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Making Ukraine Soviet: Literature and Cultural Politics under Lenin and Stalin

The history of communist-period Ukrainian culture in the 1920s and 1930s has already been discussed in many scientific articles. However, these articles usually address the experience of “korenizatsiya” as an attempt to force the national cultures of a multiethnic state into the general framework of Soviet culture as an international phenomenon, harnessed by the propaganda machine of the totalitarian state. These conventional works, which describe korenizatsiya as an experiment consisting in an attempt to give the motifs of socialist culture a national grounding, were constructed according to the traditional model, which did not always translate into readability. Against this background, the reviewed book stands out from many other positions.

The experiment yielded a dual cultural and political identification: Soviet and Ukrainian. By no accident, however, does the author put them in that order; the two types of culture: Soviet-centric and Soviet-Ukrainian, comprehending by the latter phrase an equal current of national culture in relation to Moscow. By following the career paths of both creators in this way, the author describes an incredibly important aspect of Soviet domestic policy at a time when the communist empire was slowly shaping its ultimate totalitarian form.

The book is an extension of the PhD thesis defended by Olena Palko, an employee of Birkbeck College, at the University of East Anglia in Norwich. It was published courtesy of Bloomsbury Academic Publishers, which translated into careful editing, proofreading, and typesetting of the reviewed volume. The language of the book is excellent, and in spite of the inclusion of the described events and historical figures in a dense maze of source footnotes, the book remains attractive not only to scholars. The book is also a proof of the careful and meticulous efforts of the publishing house, which polished it up in every detail.

From the very first pages of the book, the reader is immersed in the history of Ukrainian literature of the 1920s and 1930s. The reader learns about its most important authors, as well as the variety of attitudes they adopted with regard to the world being forged according to the Soviet model before their very eyes. The main plot of the author’s narrative revolves around the life and work of poet Pavlo Tychyna and novelist Mykola Khvyl’ovy. Two people, two artists, and, similarly, two attitudes toward the communist system not
only dictating the conditions of political and material existence of the citizens of the empire, but also molding their souls through cultural processing. The mosaic of stances that the authors of Ukrainian culture of that era held toward the communist system is echoed in the background, making it particularly remarkable how the expectations of some of them diverged from what reality revealed. The striking factor while reading the book is the extent of the cultural creators' entanglement with communism, not only as an everyday reality, but also as an element of the violent system. Olena Palko adroitly depicts her characters' strategies of day-to-day survival, but also their moral complicity as participants in the colossal social engineering project of building a "new world." This is the case until the dramatic end of Khvyly'ovyi's life, when he chose suicide as a way of demonstrating his opposition to the Sovietization of Ukrainian culture, the arrests of his friends who were Communist Party loyalists, and, perhaps most importantly, what he saw in the countryside—the tragedy of the genocide caused by the Great Famine. On the other side of the fence, in the same year, 1933, Tychyna published the text "The Party Leads," in which—on the anniversary of the outbreak of the October Revolution—he took sides with the Soviet culture. Khvyly'ovyi did not get to join the other representatives of the "Executed Renaissance"—the outstanding generation of Ukrainian culture producers murdered during the Stalinist purges in the second half of the 1930s.[1] He also did not live to see the moment when Tychyna, along with some of the surviving Ukrainian writers living in the Soviet Union, became one of the umpteenth praisers of the Stalinist reality.

Interestingly, the distinctive treatment the system meted out to the two artists is evidenced by their legacy kept in the Central State Archive of Literature and Arts of Ukraine, where Khvyly'ovyi's file is 21 pages long, compared to 148,000 (!) documents in the file on Tychyna. With the passing of time, Khvyly'ovyi and his works were almost pushed into oblivion 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.

The intellectual duel fought over the years between Khvyly'ovyi and Tychyna was far more than just a dispute between two intellectuals. To some extent, it was a war of worlds: each of the writers advocated a different solution to national and social issues at a time when the option of brutal Sovietization and concomitant Russification of culture was slowly taking hold in the Soviet Union. One of these worlds was bound to perish and vanish in confrontation with the other, incomparably more ruthless and totalitarian. We find out about this, too, in the course of reading.

The author avoids simple judgments, which would probably be tempting for those with less expertise. This is of particular value in a context where the two protagonists of the book approached communism as a path for literature and tried to "live with it" (if such a phrase may be used as an element of everyday life) in a different manner as much as they felt it was right. This approach of the researcher, consistently applied until the last page of the book, produces a purely objective monograph devoid of any sympathy or antipathy toward the characters and events that are described.

The book in review is therefore a very entertaining journey through the history of Ukrainian culture during the period of consolidation of communist power over Ukraine. Last but not least, the book shows the attitude of the representatives of the intelligentsia toward communism as a phenomenon and an intellectual suggestion to arrange the world in a quite different way than it had been before. Dr. Palko's colorful language makes this voyage not only engaging but also pleasant. The book, penned in literary English, encourages the reader to keep reading, taking them back to the not-so-distant past when the two great writers depicted in the book were arguing and
creating their life paths to suit their own sense of morality.

In conclusion, I would like to note that Olena Palko's monograph merits a high grade. The remarks raised in this review do not in the least change the book's great scholarly value and do not detract from its popularizing value, because the author has conveyed her knowledge to the reader in exceptionally accessible and engrossing language. I would like to point out that this is one of the best books of the last decade as regards research on the history of Ukraine in the early communist era.

Note


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