Two Paths. Ukrainian Culture Under the Soviets by Olena Palko: *Making Ukraine Soviet. Literature and Cultural Politics Under Lenin and Stalin*

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The history of Ukrainian culture during the Communist era of the 1920s and 30s has already been the subject of numerous scholarly works (see Brooks, 2000; Vushko, 2009). Usually, however, these were devoted to the experiment of korenizatsiia – the attempt to force the national cultures of the multi-ethnic state into Soviet culture. This marked yet another effort at involving the nations living in the USSR in the propaganda machine of the totalitarian state. Korenizatsiia as an experiment focused on transplanting elements of socialist culture to the national soil of individual countries has been presented in classical scholarly works that were structured according to the traditional model, which did not always ensure that such writings were attractive for readers (Hirsch, 2005; Liber, 1991, pp. 15–23; Slezkine, 1994, pp. 414–452). The move away from "Great Russian chauvinism" in the culture of the young Bolshevik state was intended to help win over non-Russian peoples to the Communist ideology, the very concept of revolution, and the gradually strengthening structures of the aspiring superpower. Planned as a measure serving to cement the state, it gained approval in 1923 and remained in effect for many years thereafter (Vivahainen, 2000, pp. 79 ff.; Martin, 2001).

The book under review is an extensive development of the doctoral thesis defended by Olena Palko – currently a lecturer at the University of Basel – at the University of East Anglia in Norwich. The work was printed by Bloomsbury Academic Publishing House, a recognized guarantor of publication quality. The book is excellently written, and, although the events and historical figures which it describes are set in a thicket of source footnotes, is an appealing read not only for scholars. And while not particularly long, with the body of the text comprising 192 pages, it nevertheless stands out from many other books. Olena Palko decided to go her own way and not use the paths already trodden by other historians. The book is, to some extent, a comparative analysis of the two most important creators of Ukrainian culture from the early Soviet period – during

its heyday, right until it was brutally stifled by the system, with Ukrainianness being forced into rigid forms dictated by Party censorship and reduced to the role of a folkloric addition to "the great Russian culture", and in the 1930s reused as a tool of Soviet and Russian imperialism.

The monograph is based on an extensive and solid source base. The author is well versed in the sources, both those produced by the persons whom she describes (often very private in nature), and the documentation of the Communist Party and the internal Security Services of the USSR. While working on the book, she conducted archival preliminary research at the Kyiv City State Archive, the Separate State Archive of the Security Service of Ukraine, the Central State Archive of Social Organizations of Ukraine, the Central State Archive – Museum of Literature and Art of Ukraine, and the Central State Archive of Higher Authorities of Ukraine (Palko, 2021).

Olena Palko also familiarized herself with the press of the period, including the following important publications: "Shliakhy mystetstva" ("Paths of Art"), "Chervonyi shliakh" ("Red Pathway"), "Zhyttia i Revoliutsiia" ("Life and Revolution"), "Nova Ukraina" ("New Ukraine"), "Kultura i pobut" ("Culture and Everyday Life"), and "Zhovten" ("October"). Her book is given additional value by the supplementation of sources with those published in print and concerned with both the general course of the Soviet culture of the time, and korenizatsiia and strictly Ukrainian themes (Yevsieiev, 1959; Clark, Dobrenko, 2007; Acton, Stableford, 2005).

Finally, mention should be made of the in-depth analysis to which the author has subjected the works of the book's main protagonists: Mykola Khvylovy and Pavlo Tychyna, as well as those of the creators and state activists of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (Ukrainian SSR), whose fate she has presented in the monograph somewhat sparingly, such as Andrii Khvylia (incidentally, a great opponent of national cultures in any form), Volodymyr Koriak, and Alexander Shumsky (Matiash, 2024, pp. 61–88). The experiment of korenizatsiia in the Ukrainian SSR resulted in the creation of a dual cultural and political identification: Soviet and Ukrainian. It is no coincidence that the author lists them in this order. Two types of culture: the "central Soviet" and the "Soviet-Ukrainian", taking this to mean a current of national culture equal to that of Moscow. Utilizing the career paths of these two artists, the author has described an extremely important aspect of Soviet domestic politics at a time when the Communist empire was slowly assuming its most totalitarian shape.

The book is complemented by a bibliography which contains an almost complete list of studies of the subject, starting with the earliest, written in the era of Communism and the Cold War (Boersner, 1981; Borland, 1969; Tsaplienko, 1960), and ending with the most recent writings, only a little older than the work under review (among others Blitstein, 2006A, pp. 273–293; Blitstein, 2006B, pp. 197–219; Borisyonok, 2006; Borisenko, 2001; Danylenko, Kasianov, 1991; Kappeler, 2001;

Luckyj, 1990). What is surprising, however, is the absence of Agnieszka Korniejenko's successful book (Korniejenko, 2010), and the lack of significant references to descriptive monographs. The author's broader application of the comparative method to the cultures of the other nationalities of the Soviet Union during the period of korenizatsiia could lead to further important conclusions, and also provide answers – at least partial – to questions about the significance of the Ukrainian culture of the late 1920s and early 30s for the culture of the Soviet state as such, and its role in the process of building national identity among the numerous constituent nations of the USSR (for example, Wixman, 1980; Edgar, 2006; Lee, 2004, pp. 101–116).[1]

From the very first pages of the book, the reader learns about the history of Ukrainian literature in the 1920s and 30s, and about its most important authors and the various attitudes which they took towards the world that was coming into being before their eyes, built according to the Soviet model. As mentioned earlier, the main axis of the author's narrative was centered around the life and activities of the poet Pavlo Tychyna and the novelist Mykola Khvylovy. Two people, two authors, and, at the same time, two stances towards the Communist system which not only dictated the conditions of political and material existence of the citizens of the empire, but also shaped their souls through cultural processing. The mosaic of attitudes taken by creators of Ukrainian culture of the period to the Communist system serves as the backdrop. We can see – and this is particularly interesting – the extent to which reality failed to meet the expectations of at least some of them.

What is puzzling, or even striking, is the degree to which creators of culture became entrammeled by Communism and came to function as an important element of the criminal system. Palko skillfully presents the daily survival strategies of her protagonists, as well as the moral complicity of their participation in the gigantic social engineering project – the creation of a "new world". She does not shy away from portraying them in a negative light or passing negative judgments. However, we can see that she treats them – or at least the group favoring the policy of korenizatsiia, which was abandoned by the Communist Party in the 1930s – as cogs in a grand politico-cultural experiment aimed at making Ukrainian culture one of the most important elements of the culture of the entire vast totalitarian state. This style of narration has been used right until the description of Mykola Khvylovy's dramatic end. Faced with a growing sense of powerlessness due to the actions of the totalitarian state, he chose suicide in order to manifest his opposition to the Sovietization

1 And also newer works that are awaiting publication in print, but are available to researchers: Zastawny (2018).

of Ukrainian culture, the arrests of his acquaintances (who were, incidentally, Communist Party loyalists), and, perhaps most importantly, under the strong influence of what he had witnessed in the provinces, namely, the tragedy of the Great Famine genocide (Palko, 2021, pp. 175–179).

On the other side of the barricade – in the very same year, 1933 – his creative and at once ideological adversary, Pavlo Tychyna, published the text *Partiia vede* ("The Party Leads"), in which – on the anniversary of the outbreak of the October Revolution – he aligned himself with Soviet culture. Khvylovy was unable to join the other representatives of the "Executed Renaissance", a prominent generation of Ukrainian artists and writers who were murdered during Stalin's purges in the second half of the 1930s (Palko, 2021, pp. 179–184; Lavrinenko, 1959). He also did not live to see the moment when Tychyna, along with some of the surviving Ukrainian literati living in the Soviet Union, became one of Stalin's next eulogists – obviously despite the fact that in the second half of the 1930s, the Communist Party abolished autonomous regions, drastically curtailed the cultural autonomies of national minorities in the Soviet Union, and eventually embarked on a series of thorough purges that ended with the arrest, torture, criminal processing and, ultimately, execution of hundreds of thousands of people, including numerous creators of culture and prominent Party activists.[2]

It is interesting to note just how characteristically the system treated the two creators. A good example here is their legacy: in the Central State Archive – Museum of Literature and Art of Ukraine, Khvylovy's dossier contains only 21 pages, while the fonds devoted to Tychyna comprises no less than 148,000 documents. With time, Khvylovy and his writings were almost pushed into obscurity by the system, whose censors tried to limit his role in literature to a supposedly nationalist theme, when he fell out of favor with party decision-makers (Palko, 2021, p. 187 ff.).

In this context, it seems highly symbolic how history repeated itself in 1945–1948, when a campaign against so-called Ukrainian bourgeois nationalism was unleashed in the USSR. As we may easily guess, the idea was to strike at the creators of Ukrainian culture: literature, art, music, as well as scientists and museologists, who did not conform to the Soviet and Great Russian vision of the post-war, victorious Soviet Union. The campaign, which was brutal and culminated in numerous arrests and the removal of many people from their jobs, was initiated by a signal from the Party, given by Joseph Stalin himself in an article published in "Pravda" on 25 May 1945, barely two weeks after the end

2 Ian Law considered the move away from the policy of korenizatsiia to discrimination in favor of "Great Russian" culture as a manifestation of Soviet racism (Law, 2012).

of the war in Europe. At the time, the Soviet leader acknowledged that the Russian people were the "leading" nation in the state (Velychenko, 1993, p. 56; Danylenko, 2005, pp. 496–515).

In 1945, no decision had yet been made to intensify repressions, but the situation changed the following summer, after the first post-war plenum of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks), when members of the Party's Central Committee sharply criticized the thaw in culture, admittedly symbolic, brought about by the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Ukraine during the war, deeming it to serve "a resurgence of nationalist sentiment". Of course, in order not to expose himself to further criticism, Nikita Khrushchev decided to step up the oppression of the "rebellious and defiant" (Kaganovich, 1995, p. 494). In the book, Palko does not explicitly refer to this legacy of the policy of departure from korenizatsiia following the 1930s, which must be viewed as a shame. Indeed, it can be noted that these events would connect the period of persecution described by the author with the short and impermanent post-war thaw of the late Stalinist period.[3]

The conceptual "distance duel" in which Khvylovy and Tychyna engaged over the years was much more than a dispute between two intellectuals. To some extent, it was a war of worlds: each of the authors opted for a different solution to national and social issues at a time when an approach focusing on brutal Sovietization and the simultaneous Russification of culture was slowly beginning to take hold in the Soviet Union. One of these worlds had to die and disappear after clashing with the other, incomparably more ruthless and totalitarian. Palko informs her readers about this, too. Importantly, the personal threads – dedicated to two, after all, prominent creators of Ukrainian literature (regardless of their involvement: temporary in the case of Khvylovy and lifelong in the case of Tychyna) – have been skillfully interwoven in the book with a strictly historical narrative concerning the fate of Ukrainian culture at the turn of the 1940s. The author wrote these parts of her monograph relying mainly on the existing topical literature: disputes within the Communist Party over the meaning, scope and future of the "experiment of korenizatsiia", from its initiation in the formative years of the Soviet Union until its abandonment and transition to the domination of Russian culture and open persecution of those deemed insufficiently loyal to the changing internal policies of the Communist Party, which controlled every element of social and economic life in the vast country (Palko, 2021, pp. 117–184).

3 For more on the campaign targeting "bourgeois nationalists", readers are referred to a book written by the author of the present review (Markowski, 2018).

Despite this shortcoming, the author's objectivity remains the book's key feature. Palko avoids simple assessments, does not remain uncritical of the characters she describes, weighs her words, and refrains from facile judgments. She points out the differing perspectives of events, and shows the motives that influenced the actions of Mykola Khvylovy and Pavlo Tychyna. This is particularly valuable in a situation where the two protagonists of the book viewed Communism differently, but as an inherent element of literature, and tried to "live with it" – if one can use such a phrase as an element of everyday life – to the extent that they felt was proper. Thanks to this approach of the researcher, which is consistently applied right until the end of the book, we have a fully objective monograph.

Thus, the publication under review appears as an interesting work, written in colorful language, on the history of Ukrainian culture during the period of consolidation of Communist power over Ukraine. Furthermore, and this element is of no lesser importance for ensuring the attractiveness of the work, the author shows the attitude of representatives of the intelligentsia towards Communism as a phenomenon and a conceptual proposal for a novel and altogether different organization of the world. The monograph is valuable for both professional historians and those who are simply curious about history and intend to reach for a more ambitious read.

By way of conclusion, I would like to emphasize that Olena Palko's publication deserves a high rating. The remarks and observations made in the present text should not detract in the slightest from the immense cognitive significance of the book, nor from its popularizing value, as the author has conveyed her knowledge to the reader using very accessible language. I will, in fact, allow myself to put forward the suggestion that this is one of best studies to be published in the past decade on the history of Ukraine in the early Communist period. Thanks to this monograph, information about this specific generation of Ukrainian artists, the so-called Executed Renaissance, will reach not only a narrow circle of experts on the subject, but also all English-speaking academics and persons interested in the history of Soviet Ukraine. Finally, I would like to express the hope that the author will continue her research into the policy of korenizatsiia not only in relation to Ukrainian culture (which, obviously, is not a reproach), but also more broadly – with respect to other national cultures of the numerous ethnic minorities of the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s.

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