

**Serhii Plokhy, ed. *Poltava 1709: The Battle and the Myth*.** Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012. xxv, 703 pp. Maps. Illustrations. Index. \$29.95, paper.

**T**he Battle of Poltava in 1709 is generally considered to have been one of the decisive battles of the western world destroying the ephemeral Swedish ascendancy in central and northern Europe and setting the stage for the emergence of the Russian Empire, which consequently expanded into what are today Finland, Estonia, and Latvia to the north; Lithuania, Poland, Belarus and Ukraine to the west; and the Ukrainian steppe and the Crimean peninsula to the south. These varied lands were taken away from neighbouring states, such as the Kingdom of Sweden, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and the Ottoman Empire, all of which had been great powers in their own time, but all of which declined precipitously after Poltava.

In Russian history, this Battle of Poltava, in which Peter I of Russia defeated Charles XII of Sweden, is often seen as the first in a series of three great battles that determined the fate of Russia for the next two and a half centuries. These were Poltava itself (1709), Borodino (1812), at which France's Grande Armée was badly mauled, and Stalingrad (1943), which turned the course of World War II (the Great Fatherland War in Russian parlance). In this narrative, Charles XII, Napoleon, and Hitler are all seen as evil invaders, and Peter, Alexander I, and Stalin are seen in a much more positive light; that is, as defenders of the Fatherland and successful military leaders to boot. In fact, as a consequence of Poltava, Peter was able to upgrade the name of his state on the European scene from the Tsardom of Muscovy to the "Russian Empire," and his Russian contemporaries immediately proclaimed him "Peter the Great," a title generally accepted by European historians but disliked by many Ukrainian, Polish, and other scholars.

This peculiar dispute over terminology points the reader to a major fact discussed in Serhii Plokhy's volume: Ukrainian historians in general have a differing view of Poltava from that of the master narrative accepted by most European historians. For in terms of Ukrainian national history, Poltava not only signified the proclamation of the Russian Empire, but also the demise of the Ukrainian Cossack state called the "Hetmanate," which had been established by Hetman Bohdan Khmel'nyts'kyi in 1648 and prospered and was considerably strengthened during the long reign of Hetman Ivan Mazepa from the 1680s to 1709. Mazepa crossed over to the Swedes before the Battle of Poltava and together with Charles had to flee for his life afterwards. Thus for Ukrainian national historians sympathetic to Mazepa

and the Cossack state, Poltava was a defeat and a disaster, not a victory and a success; and the figure of the historical Mazepa, usually only mentioned in passing by Russian and Western historians, is central.

The essays collected in Plokhý's book deal with both ways of seeing this important battle. Some of the essays, such as those of Donald Ostrowski and Peter B. Brown, deal with the purely military aspects of the event, Ostrowski seeing Peter's military reforms as central to his victory while Brown takes a longer-term view, stressing the slow but steady growth of Russian military power. Other essays in the volume deal with geopolitical or administrative questions. For example, Paul Bushkovitch brings attention to the fact that Peter allowed the newly-conquered Baltic provinces to regain some of the autonomy lost under the Swedes, while simultaneously, he destroyed the autonomy of the Hetmanate. Bushkovitch concludes that Peter was not the dogmatic centralizer that some have seen him to be. Also, Robert I. Frost argues (somewhat implausibly in my view) that Poltava did not really mean the end of the great power status of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the emergence of the Russian ascendancy in Poland but rather that the missteps of the Polish king, Augustus the Strong, were more immediately responsible for this unfortunate situation. Other essays deal with important subjects, such as the bloody "Rape of Baturyn," Mazepa's capital, by the Russians, for which Volodymyr Kovalenko provides strong archaeological evidence to complement the historical and literary sources. But the essays that most attracted my attention were those dealing directly with the person and activities of the controversial Ukrainian hetman, Ivan Mazepa.

A number of these are quite important. For example, the Russian historian, Tatiana Tairova-Iakovleva repeats her oft-stated position that Peter's administrative reforms seriously threatened the autonomy of the Hetmanate even prior to Poltava and were probably a major impetus for Mazepa's decision to go over to the Swedes, while Michael Moser and Michael Flier both analyze Mazepa's writings, official and personal, to conclude that his language was of an excellent Ukrainian character, without the Russian accretions that came to the tongue after Poltava. But among my favourite essays in this volume is that by Plokhý himself who analyzes the early nineteenth-century manuscript called *The History of the Rus'* to determine its attitude towards the controversial Hetman and, consequently, the attitudes of the Left Bank gentry milieu from which the manuscript emerged. This manuscript, ostensibly written by Bishop Heorhii Konys'kyi but actually anonymous, was to have an enormous impact upon the development of Ukrainian national identity during the national awakening of the nineteenth century and after 1991, when the USSR collapsed and Ukraine became independent, enjoyed a new and revived influence, which

has endured to today. Ploky points out that the author's approach to Mazepa was cautious and complex, condemning him in the general narrative but making him look very good, indeed, a true Ukrainian patriot, in the direct quotations from his speeches and proclamations, and also those of Charles and others that he inserted into his history. This the anonymous author probably did to shield himself from criticism should his dangerous history be discovered by the Tsar's unsympathetic officials, censors, and others.

On a somewhat different level, I also quite enjoyed the essay by Taras Koznarsky on the general image of Mazepa during the Romantic period as revealed in Russian-language literature. The centrepiece of Koznarsky's essay is Pushkin's poem, *Poltava*, which is really not about Poltava at all but rather about the personality of Mazepa. Pushkin painted Mazepa in very negative colours, and his characters in the poem are superficial and unrealistic, Mazepa himself appearing to be almost demonic. Consequently, critics tore the poem to shreds, and it is still generally seen as one of his weaker products, though its influence upon later Russian views of Ukraine and Ukrainians is undeniable.

It is interesting to note that both Ploky and Koznarsky refer to the Russian historian, Mikhail Pogodin's remark, made in the 1820s, that the Little Russians "love" Mazepa, and they both quote from Oleksii Martos's famous journal of a few years earlier where he ruminates upon the fact that both the ignorant and destructive Russian rebel, Sten'ka Razin, and the educated and cultured Mazepa are officially cursed each year in the churches of Kyiv, though one was no credit to his land and the other, an enlightened and philanthropic man and the ruler of a once "free nation." These quotations clearly reveal that the person of Mazepa and his cause, so excoriated throughout the Tsarist period of Russian and Ukrainian history, never completely disappeared from the historical memory of Ukrainians, even prior to the national awakening of the mid-nineteenth century, and the questions that his choice in 1708 and 1709 raised, while long suppressed by the Tsarist and Soviet regimes, are still relevant to historians and others today.

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