation of Ukrainian History" in Yaroslav Bilinsky, *The Second Soviet Republic: The Ukraine after World War II* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1964), pp. 203–225.

witch-hunt against Ukrainian nationalism intensified, so that any study or mention of a separate Ukrainian history was condemned.¹⁰

By the late 1980s, the antinationalist campaigns of the Soviet authorities had merely strengthened the view that the essence of Ukrainian identity rested in the Cossacks. This set the stage for the emergence of the Cossack issue in the incomplete processes of Ukrainian nation-building and state-building. Although more than 42 million people in the USSR called themselves Ukrainians, they did not form a cohesive national community as Germans, Poles, or Hungarians did. Millions had abandoned the use of their native language in everyday life and some did not even know it. Among the well-educated, knowledge of national culture and history was limited, while most of the others did not even have the simplified, shared image of national identity common to most Central and East European peoples. Regional differences were so pronounced that the collective identity "Ukrainian" could not transcend them. For much of the population in the southern and eastern Ukraine, "Ukrainian" merely connoted ancestral roots. Collective loyalties to a "Soviet people" and to an East Slavic family coexisted with a Ukrainian identity that was often devoid of linguistic, cultural, or historical content. Although the Soviet regime had officially abandoned the czarist view that one Russian nation encompassed Great, White, and Little Russians (i.e., Ukrainians), it had in practice propagandized for a loyalty to "eternal Ukrainian-Russian friendship," and the supplanting of Ukrainian by Russian culture. This policy succeeded for some Eastern Ukrainians, who lived alongside more than 10 million Russians concentrated in the southeast Ukraine. The process of modern Ukrainian nation-building, begun in the

¹⁰ See Jaroslaw Pelenski, "Shelest and His Period in Soviet Ukraine (1963–1972): A Revival of Controlled Ukrainian Autonomism," in P.J. Potichnyi, ed., *Ukraine in the Seventies* (Oakville, Ont., 1975), pp. 283–305 and Roman Solchanyk, "Politics and the National Question in the Post-Shelest Period," in *Ukraine after Shelest*, ed. Bohdan Krawchenko (Edmonton, 1983), pp. 1–29.

nineteenth century, had never been completed, and in fact had been reversed during the Stalinist terror. Subsequently the Soviet regime continued to retard the process and Ukrainians in Ukraine continued to assimilate to Russian culture and identity. Despite their great numbers Ukrainians were endangered as a national community.¹¹

Although the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic was a founding member of the United Nations, the community of sovereign states, the process of Ukrainian state-building had been even more severely retarded than that of forming a national community. There were some successes in the process of Ukrainian state-building from 1900 onward. "Ukraine" at the turn of the century was merely a geographical notion, amorphous in its limits and not widely acknowledged by those who did not adhere to the Ukrainian national movement. Yet from the concept of the Ukraine as the land inhabited predominantly by Ukrainians a political and administrative entity generally recognized by its inhabitants, its neighbors, and the world community as "Ukraine" emerged. Out of the turmoil after World War I, and the struggle after the Russian Revolution, an administratively defined Ukrainian SSR emerged with a clear border between Ukraine and Russia. During and after World War II the Ukrainian SSR was extended westward into former Polish, Romanian, and Czechoslovak territories to incorporate much of the territory in which Ukrainians were a majority. In 1954 the Crimea was transferred to the Ukrainian SSR. Therefore, by the 1980s, the Ukraine was a relatively stable geographic-political entity, though for many of its inhabitants, its neighbors, and the world community it was viewed as merely a part of the USSR, or even of Russia.

The fact that the Ukraine had emerged as a political-

¹¹ On the evolution of Ukrainian national consciousness in the twentieth century, see Bohdan Krawchenko, *Social Change and National Consciousness in Twentieth-Century Ukraine* (London, 1985).

administrative entity was largely due to the struggle of the Ukrainian national movement to establish an independent state in 1917–21 and to the Bolsheviks' need to win supporters away from this movement. The Soviet annexation of the Western Ukrainian territories during and after World War II, which was in part an attempt to neutralize the activities of Ukrainian groups to establish an independent state, had a similar consequence. Indeed, Stalin's inclusion of the Ukrainian SSR in the UN was to some degree a sop to Ukrainian desires for a state. Certainly the Soviet constitution guaranteed wide powers usually associated with sovereign statehood to the Ukrainian SSR and other republics. Practice was indeed very different. Not only did the Ukraine not have an autonomous role in international affairs, it did not even exercise meaningful self-rule.

When in the late 1980s the reemerging Ukrainian national movement, which took on an organized character in 1989 with the formation of *Rukh*, turned to Cossack topics, it was profoundly aware of the unfinished nature of Ukrainian nation-building and the need to instill national consciousness in the population, particularly in Eastern Ukraine. In the initial phase of activation of forces for perestroika and glasnost in the Ukraine against the retrograde Sherbyts'kyi regime, antitotalitarian, democratic, anticommunist, religious, ecological, and national movements easily coalesced into an opposition, for which the Ukrainian national movement provided an umbrella organization. In some ways, this gave a voice to Ukrainian national questions, which previously had not been heard. It also gave support to the Ukrainian movement that could easily evaporate once the grip of the old regime weakened and political, civil, and religious rights were ensured. In some ways the opposition benefited from the extreme rigidity of the government and the Communist party in the Ukraine, since this united groups that individually might otherwise have come to an accommodation with the regime. The fact that the Ukrainian government and the Soviet

government dealt so poorly with the Chernobyl disaster led to the conviction among the ecologically aware that there must be a responsible Ukrainian government which cared about the Ukraine and its people—a view that bolstered the nationalist movement. The government's refusal to grant religious freedom to the Ukrainian Catholic and Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox churches and its preference for the Russian Orthodox church compromised any claim that it respected religious liberty and gave the nationalist movement issues which resonated with broad masses of the rural population (especially in Western Ukraine). In the early phases of mass opposition in the Ukraine, disparate issues all seemed to take on a nationalist coloration against a regime that made struggle against "Ukrainian nationalism" the centerpiece of its legitimacy.

The uneven level of Ukrainian national consciousness and the assimilation of many Ukrainians to Russian language and identity presented the Ukrainian national movement with problems not faced by groups such as the Armenians or the Lithuanians. Ukrainian writers had made the defense of the Ukrainian language a major issue, and groups such as the Society for the Ukrainian Language struggled against the Russification of the school system and the diminished place of the Ukrainian language in the republic. The language issue drew wide support from the Western Ukraine and from individuals throughout the Ukraine, but in many areas of the Eastern Ukraine, Ukrainians accepted the dominance of Russian in public and even private life. A generation that had switched from Ukrainian to Russian in order to fit into their new urban surroundings and to improve their children's chances now found their acts in question. A generation or in many cases two generations in Eastern Ukrainian cities had been raised and schooled in Russian and did not even know Ukrainian. While such groups often favored strengthening the position of the Ukrainian language, they did not see it as a vital issue in their own lives. Similarly, while the publication of

formerly banned writers and the renewal of artistic and musical traditions gave members of the Ukrainian intelligentsia greater understanding of and self-confidence in their own culture, none of this much affected the Russified bureaucrats, technical intelligentsia or workers, or the Ukrainian peasantry. Even the religious issue, so important in the countryside, only benefited the Ukrainian national movement in the Western Ukraine, where in late 1989 and 1990 the Ukrainian Catholic church emerged from the underground and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox church spread rapidly. In other areas, the Russian Orthodox church (renamed the Ukrainian Orthodox church in 1990) dominated and generally opposed *Rukh* and the Ukrainian movement, though it responded reluctantly to the Ukrainian revival by late 1990. Indeed, the Russian Orthodox church viewed the alliance of *Rukh* with the Ukrainian churches as a threat, and to some degree the national movement may have further alienated the Russian Orthodox church and its followers, particularly in Eastern Ukrainian villages, by its alliance with the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox church.

Given differing worldviews in the Ukraine, which are primarily due to regional and political differences, twentieth-century Ukrainian history evokes diverse reactions, even from those who are generally anticommunist. Therefore the tradition of the Ukrainian *Sich* sharpshooters, who fought for Austria-Hungary against imperial Russia, provides great solidarity in Galicia, but elicits a more mixed reaction in areas formerly part of the Russian empire. Advocates of Ukrainian independence still divide into proponents of the Ukrainian People's Republic (UNR) and of the hetmanate. World War II is still interpreted in very different ways, especially in Western and Eastern Ukraine. Therefore, while the new freedom of discussion and publication allowed new views and interpretations of Ukrainian history to be aired, there has been no clear unifying vision that could easily rally broad segments of the population to the national movement. This has been particu-

larly true in the Eastern Ukraine, which lived under Soviet rule for seventy years and where there was widespread acceptance of the Soviet interpretation of Ukrainian history. As a consequence the rapid introduction of new views had the potential for alienating and did alienate Ukrainians who might otherwise have favored a national revival.¹²

The national movement could most easily turn to interest in the Cossack past as a means of spreading national consciousness. One need not believe that the leaders of the Ukrainian revival made a calculated decision to propagate consciousness of the Cossack past as a vehicle for other issues, since a revived interest in the Cossacks was already developing. The Cossack legacy stood at the core of the Ukrainian national awakening of the nineteenth century and was universally accepted throughout Ukraine as a touchstone of Ukrainian self-identity. As a historical phenomenon Cossackdom had its center in the south and east Ukraine, in the very areas in which the Ukrainian movement was weak and Russification most advanced. Oblasts such as Cherkasy, Dnipropetrovs'k, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson remained bastions of conservative Communist party apparatuses that opposed reform and Ukrainian activities. These areas, which had been settled as agricultural regions in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and which had in some cases developed as industrial regions in the late nineteenth century, had relatively few Ukrainian historical traditions except those of the Cossacks, even though material remains of the Cossack past were quite scarce. Indeed, the city built near the historic *Sich*, Zaporizhzhia, is the archetypical faceless Soviet industrial city. In more northern areas such as Sloboda Ukraine (the Kharkiv region, where Cossacks played a major role) and the former hetmanate (Chernihiv, Poltava, and Sumy oblasts) more

¹² For a related symbolic issue, the use of the blue-and-yellow flag, see Bohdan Krawchenko, "National Memory in Ukraine: The Role of the Blue and Yellow Flag," *Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 15 (Summer 1990): 1–22.

substantial material remnants of the Cossack past survive, as do more developed traditions of Ukrainian and historical national activities. In symbolic terms, however, the area of the Zaporozhian Cossacks' cradle, the lower Dnieper region of the earliest *Sich*, assumes a primary position in the popular imagination.

In June 1989, the editorial board of the journal of the Ukrainian Society for the Preservation of Monuments, *Pam'iatky Ukrainy*, conducted an expedition to the sites of the Zaporozhian *Sich*.¹³ Led by Dr. Olena Apanovych, a scholar who after 1972 was prevented from doing her research on the Cossacks, the expedition attracted wide interest among students and the intelligentsia. In the spring of 1990, a politically much more significant expedition occurred. A proposal to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Zaporozhian Cossacks in 1990 was embraced by *Rukh* as a means of raising national consciousness in the southeastern Ukraine. With the triumph of the democratic national camp in the elections in the Western Ukrainian Galician oblasts in March 1990, *Rukh* had the wherewithal to organize a mass action. The primarily Western Ukrainian travelers, who went to the Cossacks' heartland with the paraphernalia of the Cossack past and the Ukrainian national cause, sought to heal the breach between Western and Eastern Ukraine by emphasizing common loyalties. Local Communist party leaders used bureaucratic chicanery and scare campaigns to keep the East Ukrainian population from participating in the celebration. While some inhabitants of the oblasts were influenced by this propaganda, as their curiosity gradually began to outweigh their fears they joined in increasing numbers. This culminated in a mass demonstration in Zaporizhzhia.¹⁴

¹³ For a description of this expedition, see Anatolii Serykov, "Sich utslila?", *Pam'iatnyky Ukrainy*, no. 4 (1989): 6–11.

¹⁴ On the celebrations, see Chrystyna Lapychak, "Days of Kozak Glory Explore Ukraine's History, Promote National Identity," *The Ukrainian Weekly*, Sept. 23, 1990,

The Communist-controlled governments in southeastern Ukraine were under increasing criticism about their attitude to the national past, which was exemplified by their decision to build a bridge across the island of Khortytsia, one of the "holy places" of the Cossack past. Soon these reactionary elites attempted to appropriate the Cossack celebrations to their own ends. They ceased to resist the legacy of the Cossacks, which they had so long denied, and instead sought to co-opt it. With the triumph of the national movement in Galicia and the increasing radicalization of the republican capital of Kiev and its intelligentsia, the Cossack issue became much less threatening. As the revival of Ukrainian culture and language came to be accepted, more controversial issues such as the struggle for Ukrainian independence of 1917–21 and the conflicts during World War II began to take center stage in political-historical discussions. By early 1991, when the Ukrainian national organizations announced new marches throughout Ukraine, culminating in demonstration at the *Sich*, the national and local Communist party had decided to take the Cossack issue firmly in hand and to ensure that *Rukh* and Western Ukrainian "extremists" would not be able to carry on propaganda campaigns during the celebrations.¹⁵ The Ukrainian Academy of Sciences hurriedly organized an "international" conference in Kiev and Dnipropetrovs'k on the 500th anniversary of the Zaporozhian Cossacks, while the local party cadres were retrained to praise the Cossack past. In essence, the Cossack issue, which had in fact symbolized the very existence of a Ukrainian national community, became defused, since even the reactionary Communist party groups of oblasts, such as Cherkasy, Dnipropetrovs'k and Zaporizhzhia, joined the action of commemoration. While the extent of the Ukrainian renewal and the content of the revived Ukrainian national culture

pp. 8–9, 11 and Oleksii Opanasiuk, "Homoniia Ukraina. . . .," *Radians'ka Osvita* 10 August 1990.

¹⁵ For example of the Party's new interest in the Zaporozhian Cossacks, see "Kozats'ka respublika," *Robitnycha hazeta*, 20 February 1991.

might still be in question, the basic issue of its existence in the southeast has been resolved.

The Cossack issue also played a role in the question of Ukrainian state-building and even was related to issues of the geographic limits of the Ukrainian polity. Although the borders of Ukraine had been generally accepted by its population, the Ukraine had little political reality. In the strictly centralized Soviet Union, Moscow and the all-Union ministries had functioned more as the Ukraine's capital than their Kiev equivalents. As the reality of a Ukrainian polity less firmly under communist control emerged, local elites began to raise questions about whether their region belonged fully to the Ukraine. While in the instance of the Transcarpathian oblast this claim was based on the linguistic and cultural particularism of a group of Ukrainian speakers, all other cases (Novorossia, Donbas, Mykolaiv oblast) occurred in the southern and eastern Ukrainian territories, which had been permanently settled only in the late eighteenth century and had not been included in earlier Ukrainian political and cultural formations. All these regions had substantial numbers of Russians and Russified Ukrainians. In this they were similar to the Crimea, which indeed had a Russian majority. The Crimea, however, differed from the other oblasts in that it had only been transferred from the Russian SFSR to the Ukrainian SSR in 1954 and had previously been an autonomous republic, the homeland of the Crimean Tatars, whom Stalin had deported in 1944. The questioning of Ukrainian control in the southern regions, first supported by the conservative party local apparatus that also opposed the declaration of Ukrainian sovereignty on July 16, 1990, was temporarily raised again by the Russian reformers Boris Yeltsin and the mayor of Moscow, Gavriil Popov, after the proclamation of Ukrainian independence.¹⁶

¹⁶ On Russian-Ukrainian relations, see Roman Solchanyk, "Ukraine and Russia: Relations before and after the failed coups," *The Ukrainian Weekly*, Sept. 22, 1991, p. 9.

Yet between 1989 and 1991 the cult of the Cossacks had served to reinforce the Ukrainian nature of the territory in popular consciousness. The popular celebrations and the attention to sites of the Cossack past emphasized that before the Russian empire had conquered these regions in the late eighteenth century, they had been the terrain of the Zaporozhian *Sich* and Cossack expeditions. This most directly affected areas such as Zaporizhzhia, Dnipropetrovs'k, and Kherson oblasts, but tangentially even affected the Crimea, the site of Cossack-Tatar contact and conflict long before Russian presence was established on the peninsula. Thus the celebration of the Cossack past contradicted the Russian imperial vision of the area as primarily the creation of Catherine II and Prince Grigorii Potemkin. While before 1989 this Russian imperial perception had merely served to justify the dominance of Russia and Russians, it later called into question the territorial integrity of an increasingly sovereign Ukraine. The restoration of the memory of the Cossack past had in effect claimed these southern lands for the emerging Ukrainian polity.¹⁷

The Cossack cult also functions as an instrument for building a modern Ukrainian political culture on the basis of native traditions. The elites of the peoples of the Soviet Union emerged from Soviet totalitarianism with a need to convince their populations that they possessed the intrinsic capacity and native traditions that would permit them to establish liberal democratic political systems. For the Baltic peoples, the traditions of the prewar states, albeit idealized, functioned to give them confidence. Russians, bound to their role as the imperial nation of the Soviet period and the creators of czarist autocracy, faced a particularly difficult quandary, only really

¹⁷ For the use of the Cossack past to assert claims for south-eastern Ukraine, see "Siudy siahala ukrains'ka vol'nytsia, abo pro shcho shepocha kovyla donets'kykh stepiv," *Visti z Ukrainy*, no. 11 (1991): 8.

For claims to Odessa, see O. Oliinykiv, "Nashchadiy Chepihy i Holovatoho," *Kul'tura i zhyttia*, 5 August 1990.

resolved by the formation of new traditions of support for democracy and resistance to despotism during the coup of late August 1991. In contrast, the Ukrainians had inherited from the nineteenth century a self-image as a democratic, if anarchic, people. That image had been based on the Cossack past. It was maintained throughout the Soviet period, in part because Friedrich Engels had described the Zaporozhians as a Christian republic, a phrase often repeated when Soviet Ukrainian historians sought to justify their interest in the Cossacks. The renewed cult of the Cossacks soon developed into an idealized image of a democratic, free, law-governed society that could stand as a model for the new Ukraine for which the reform groups were striving. In this search for Cossack Ukrainian traditions, contemporary historians and publicists placed the Bender constitution of 1710, written by Pylyp Orlyk, a follower and then successor to Hetman Ivan Mazepa, at the center of the Ukrainian political tradition.¹⁸ That a document written by émigrés which had never been in effect in the Ukraine could be viewed as a seminal work in Ukrainian political culture in some ways epitomizes the current situation in the Ukraine. Many political movements and cultural institutions of the Ukrainian emigration are returning to the Ukraine and filling the vacuum left by the collapse of the Soviet order. Although popular history distorts the significance and nature of certain events and institutions of the Ukrainian Cossack past, it does focus attention on the specific Ukrainian historical legacy that had been ignored or suppressed so long during the Soviet period.¹⁹

The attention to the Cossack past has also concentrated on

¹⁸ On the interest in Orlyk, see Liubov Histsova, "Zheby Moskva v prava nashi ne mishalasia," *Ukraina*, April 7, 1991, p. 32.

¹⁹ For an example of the idealized vision of the Cossacks, see "Cossack Glory Lives on," *News from Ukraine* 1991, no. 13. and "Fenomen nashoi istorii, Do 500-richchia Zaporoz'koho kozatstva," *Za vil'nu Ukrainu* 24 July 1990. These elements had already begun to appear in the Communist Party press by the summer of 1990, A. Pachenko, "Vozrozhedenie slavy kozatskoi," *Pravda Ukrainy* 21 July 1991.

the hetmanate and other Cossack polities as embodiments of Ukrainian statehood. During the early decades of this century, many Ukrainian historians broke with the populist tradition in Ukrainian history and studied state-building and sociopolitical elites in early modern Ukraine. Although their studies were inspired by the modern Ukrainian aspiration for statehood, they produced much valuable information on the political structures and elite of the hetmanate. After decades in which the hetmanate could not be studied and the existence of this Ukrainian polity could barely be mentioned in textbooks and popular literature, the institutions, elite, and culture of the hetmanate have become very popular topics. Part of this popularity is due to the emphasis on the Cossacks as representatives of Ukrainian statehood, for which the hetmanate constitutes the most developed example. Other interests derive from the search for Ukrainian men of state. Hetman Ivan Mazepa, reviled in Soviet writings as a "traitor" for having broken with Peter I and for striving for Ukrainian independence, is the most salient example.²⁰ The resurrection of popular legends, above all the story that the eighteenth-century Hetman Pavlo Polubotok deposited a substantial sum of money in the Bank of England which was to be returned to its native land when the Ukraine became free, even reached the floor of the Ukrainian parliament.²¹ Although the popular fascination with Ukrainian Cossack statehood has engendered exaggerations and misconceptions, it has restored knowledge of earlier generations of Ukrainians who established autonomous political units and strove for independence.

The cult of the Cossacks has occupied a significant place in the process of the reemergence of a Ukrainian national community and the formation of a Ukrainian state. Cults of former heroes and the reemergence of traditional values have

²⁰ On the cult of Mazepa, see "See uchinil vsei rady Ukrainy," *Molod' Ukrainy*, 7 March 1990.

²¹ On the treasures of Polubotok, see "Shche raz pro Polubotka," *Molod' Ukrainy*, 8 August 1990.

been common in postcommunist Eastern Europe. In most of these societies, however, not only did well-integrated national communities exist, but the communist states had employed nationalism to legitimize their existence. In contrast, the Ukrainian national community was poorly integrated. Official Soviet policy condemned most manifestations of Ukrainian national consciousness, limited the use of the Ukrainian language and the development of Ukrainian culture, and fiercely persecuted any autonomous Ukrainian political activity. In their efforts to revive Ukrainian culture and to strengthen Ukrainian national consciousness, the leaders of the Ukrainian national movement turned to the symbol of the Cossacks. The legacy of the Cossacks has also been employed by groups who seek to establish a Ukrainian state. The function of Cossack mythology will alter as the cultural and political situation in Ukraine changes, but its continued importance is certain.