

Serhii Plokyh. *The Cossack Myth: History and Nationhood in the Age of Empires*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. viii, 386 pp. Illustrations. Maps. \$100.95, cloth.

It has occasionally been observed that the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century was a time of great interest in history. But the kind of history those times were most concerned with was quite different from the preceding age of the Baroque and the early Enlightenment. Those earlier times were very focused on the ancient world of Greece and Rome, and the history of Edward Gibbon, the discovery of Pompeii, and the elaboration of art history on Classical models by J. J. Winckelmann were testimony to it.

By contrast, the late Enlightenment and the early Romantic age turned more and more to the indigenous histories of the various European countries themselves, and some of those countries, which at first had some difficulty finding documents and historical “monuments” to exemplify this history, began to manufacture them on their own. Thus there appeared the famous “forgeries,” or “mystifications” as Serhii Plokyh somewhat obliquely calls them, of Ossian in Scotland, the *Manuscript of the Queen’s Court* in the Czech lands, the *Tale of Igor’s Campaign* in Russia, and, finally, the *History of the Rus’* in eastern or Left Bank Ukraine, then usually called “Little Russia.”

The *History of the Rus’* was especially popular among the gentry of Little Russia which was descended from the Officer Class of the old Cossack state, called by historians “the Hetmanate,” after its supreme official the “Hetman.” The names of numerous families of that part of Ukraine were mentioned in the history, and today’s historians all agree that the document was manufactured to provide historical legitimacy to this elite in its strivings for acceptance into the Russian nobility of the early nineteenth century. There remains, however, great disagreement over who the real author of this anonymous manuscript was and the exact time and place of its composition. Plokyh’s book addresses these two questions in great detail and reads very much like a detective story.

At first, the work was attributed to Bishop Hryhorii Konys'kyi (1717–95), a long-time professor of the Mohyla Academy in Kyiv who later gained fame as a defender of Orthodox Christianity in Belarus while it was still under Polish Catholic rule. But this attribution, which had appeared on the title page of several manuscripts, was soon discarded by scholars as a ploy to legitimize the history and hide its true author whose views were at considerable variance with official accounts of Russian and Ukrainian history. Thereafter, the father and son team of Hryhorii and Vasyl' Poetyka were advanced as possible authors. The father had been active in Catherine

II's famous Legislative Commission, which was intended to give order, responsibilities, and some liberty to the Russian nobility, and his authorship would have fit well with this path. But closer examination of the manuscript revealed that it could not have been composed so early in Catherine's reign, and the true author had access to sources and ideas that the Poletykas did not. Therefore, the Lviv historian, Mykhailo Vozniak (1881–1954), proposed that none other than the imperial chancellor, Oleksandr Bezborod'ko (1747–79), who was of Ukrainian background and a bit of a local patriot, was the real author. He had an intense interest in history and was, to a degree, a defender of traditional Ukrainian liberties.

However, again, closer examination of the manuscript revealed that Bezborod'ko could not have been the sole author because the document seemed to contain several references to events that occurred after his time. Vozniak's thesis was, therefore, challenged by Oleksandr Ohloblyn (1899–1992) who analyzed the place names in the document and hypothesized that it was produced by someone from the Novhorod-Siverskyi region of Ukraine. During his long career as a student of the history, Ohloblyn suggested at least two different candidates for author, the most important being a nobleman named Opanas Lobysevych.

Building upon all this scholarship, Ploky takes the “people and places” analysis further and proposes that it was not the Novhorod-Siverskyi area, but rather the Starodub region that was most familiar to the author, and he finds in Starodub several candidates with the means and motivation for writing such a history. Of all these, his favourite is Stepan Shyrai (1761–1841), Marshal of the Chernihiv Nobility, who was an ardent promoter of the history and a political rival of Prince Nikolai Repnin, the Governor-general of Little Russia (later Leo Tolstoy's hero and the model for Prince Andrei Bolkonskii in *War and Peace*), who sponsored the official history of “Little Russia” by Dmytro Bantysh-Kamens'kyi. Thus Shyrai and Repnin, according to Ploky, were both political and historiographical competitors. In his conclusions, however, Ploky admits that his theory is far from conclusive and that much research still needs to be done to clarify the matter.

The general significance of the *History of the Rus'*, nonetheless, is never in doubt. Not only did it represent an early, pre-nationalist phase of “Ukrainian” patriotism, “estate patriotism” as some have called it, but it solidly linked even earlier Cossack identities through the “Little Russian” autonomist identity of the late Enlightenment to later “ethnic” Ukrainian ones. The middle stage of these, to the mid-nineteenth century, was based on the nobility, of course, but the last stage quickly came to embody the rights and aspirations of the entire Ukrainian people, especially the peasantry, who originally were of no concern to the author of the history.

(His logic of local noble rights actually militated against central government interference with gentry control over serfs.) So the ultimate irony of the matter is that the defence of noble rights, elitist, hierarchical, and in a sense undemocratic, was turned truly egalitarian and democratic in modern times, and a document written for the most part in the peculiar “Russian” of the Left Bank nobility (which did, in fact, contain many local elements), eventually came to be seen as a manifesto of Ukrainian nationalism, translated into the modern Ukrainian language by none other than one of the leaders of the late twentieth-century Ukrainian national movement, the writer and political leader, Ivan Drach, who was at that time very much a “linguistic nationalist,” if we may be permitted to use the term in a neutral and non-judgemental way. In this, I think, lies the essence of what Plokhy calls “the Cossack Myth,” though he himself never quite puts it in this way.

Of course, there are many sub-plots in Plokhy’s tale, and these envelop many of the most interesting historical controversies, which have bubbled up in independent Ukraine. For example, the author of the history, somewhat astonishingly to the modern reader, begins his story by actually rejecting the term “Ukraine” as a Polish invention for his country. He much prefers the terms Rus’ or Little Russia, claiming that the Muscovites had, in a way, stolen the name “Rus’,” which had once belonged to the region around Kyiv, what had at one time been Scythia, then Sarmatia, and in his own time was more and more known simply as “Little Russia,” or Southern Rus’. Plokhy points to a controversy over the use of the name “Ukraine,” which appeared in the early Kharkiv journal *Ukrainskii vestnik* in 1816 as the origin of this rather peculiar opinion rejecting the name “Ukraine,” which, in fact, the anonymous author did not consistently adhere to in the text of his work. This opinion did, however, reflect the extreme hostility to the Poles, which the author displays throughout his highly polemical tract. Such opinion, claims Plokhy, fits in perfectly with the attitudes of the Starodub nobility, who were struggling for the legal recognition of their noble status while their neighbouring Polish counterparts achieved such recognition without much difficulty at all.

Such an anti-Polish attitude came to be repeated throughout the history. Supposedly anti-Polish figures like Bohdan Khmel’nyts’kyi are treated with great respect, while supposedly Polonophile leaders like Ivan Vyhovs’kyi are severely criticized. Indeed, Vyhovs’kyi and Hetman Ivan Mazepa are accused of being Poles by origin, an evident falsehood. Khmel’nyts’kyi, it should be stressed, is the national hero par excellence in the history.

As for Mazepa, the author displays a cautious and equivocal attitude towards him. On the one hand, he is an ethnic Pole and traitor to the Tsar; on the other, he is a noble rebel, a defender of the traditional rights and

privileges of his country. The former position seems to have been taken, at least partly, pro-forma by the narrator, while the latter is perhaps taken more seriously and is revealed in the quoted speeches of Mazepa and other protagonists of the history. The author may have used this somewhat thin literary technique to shield himself a bit from accusations of disloyalty to the Tsar, just as he vilified Tsar Peter's General Aleksandr Menshikov while leaving the Tsar himself untouched.

Another heroic figure in the history is Hetman Pavlo Polubotok, who died in Muscovite captivity defending Ukrainian rights and privileges. The author puts into his mouth a speech defending these privileges before Peter himself, while still proclaiming his undying loyalty to the person of the Tsar. It is the story of Polubotok, it should be mentioned, that is the origin of the legend of the "barrel of gold," which the Hetman supposedly deposited in a British bank for safekeeping before heading off for Saint Petersburg to defend his country's liberties. Long believed to be a historical fact, at the time of Ukrainian independence in the late twentieth century, the Ukrainian government actually tried to collect this treasure, along with the enormous interest it would have accumulated over the centuries, but the effort failed. The British government could find no record of the gold, and Plokhy claims that this story, as well, forms part of "the Cossack Myth."

Finally, Plokhy discusses the use of the terms *narod* (people) and *natsiia* (nation) in the history, which is an important point because they later become central to the historical claims of Ukrainian nationhood. He points out that the author's major known sources were Vasyli' Ruban's "Short Chronicle of Little Russia," in part believed at least by some to have been authored by Bezborod'ko; Voltaire's history of Charles XII of Sweden, which discussed the Mazepa revolt; and the French-language history of the Cossacks of Ukraine by Jean Benoit Scherer, which served as a model for many later Russian-language histories of Ukraine. Both Voltaire and Scherer use the terms "Ukrainians" and "nation" in their accounts, and these subsequently show up in the *History of the Rus'* or are intimated by it. Therefore, the possibility clearly exists that the author, at least in part, borrowed them from these western writers. It would be amazing, indeed, if modern Ukrainian nationalism owed so very much to Voltaire and Scherer, neither of whom could be accurately described in any reasonable sense as a "nationalist," Voltaire being the very embodiment of Enlightenment cosmopolitanism and Scherer being an Alsatian known throughout Germany as Johann Benedikt Scherer, former employee of both France and Russia! But Plokhy does not pursue this point very far, acknowledging that similar concepts appear in some of the Cossack or other chronicles, and leaves it to other, more adventurous scholars to take up this central question, which is not without a certain amount of irony.

In conclusion, I found Ploky's detailed study of this important document interesting and enlightening, if in places somewhat complicated by minor points of local and family history, which make for some rather dry sections. But the book as a whole is a good one and reminds us that the *History of the Rus'* itself, which already for decades has been available in modern Ukrainian and French translations, has still not been put into English for the use of interested readers in the Americas and throughout the modern world. It is about time.

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