

The Hetman's Charter: Cossack Mythology and the Limits of Symbolic Legitimacy in Ukrainian State-Building, 1888 - 1921

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Abstract

Research on Cossack mythology within Ukrainian nationalism has concentrated on two periods, the Romantic construction of the nineteenth century and the post-Soviet remobilization of 1989-91. This article bridges these two periods, tracing the continuities and ruptures between them. It argues that the Cossack past furnished the Ukrainian national movement with its principal symbolic resource between 1888-1921 and that the decisive test of that symbolism came not in literature or historiography but in April 1918, when Pavlo Skoropadskyi revived the hetman's position, which had been eliminated through imperial decree in the mid-eighteenth century. The rapid collapse of the Hetmanate is conventionally attributed to its dependence on German military power and to its land policy. This article proposes an additional and specifically symbolic explanation. Serhii Plokhyy has observed, in the closing pages of his study of the History of the Rus', that the aristocratic rendering of Cossack historical memory temporarily overshadowed its popular democratic counterpart during the revolutionary upheaval of 1918. The observation is registered rather than developed. This article develops it, tracing the mechanism by which a myth elaborated across the nineteenth century in a democratic and communal register came to be invoked by Skoropadskyi in an aristocratic and military one by showing that the register he chose was not an innovation but a recovery of the founding text's original meaning, which the popularizers had inverted. The myth's plasticity enabled the movement's growth and simultaneously withheld legitimacy from the state that movement produced. The Cossack past could authorize the conceptual legitimacy of Ukrainian statehood as a political reality, it could not legitimize anyone.

Keywords: Ukrainian nationalism; Cossack mythology; ethno-symbolism; invented tradition; Hetmanate; Skoropadskyi; History of the Rus'; state-building

Introduction

On 29 April 1918, Pavlo Skoropadskyi issued a document entitled the "*Charter to the Entire Ukrainian People*," declaring himself Hetman of All Ukraine.¹ The declaration was plain in its language and extravagant in its implication. The office Skoropadskyi assumed had been defunct for 154 years. The hetmancy was abolished in 1764. Catherine II then completed the forcible

¹ Skoropadskyi, "Manifesto to the Ukrainian People," 29 April 1918, translated in Fedyshyn, *Germany's Drive to the East*, appendix F, 285-86.

dismantling of the Zaporozhian military and administrative center in the latter part of the eighteenth century, and the regimental administrative system was dismantled across the 1780s, as part of a sustained imperial effort to eliminate Cossack self-government.² The man who revived the title was a former lieutenant general of the tsarist military establishment the institution that had absorbed the Cossack officer class and he revived it with the acquiescence of German military authorities whose principal interest in Ukraine was grain for their own hungry armies.

What requires explanation is the historical situation in which such a gesture was intelligible at all, in which the resurrection of an eighteenth-century office could be expected to command assent rather than ridicule. By 1918 the Cossack past had been so thoroughly reconstituted as a ground of political legitimacy that a title abolished under Catherine II could plausibly carry sovereign authority in the twentieth century. This article examines how that reconstitution occurred, and what the collapse of Skoropadskyi's regime eight months later reveals about its limits.

The scholarship on Cossack mythology has clustered at two ends of the period this article addresses. Serhii Plokhy's *The Cossack Myth* reconstructs the origins of the myth's founding text, the *History of the Rus'*, locating its production in the Starodub region among descendants of the Cossack officer elite in the first two decades of the nineteenth century.³ Frank Sysyn's study of the myth's reactivation during the disintegration of the Soviet Union examines its political mobilisation in 1989–91.⁴ Between these lies the interval in which the myth passed from literary elaboration to political application and was briefly and disastrously tested as an actual system of government. This article addresses that interval. It attempts for the revolutionary period something analogous to what Sysyn attempted for the Soviet collapse, an account of what the Cossack myth was asked to do politically and of what it proved unable to do.

In the epilogue of *The Cossack Myth*, Plokhy observes that the myth significantly influenced Ukrainian politics in 1918, when Skoropadskyi, having been chosen by a landowner dominated assembly, invoked Cossack historical imagery and ceremonial precedent as the basis for his political authority. Consequently, the elitist interpretation of the myth temporarily overshadowed its egalitarian counterpart until the socialist leadership of the revolution deposed him.⁵ This observation forms the foundation of the argument presented here. However, it appears as a concluding remark in a book focused on a text and its authorship rather than on a regime and its legitimacy. Plokhy notes the conflict without examining it in detail. The following analysis seeks to dissect this issue, how the two interpretations of the myth diverged, who was responsible for this divergence and why, where each interpretation was propagated and what specific discrepancies arose in 1918.

The argument proceeds in five stages. Section 2 sets out the theoretical framework, drawing on Anthony D. Smith's ethno-symbolism and Eric Hobsbawm's invented tradition, and argues with

² Zenon Eugene Kohut, *The Abolition of Ukrainian Autonomy (1763–1786): A Case Study in the Integration of a Non-Russian Area into the Empire* (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1975), 33 – 37.

³ Serhii Plokhy, *The Cossack Myth: History and Nationhood in the Age of Empires* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁴ Frank Sysyn, "The Reemergence of the Ukrainian Nation and Cossack Mythology," *Social Research* 58, no. 4 (Winter 1991): 845–64.

⁵ Plokhy, *Cossack Myth*, 364–65. See also 3, where the 1918 revival of the hetman's rank is noted in the book's opening survey.

support from Plokhy's own methodological reflections that neither is adequate alone. Section 3 examines the Cossack past as a reservoir of usable material and includes an account of the specific estate political crisis out of which the myth's founding text emerged. Section 4 examines the nineteenth century intellectuals who converted that material into a national narrative, emphasizing the divergences among them and the exclusions they jointly performed. Section 5 traces the myth's institutional embodiment from the volunteer military formation established in Galicia at the outbreak of the First World War, drawing its identity directly from Zaporozhian martial tradition to the Hetmanate of 1918. Section 6 presents the central argument concerning the mismatch between the myth as elaborated and the myth as invoked.

Theoretical Framework: Between Reservoir and Invention

Two bodies of theory bear on this material, and the relation between them is more productive than adversarial. Smith's ethno-symbolism holds that modern nations are ordinarily constructed upon pre-existing ethnic communities whose collective memories, myths, symbols and values supply the foundations of national identity.⁶ On this account the Cossack heritage was not manufactured but transmitted a genuine repository of shared memory sustained through folk tradition, Orthodox religious identity and regional custom. The framework explains a good deal in cases where national consciousness developed in the absence of unifying political institutions and across two imperial jurisdictions, and it accounts for the affective force of Cossack symbolism in a way that strict modernist theories do not.

Hobsbawm's analysis of invented tradition proposes the contrary emphasis. Flags, anthems, ceremonies and historical narratives, on his argument, are deliberately fabricated to legitimate contemporary political authority.⁷ Applied to Ukraine, this directs attention to the agency and the choices of nineteenth-century intellectuals, who did not simply transmit a Cossack inheritance but selected within it, subordinated parts of it, and attributed to it political meanings the historical Cossacks would not have recognized.

The Ukrainian situation necessitates both elements rather than a compromise. The Cossack heritage was genuinely accessible, unlike a hypothetical Ukrainian medieval monarchy. There had been a Hetmanate that exercised real autonomy and its abolition remained within living institutional memory. This aligns with Smith's perspective. However, the national movement's interpretation of this past was evidently selective and, at its inception, demonstrably fabricated, as Hobsbawm suggests. The analytically significant question is not which theory is applicable, but rather the specific relationship between the reservoir and invention, and whether the constructed nature of the myth-imposed limitations on its subsequent political applications. Section 6 contends that it did.

Support for this refusal to choose comes from an unexpected quarter. Plokhy reports that he began his research expecting to find the *History of the Rus'* produced by a circle of dreamy antiquarians engaged in what Miroslav Hroch classified as the heritage gathering phase of national movements, without clear political objectives. His evidence led elsewhere, to a milieu of notables who were politically engaged at home and thoroughly integrated into the empire imperial officials who had made careers and fortunes administering imperial borderlands and

⁶ Anthony D. Smith, *Ethno-Symbolism and Nationalism: A Cultural Approach* (London: Routledge, 2009), 25 – 30.

⁷ Alain Babadzan, "Anthropology, Nationalism and 'The Invention of Tradition'," *Anthropological Forum* 10, no. 2 (2000): 131 -155.

who sent their sons to imperial institutions of higher learning. He concludes that he could no longer rely exclusively on the familiar literature of nations and nationalism including Benedict Anderson, Hroch, Ernest Gellner and Hobsbawm, and had to situate his findings within the historiography of empire as well.⁸ The inadequacy this article posits on theoretical grounds is thus reported empirically by the historian who has looked hardest at the relevant evidence.

Three further conceptual borrowings from Plokhy's framework are used here. The first is his working definition of myth, taken from George Schöpflin. A set of beliefs, usually cast as narrative held by a community about itself, through which collectives establish the foundations of their own being and their own system of morality and values.⁹ The second is John A. Armstrong's characterization, which Plokhy adopts, of the Cossack myth specifically as the integrating phenomenon through which the symbols of Ukrainian national identity acquire coherent meaning.¹⁰ The third, and the most consequential for the argument advanced below, is Smith's observation again adopted by Plokhy that myths, memories, symbols and values can be adapted to new circumstances by being assigned new meanings and new functions.¹¹ Smith intends this as a description of how ethnic materials survive. This article treats it also as a description of how they become politically unreliable. Adaptability and indeterminacy are the same property viewed from different ends.

Finally, the genre to which the founding text belongs deserves theoretical weight it is not usually given in the Ukrainian literature. Plokhy situates the *History of the Rus'* within the European tradition of national literary mystification alongside James Macpherson's Ossianic poetry and the Bohemian forgeries of Václav Hanka, and identifies the recurring features of that genre that the demand for a national epic in the aftermath of defeat, composition in the imperial language, insistence on the cultural superiority of the defeated nation over its conquerors, attribution of authorship to a long dead authority in order to authenticate the text, the use of forgery to "restore" a national narrative believed irrecoverable and decisively the political loyalty of the mystifiers themselves to the empire they were unwittingly undermining.¹² Hobsbawm's category thus applies to the Ukrainian case with unusual precision and it applies at the point of origin rather than as a later imposition. This matters, what follows if the myth's founding document was an invention produced by imperially loyal elites for estate political purposes, then the democratic communal reading of the Cossack past that dominated by 1900 was not the myth's original content but a subsequent overlay. Section 6 turns on that fact.

The Reservoir: What the Cossack Past Supplied

The Hetmanate and its abolition

The Cossack Hetmanate emerged from the revolt led by Bohdan Khmelnytsky against Polish domination in 1648. This constituted the most substantial Ukrainian polity before the modern

⁸ Plokhy, *Cossack Myth*, 7–9.

⁹ George Schöpflin, "The Functions of Myth and a Taxonomy of Myths," in *Myths and Nationhood*, ed. Geoffrey Hosking and George Schöpflin (London, 1997), 19–35, as adopted in Plokhy, *Cossack Myth*, 6–7.

¹⁰ Plokhy, *Cossack Myth*, 7, citing John A. Armstrong.

¹¹ Ibid, 98–99.

¹² Plokhy, *Cossack Myth*, 10–11; see also 359–63 on the mystification genre and its aristocratic sponsorship.

era.¹³ Its political architecture rested on three durable components, military organization, Orthodox religious identity, and the elective authority of the hetman.¹⁴ The last was disproportionately important for what came later. Though the electorate was narrow, the principle of an elected executive established a precedent capable of being read as constitutional, democratic or republican according to the disposition of the reader.

The treaty concluded in 1654 placed the Hetmanate under Russian protection and substantially extended Moscow's influence over Ukrainian territory.¹⁵ As Russian power grew, the Hetmanate entered a long period of contraction and internal conflict. The hetmancy as a military-elite institution is conventionally viewed as a distortion of the Cossack myth, framing what was originally a democratic tradition in authoritarian terms, the regimental administrative system was dismantled across the 1780s and the Ukrainian lands were thereafter governed as ordinary provinces of a centralising empire.¹⁶

Two features of this trajectory matter particularly. First, the abolition was recent enough to be vividly remembered and comprehensive enough to be mourned. This combination made the Cossack past a serviceable nationalist resource in a way that more distant precedents were not: Kyivan Rus' supplied antiquity and prestige but no institutional grievance, whereas the Hetmanate offered a documented instance of autonomy extinguished by identifiable imperial acts.

Second, the historiographical significance of the Hetmanate was contested from the outset. Mykhailo Hrushevsky treated it as an early expression of Ukrainian statehood¹⁷, Vyacheslav Lypynsky read it as evidence of a territorial political tradition grounded in elite leadership and state institutions.¹⁸ The difference is not a matter of emphasis. Hrushevsky's reading underwrites a populist and democratic national narrative. Lypynsky's underwrites a conservative and statist one. Both were supported by the same historical institution. That interpretive divergence, visible in the scholarship, was reproduced in the myth's political uses and it is central to the argument developed below.

The estate crisis and the making of a founding text

The conventional account of the Cossack myth begins with its romantic elaboration. Ploky's reconstruction of the origins of the *History of the Rus'* requires that it begin earlier and in a register that is not Romantic at all but political and legal. Because this material has direct bearing on Sec-

¹³ Frank E. Sysyn, "The Khmel'nyts'kyi Uprising: A Characterization of the Ukrainian Revolt," *Jewish History* 17, no. 2 (2003): 115 – 139.

¹⁴ Vitalii Holets, "Historical Stages in the Formation of the Ukrainian Nation," *Baltic Journal of Legal and Social Sciences* 2 (2026): 20 – 28, DOI 10.30525/2592-8813-2026-2-2.

¹⁵ Serhii Ploky, "The Ghosts of Pereyaslav: Russo-Ukrainian Historical Debates in the Post-Soviet Era," *Europe-Asia Studies* 53, no. 3 (2001), 289 - 505.

¹⁶ Zenon E. Kohut, *Russian Centralism and Ukrainian Autonomy: Imperial Absorption of the Hetmanate, 1760s–1830s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, distributed by Harvard University Press, 1988), 27 – 35.

¹⁷ Hrushevsky, Mykhailo. *Istoriia Ukrainy-Rusy*. 10 vols. in 11 bks. Lviv and Kyiv, 1898–1937. Reprint, New York: Knyhospilka, 1954–58.

¹⁸ Kornovenko, Serhiy, and Yulia Pasichna. 2021. "Intellectual Bases of Ukrainian Agrarianism of the Revolutionary Epoch: Vyacheslav Lypynsky." *East European Historical Bulletin* 19: 107–121. <https://doi.org/10.24919/2519-058X.19.234292>.

tion 6, it is worth setting out in some detail. Throughout the eighteenth century the imperial authorities sought a formula for incorporating the Cossack elite of the Hetmanate into the imperial nobility to form a corporate estate exempt from taxation, uniquely entitled to own serfs and enjoying extensive privileges in education and in army and civil service careers. The government's difficulty was one of scale. It wished to absorb the upper ranks of the Cossack officer stratum without admitting tens of thousands of well to do Cossacks whose ancestors had held elective office in the Hetmanate's army and administration, which would have produced far more recognized nobles in the former Hetmanate than in the Russian gubernias proper.¹⁹ The result was decades of vacillation and then a series of rulings that fell heavily on the Ukrainian gentry. In 1805 the Heraldry Office determined that service in the Hetmanate at company or regimental officer rank did not of itself establish noble origin. Hundreds of families previously treated as noble had their status revoked their right to hold serfs challenged and their children excluded from educational institutions reserved for the nobility.²⁰

The response was historical. Since the only available means of contesting the Heraldry Office was to demonstrate that the noble standing of Cossack officers had been recognized by Russian tsars and indeed predated Russian rule in grants from Lithuanian dukes and Polish kings, the collection of historical documents abruptly became a matter of urgent practical importance. Nobiliary assemblies charged their elected marshals with drafting historical memoranda, and the marshals turned to local men with reputations as historical connoisseurs.²¹ Roman Markovych argued that Cossack officers had constituted a virtual knightly estate equivalent to the hereditary nobility²². Tymofii Kalynsky went further, contending that not merely the officers but the Cossacks in general were entitled to noble status, and privately declared himself willing to die in defence of the order's liberties²³. Andrian Chepa and Vasyl Poletyka produced memoranda at the request of the Poltava marshal Vasyl Charnysh, Poletyka following Markovych and Kalynsky in describing the officers as a particular knightly order.²⁴

The rhetorical escalation is the point. Charnysh's memorandum argued that in denying nobility to Little Russian officials the Heraldry Office demeaned not only those officials but the rights and privileges of the whole nation, whose roots he traced to the grand principalities of Kyiv, Chernihiv and Pereiaslav.²⁵ An estate grievance was being reformulated as a national one. Plokhly's judgement is that the growing conviction among the elite was that the Heraldry Office's rulings assaulted not merely individual status but the historical identity and honour of the community as a whole and that struggle with the office became a patriotic duty.²⁶ Nor did the conflict subside. The Cossack regiments raised in 1812 were disbanded in 1816 and in December 1818 it was ruled that descendants of officers holding the ranks of aide de camp, flag-bearer, captain or fellow of the Host were not to be considered noble, their forebears having been

¹⁹ Plokhly, *Cossack Myth*, 156–57.

²⁰ Ibid, 157.

²¹ Ibid, 157–58.

²² Tolochko, Oleksiy. 2008. "Fellows and Travelers: Thinking about Ukrainian History in the Early Nineteenth Century." In *A Laboratory of Transnational History: Ukraine and Recent Ukrainian Historiography*, edited by Georgiy Kasianov and Philipp Ther, 149–168. Budapest: Central European University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9786155211553-008>

²³ Plokhly, *Cossack Myth*, 159–160.

²⁴ Ibid, 158–62.

²⁵ Ibid, 162–63.

²⁶ Plokhly, *Cossack Myth*, 159–60.

entitled to personal rather than hereditary nobility.²⁷ The year 1818 is also the earliest date appearing on a manuscript of the *History of the Rus*.²⁸

Ploky's central conclusion follows from this context. The *History* was not, he argues, a conscious manifesto either of Russian Ukrainian unity or of incipient Ukrainian nationalism. The two readings that have divided modern scholarship but an attempt by descendants of the Cossack officer elite to negotiate the best available terms for their incorporation into the empire at a moment when their noble status was under attack.²⁹ The text raises the spectre of Mazepa as a latent threat of rebellion while simultaneously seeking to shame the imperial authorities into recognising the nobility of the Cossack elite's descendants.³⁰ Its anonymous author was a patriot of his homeland but no opponent of those countrymen who were doing their utmost to secure Russian noble status and accelerate their integration into the empire.³¹ The milieu in which the text was produced and circulated was one of hereditary Cossack notables well integrated into the imperial order and principally concerned with the loss of their traditional rights and privileges.³²

The Social geography confirms the reading. The estates of the Starodub gentry, the Myklashevskys, the Hudovyches, the Shyrais, the Bezborodkos and their connections were the nodes through which the manuscript circulated. The Ploky's appendix of Cossack family networks maps a dense intermarried elite of imperial officials, governors and grand chancellors.³³ These families were not marginal to the empire but constitutive of it. Mykhailo Myklashevsky, on whose estate the text was known and read. He saw both his son and his son-in-law implicated in the Decembrist conspiracy and one of the earliest located copies of the *History* surfaced on the Bezborodko estate at Hryniv.³⁴ The same milieu can be described from a second angle. Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak, writing about the women of these households, describes a dense network of Cossack families held together by formalized godparenthood and arranged marriages that persisted into the twentieth century, and records that during the imperial inquests into officeholders of non-noble standing some women petitioned for noble status on behalf of their sons.³⁵ The estate claim was pursued as a household strategy as well as a corporate one. It should also be recorded that the estate origins of the aristocratic reading are not a recent discovery. Oleh Fedyshyn derived the aristocratic school in Ukrainian historiography from precisely this demand by descendants of Cossack officers to be treated as members of the Russian gentry, four decades before Ploky supplied the archival demonstration.³⁶ Ploky's comparative observation is that where Habsburg centralization had stripped local administration from the aristocracy. The incompleteness of Russian centralization left such notables in control

²⁷ Ibid, 164.

²⁸ Ibid, 51- 52.

²⁹ Ibid 5-6, 352, 356.

³⁰ Ibid, 364.

³¹ Ibid, 168.

³² Ibid, 356.

³³ Ibid, 225-60, and appendix, 369-70.

³⁴ Ploky, *Cossack Myth*, 231; appendix, 369.

³⁵ Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak, *Feminists Despite Themselves: Women in Ukrainian Community Life, 1884-1939* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, University of Alberta, 1988), 6-8.

³⁶ Oleh S. Fedyshyn, *Germany's Drive to the East and the Ukrainian Revolution, 1917-1918* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1971), 6. Cf. Ploky, *Cossack Myth*, 156-64.

of local centers of power which they used to resist St Petersburg; the *History* began its literary career from the house of a marshal of the local nobility.³⁷

For the purposes of this article the analytical yield is precise. The founding text of the Cossack myth was produced by, and in the immediate interest of the Cossack officer class at the moment of its absorption into the imperial nobility. Its original register was aristocratic, corporate and estate based. It is that register not the democratic communal one, which Skoropadskyi would invoke in 1918, and the invocation was in an important sense the more historically faithful of the two.

The Curators, Elaboration and Divergence, c. 1820 - 1900

The transformation of Cossack memory into a national narrative was the work of identifiable intellectuals, and the crucial fact is that they did not agree about what the Cossack past meant. This section argues that the disagreement was constitutive rather than incidental, and that it was visible from the very first generation of readers.

One text, four readings

The "History of the Rus'" circulated widely among educated Ukrainians before its publication in 1846. This work portrayed Ukrainian history and the Hetmanate as a continuous struggle for political independence. Thereby significantly shaping the historical consciousness of the subsequent generation.³⁸ Despite its substantial influence, its reliability was limited. As Plokhy has demonstrated, the text originates from the early nineteenth-century Left-Bank gentry, rather than the eighteenth-century ecclesiastical authority to which it was attributed.³⁹ Its dissemination was noteworthy. The German traveler J. G. Kohl, who visited Dnieper Ukraine in the late 1830s, noted that in some districts, a copy was present on every estate.⁴⁰

What is particularly noteworthy and remains underexplored in scholarly discussions about the myth's political trajectory, is the divergent interpretations its earliest and most influential readers drew from it over roughly twenty years. Kondratii Ryleev, a veteran of the Napoleonic wars and a leading Russian poet of that era, was the first to be impacted by the myth. He composed the "Confession" of Severyn Nalyvaiko, a poem aligned with the imperial liberation movement, viewing the Cossacks as precursors to his own struggle against autocracy and for a constitutional republic.⁴¹ Conversely, Alexander Pushkin, writing after the Decembrist revolt's failure, in which Ryleev perished, interpreted the same text differently. To Pushkin, the Cossacks represented supporters of the imperial rule's strengthening over the western borderlands, combatants against Catholicism and Western influence, and symbols of authentic Russian and Orthodox spirit. The excerpts he published in *Sovremennik* in 1836 carried a distinctly anti-Polish, anti-Catholic, and anti-Jewish sentiment.⁴² Nikolai Gogol, whose work *Taras Bul'ba* borrowed several iconic

³⁷ Plokhy, *Cossack Myth*, 362.

³⁸ Remy, Johannes. 2022. "Censoring Ukrainian Patriotism in the Russian Empire: The Ban on the Second Printing of the *History of the Rus'* in 1858." *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 64 (2–3): 335–352.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00085006.2022.2105614>

³⁹ Plokhy, *Cossack Myth*, esp. 1–11 and 351–68.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 61.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 3, 50, 55.

⁴² *Ibid*, 50–55.

scenes from the History, perceived the Cossacks as a separate nation. Yet, despite his Ukrainian patriotism, he, like Pushkin, saw the text as an expression of Russian national identity and imperial allegiance.⁴³ Finally, Taras Shevchenko interpreted both Gogol's portrayal of the Cossacks and the History as chronicles of a uniquely Ukrainian past, viewing the text not only as a call for freedom but also as a rallying cry against the Russian tsars and nobility.⁴⁴

Four interpretations emerge from a single document within a generation, constitutional republican, imperial Russian, culturally Ukrainian yet imperially loyal and nationally insurrectionary. This provides the clearest evidence supporting the assertion that the Cossack myth was significantly underdetermined by its foundational text forming the empirical basis for the argument presented in Section 6⁴⁵. For comprehensiveness, a fifth interpretation may be considered that is the émigré historian Nikolai Ulianov in his work "*Origins of Ukrainian Separatism*" reprinted in post Soviet Russia⁴⁶, approached the History not as a monument for study but as an ideological text to be refuted. He accurately identified its origin in the conflict over the recognition of Cossack officer ranks while objecting to the reinterpretation of this social grievance as a national issue.⁴⁷

It was Shevchenko's reading that prevailed and it prevailed because of the popularity of his verse rather than the strength of his evidence. Plokhy's assessment is that Shevchenko's poetry converted the Cossack myth from a largely Russian literary phenomenon into a largely Ukrainian one, capturing the moment at which the first generation of Ukrainian awakeners took over Ryleev's and Pushkin's fascination with the text while repudiating their interpretations of it.⁴⁸

The populist turn and its disappointment

The clandestine intellectual society that emerged in Kyiv during the 1840s, organized around principles of Slavic unity and Ukrainian national distinctiveness, whose members were arrested in the imperial crackdown of spring 1847, whose members were caught in the police roundups, represents the moment when the myth took on a distinctly populist interpretation that would characterize it for the rest of the century. Mykola Kostomarov, the brotherhood's main ideologist, drew from Cossack history to assert a particular Ukrainian political identity⁴⁹. In his essay "Two Russian Nationalities," he contrasted the democratic and communal traditions he identified in the Cossack past and peasant culture with the centralized and autocratic traditions of Russian political culture.⁵⁰ The Cossack heritage thus serves as proof of an innate Ukrainian inclination towards self-governance and communal freedom.

⁴³ Ibid, 3–4, 56–59.

⁴⁴ Plokhy, *Cossack Myth*, 50, 59–60.

⁴⁵ Maxwell, Alexander. 2022. "Popular and Scholarly Primordialism: The Politics of Ukrainian History during Russia's 2022 Invasion of Ukraine." *Journal of Nationalism, Memory & Language Politics* 16 (2): 152–171. <https://doi.org/10.2478/jnmlp-2022-0008>.

⁴⁶ Riasanovsky, Nicholas V. 1967. "Review of *Proiskhozhdenie ukrainskogo separatizma*, by N. I. Ulianov." *Russian Review* 26 (4): 411–413. <https://doi.org/10.2307/126905>.

⁴⁷ Plokhy, *Cossack Myth*, 225–27.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 64.

⁴⁹ Sogu Hong, *Mykola Kostomarov and Ukrainian Folklore* (M.A. thesis, University of Alberta, 1998), 45 - 72.

⁵⁰ Hong, *Mykola Kostomarov and Ukrainian Folklore*, 78.

Mykhailo Drahomanov identified a concept that, while related, is distinct. By integrating Cossack traditions with European federalist models, he proposed a decentralized system comprising self-governing communities and autonomous regions. This vision was detailed in "*Volnaia Spilka*" and the Geneva journal "*Hromada*." Drahomanov perceived the "*History*" as the earliest articulation of a distinctly Ukrainian political philosophy oriented toward freedom and self-governance, reading the Cossack experience as evidence of an indigenous tradition of collective administration and participatory rule that connect Ukraine to Europe and differentiate it from authoritarian Russia.⁵¹ The Cossack historical narrative thus serves as a foundation for federalism and pluralism, rather than solely for national sovereignty.

Shevchenko supplied the affective register, infusing the movement with moral and emotional force through poetry denouncing serfdom and imperial oppression.⁵² Here the Cossack past functions less as constitutional precedent than as lost freedom and unredeemed injustice.

Panteleimon Kulish serves as the most illustrative example, directly foreshadowing the events of 1918. In the early 1840s, he was an enthusiastic advocate for the History and the Cossack myth, as evidenced by his works *Mykhailo Charnyshenko* (1843) and a widely read Ukrainian language history from the same year, both of which were significantly influenced by these themes.⁵³ However, following the 1846 edition by Osyp Bodiansky, which subjected the text to academic examination, the Imperial Society of Russian History and Antiquities at Moscow University was not subject to the usual censorship at that time. Kulish quickly became a leading skeptic and subsequently focused his efforts on the standardization of the Ukrainian literary language.⁵⁴

Plokhyy's elucidation of this reversal constitutes the central argument of the current article. He asserts that the Cyril-Methodians aspired for the Cossacks to embody not only the Ukrainian nation but also the Ukrainian popular masses. Upon realizing that History provided justification solely for the national aspect of their ideology, and not the populist one, its influence over them diminished. Some explicitly repudiated the text's elitist stance, attributing it to the conservatism of the landowning classes.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, by the time they disavowed it, History had become inseparable from the Cossack myth, which the awakeners had already established as the foundational myth of the modern nation.⁵⁶

There are three outcomes, all of which relate to 1918. Initially, the authors themselves acknowledged that the populist interpretation of the Cossack history lacked support from the original text. Despite this, it was still spread and reached a much larger audience than the interpretation it replaced. Lastly, the elitist interpretation was not disproven but simply left behind, remaining accessible, logical and as indicated in Section 3.2, more historically substantiated.

⁵¹ Mykhailo Drahomanov, *Vol'nyi soiuz—Vil'na spilka: Opyt ukrainskoi politiko-sotsial'noi programy. Svod i ob'iasneniia M. Dragomanova* (Geneva: Tipografiia "Hromady," 1884), 65.

⁵² George G. Grabowicz, "Taras Shevchenko: The Making of the National Poet," *Revue des études slaves* 85, no. 3 (2014): 421–439, <https://doi.org/10.4000/res.398>

⁵³ Plokhyy, *Cossack Myth*, 60–61.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 62–64.

⁵⁵ Plokhyy, *Cossack Myth*, 64, 364.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 64.

Dissemination and synthesis

These developments were disseminated to a wide audience through institutional means during 1880's and 1890's. Historical journals like *Kievskaiia Starina*, played a significant role in fostering public awareness of Ukrainian history and Cossack traditions. In parallel educational societies contributed to the expansion of literacy. The Greek Catholic Church maintained cultural continuity through its schools and community organizations in the Habsburg western regions,⁵⁷ Hrushevsky's "*History of Ukraine-Rus*" provided a comprehensive analysis, portraying the Ukrainian nation as an enduring community from the era of Kyivan Rus' through the Cossack period to contemporary times thereby offering the historical legitimacy necessary for political mobilization.⁵⁸

By 1900, the Ukrainian literate audience was exposed to a portrayal of the Cossack past that emphasized its democratic, communal, anti-imperial, and popular aspects. This portrayal was not without basis: the Hetmanate indeed featured an elective leadership, and Cossack society was, in certain ways, more egalitarian compared to its surroundings. However, this was a selective portrayal by omitting significant aspects. The Hetmanate was also a military state led by an officer class that eventually integrated with the imperial nobility. An aspect that was downplayed in popular literature. This very aspect was crucial in creating the myth's foundational document as highlighted in Section 3.2. This omission became significant in 1918.

What the myth excluded

A myth is characterized as much by its omissions as by its transmissions, and an article focusing on the Cossack myth must consider these exclusions within its scope. The most significant exclusion pertains to Khmelnytsky. The 1648 uprising, which established the Hetmanate and provided the myth with its central heroic figure, was also an event marked by the mass killing of Jews. The rebellion's contemporary justification explicitly claimed that the Poles had allowed Jews to dominate the Orthodox Ruthenians, a framing that directly entered the historiographical tradition.⁵⁹ The History of the Rus' asserted the ethnicity of its nation more emphatically than its predecessors, distinguishing native-born Little Russians from Great Russians, Poles, and Jews, and creating a narrative that attributed the nation's victories to native heroism and its defeats to the actions of non-natives.⁶⁰ The atrocity passages analyzed in detail by Plokhy, which elaborated beyond their sources and, in some cases, were outright inventions, belong to this same structure. As previously noted, it was precisely the anti-Polish, anti-Catholic, and anti-Jewish charges in two such passages that led Pushkin to publish them in 1836.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Peter Galadza, "Eastern Catholic Christianity," in *The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity*, ed. Ken Parry (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 291–318.

⁵⁸ Hugh D. Hudson Jr., review of *History of Ukraine-Rus', Vol. 7: The Cossack Age to 1625*, by Mykhailo Hrushevsky, translated by Bohdan Struminski, edited by Serhii Plokhy and Frank E. Sysyn, *Canadian Journal of History* 36, no. 1 (2001): 173–175.

⁵⁹ Plokhy, *Cossack Myth*, 36.

⁶⁰ Zenon E. Kohut, "The Images of Jews in Ukraine's Intellectual Tradition: The Role of *Istoriia Rusov*," in *Cultures and Nations of Central and Eastern Europe: Essays in Honor of Roman Szporluk*, ed. Zvi Gitelman, Lubomyr Hajda, John-Paul Himka, and Roman Solchanyk (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, 2000), 343–358.

⁶¹ Plokhy, *Cossack Myth*, 55.

This material is pertinent to the current argument in two distinct ways. Firstly, it demonstrates that the myth's selective operations were not limited to issues of democracy and hierarchy but also encompassed the definition of the national community itself. Secondly, and more specifically, the exclusions have proven to be mutable. Plokhy notes that in its modern Ukrainian form, the Cossack myth has entirely discarded its anti-Polish and anti-Jewish themes, while maintaining the enduring popularity of Khmelnytsky and the glorification of Cossack leaders, thus eliminating the ethnic antagonisms that characterized the earlier narrative.⁶² This documented instance of large-scale omission from a national myth provides strong evidence for the plasticity thesis, illustrating that the myth's content is not only open to varying emphasis but also subject to substantial revision under political pressure. The competing literary legacies of 1648 in Ukrainian, Yiddish, Polish, Russian, and Hebrew literature have been compiled elsewhere, and the use of Zaporozhian imagery in Zionist writing offers a particularly direct parallel to the argument of this article, as it involves the same symbolic material being employed for an entirely different national project.⁶³

A further exclusion was structural rather than narrative. The Cossack past supplied the national movement not only with a story but with a model of association, and that model was male. The Hromada of Kyiv, the most influential of the clandestine communities and the effective centre of the movement in the Russian empire from the 1870s until 1917, barred women from membership in the style of the Cossack Sich, so that women's involvement was channelled into the social functions under whose cover its meetings were held.⁶⁴ The point is not simply that women were absent from the myth's cast of heroes, but that the Cossack precedent was invoked to justify their exclusion from the institution through which the myth was transmitted. That the exclusion was a matter of convention rather than of capacity is indicated by the same author's record of Ielysaveta Myloradovych Skoropadska, active in the Poltava Hromada during the 1860s, and of the women who ran the movement's technical operations, on her assessment with more success than the men.⁶⁵ The exclusions catalogued in this section, ethnic and gendered alike, were performed by the curators rather than inherited from the reservoir, and each narrowed the range of publics to whom the myth could subsequently be addressed.

Institutionalization: From Symbol to Structure

The Ukrainian Sich Riflemen, 1914

The early display of Cossack symbolism within an organized entity occurred with the establishment of the Ukrainian Sich Riflemen in the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1914. This unit established as a volunteer group mainly composed of Galician Ukrainian youth from the Sich and Plast movements. This opportunity provided Ukrainians a way to assert a distinct national identi-

⁶² Plokhy, *Cossack Myth*, 365.

⁶³ Amelia Glaser, ed., *Stories of Khmelnytsky: Competing Literary Legacies of the 1648 Ukrainian Cossack Uprising* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015); see in particular Israel Bartal's chapter on the Zionist appropriation of Zaporozhian imagery.

⁶⁴ Bohachevsky-Chomiak, *Feminists Despite Themselves*, 22.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 22. On the participation of women in the Central Rada and its executive, see *ibid.*, 133.

ty within an imperial military context.⁶⁶ The Habsburg authorities sanctioned the unit partly to mitigate pro-Russian sentiment in Galicia. However, its leaders, including Dmytro Vitovsky and Myron Tarnavsky, perceived it as the foundation for a prospective Ukrainian national army.⁶⁷

The nomenclature is the point. To call a unit *Sich* Riflemen was to claim descent from the Zaporozhian Sich, and the claim was reinforced through the deliberate use of Ukrainian-language command, military traditions, insignia and cultural symbolism, which together fostered a distinct Ukrainian identity within a multiethnic imperial army.⁶⁸ Despite its modest size the unit acquired combat experience on the Carpathian and Bukovinian fronts, became a significant emblem of national consciousness, and subsequently supplied much of the military and nationalist leadership of the revolutionary period.⁶⁹

One feature of the unit's founding qualifies the martial register as described here. When the Sich Riflemen were organized in early 1914, before Vienna had recognized them, the formation made explicit provision for women. Its officers took titles drawn from Cossack military usage, Roman Dashkevych as *koshovyi*, his deputy as *osaul* and Olena Stepaniv, apparently without opposition, as *oboznyi*, and thirty-three of the original three hundred Striltsi were women, constituted as a separate *cheta*.⁷⁰ Once the Austrian authorities recognized the Striltsi as a paramilitary body two months later, collective enlistment by women became a moot question, although Stepaniv joined individually and was the first woman in the Austrian empire to do so.⁷¹ The martial register was therefore not intrinsically restrictive. What narrowed it was imperial recognition rather than anything in the Cossack material itself, which is a further instance of the general point argued in Section 6: the myth did not determine the uses to which it was put.

Two observations can be made. Firstly, the myth was applied in a martial context, emphasizing the Cossack heritage as a military tradition instead of a form of communal democracy. Secondly, this took place in Galicia, where the Habsburgs allowed for more cultural freedom, unlike the Russian controlled regions where the democratic-populist interpretation had been more widely spread.⁷² Consequently, the two interpretations of the myth were not only intellectually distinct but also evolved in separate regions under varying political circumstances, leading to an unresolved divergence inherited by the revolutionary governments of 1917–21.

⁶⁶ Oleksandr Reient and Volodymyr Velykochyi, "Consolidation of the Nation during the Ukrainian Revolution of 1914–1923: Main Directions of Historiographical Discourse," *East European Historical Bulletin* 17 (2020): 237–250, <https://doi.org/10.24919/2519-058X.17.218203>.

⁶⁷ Elisabeth Haid, "Galicia: A Bulwark against Russia? Propaganda and Violence in a Border Region during the First World War," *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 24, no. 2 (2017): 200–213, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13507486.2016.1257574>.

⁶⁸ Oksana Kuzmenko, "Russians in Ukrainian Folklore from the 20th and Early 21st Centuries: The Dynamics of the Images and Contexts," *Tautosakos darbai* 64 (2022): 15–56, <https://doi.org/10.51554/TD.22.64.01>.

⁶⁹ Svitlana Frunchak, *The Making of Soviet Chernivtsi: National "Reunification," World War II, and the Fate of Jewish Czernowitz in Postwar Ukraine* (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2014), 135–139.

⁷⁰ Bohachevsky-Chomiak, *Feminists Despite Themselves*, 141.

⁷¹ Ibid., 141–42. Bohachevsky-Chomiak notes that Stepaniv later revised her view on the wisdom of women bearing arms.

⁷² Andrew Wilson, *Ukraine's Orange Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 65–72.

The Hetmanate, 1918

The reestablishment of the hetmans in April 1918 represented the most ambitious institutionalization of the myth and served as its definitive test. Skoropadskyi's qualifications for this role were symbolically significant. As a former lieutenant general of the Imperial Russian Army and a descendant of a notable Cossack lineage, he was perceived as a suitable candidate. Plokhy highlights in his account of 1918 that the office was bestowed upon a descendant of one of the Cossack hetmans from the early eighteenth century, and Skoropadskyi portrayed himself as a leader capable of restoring order and strengthening state institutions.⁷³ His election was conducted by a congress of Ukrainian landowners.⁷⁴ The composition of that congress is worth specifying. Fedyshyn, working from German and Austrian records, has the congress of the League of Landowners convening in Kyiv on 29 April with some 6,500 delegates representing substantial landowners from eight provinces, presided over by Mykhailo Voronovych, who before 1917 had served as tsarist governor of Bessarabia, and conferring the title of hetman together with dictatorial powers.⁷⁵ The elitist register was thus not only a rhetorical choice but an institutional fact: the body that conferred the Cossack title was a landowners' association chaired by a former imperial provincial governor. The Charter of 29 April dissolved the Central Rada (the parliamentary governing body that had administered Ukraine during the initial phase of the revolution), thereby ending Ukraine's initial experiment with parliamentary governance. In his memoirs, Skoropadskyi later defended the coup as an effort to salvage Ukrainian statehood from chaos and societal collapse.⁷⁶ The charter's own language bears directly on the argument of Section 6. It opens by addressing the Cossacks and citizens of Ukraine and closes by calling upon the citizens and Cossacks of Ukraine without regard to nationality or religion, treating Cossackdom as a living category of social address rather than as a historical memory; and it does so in the same document that declares the full reinstatement of individual landownership rights previously suspended under revolutionary land legislation and annuls the land legislation of the Central Rada and of the Russian Provisional Government.⁷⁷ A single page thus welds the myth's estate register to the material programme that would cost the regime the countryside.

It is crucial to highlight how his social standing mirrored that of the creators of the myth. The families whose properties had generated and disseminated the *History of the Rus'* a century prior were hereditary Cossack elites with high imperial status, striving for acknowledgment of their nobility. Skoropadskyi, a general in the Imperial Russian Army, was descended from a hetman and appointed to his position by a congress of landowners. This continuity extends beyond class to encompass a specific political challenge: an elite with Cossack ancestry seeking to transform historical heritage into present-day authority. The continuity was in this case genealogical and geographical as well as social. Skoropadskyi's mother came from the Myklashevsky family, and Starodub, where he attended secondary school, had been the seat of the Myklashevsky on whose estate much of the material behind the *History of the Rus'* was assembled, the same estate

⁷³ Mikhail Akulov, "The Third Path or An Imperial Roundabout? Skoropadsky's Ukraine, Technocrats, and the 'Great Russian Lobby,'" *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 69, no. 4 (2021): 593–627, <https://doi.org/10.25162/jgo-2021-0021>.

⁷⁴ Plokhy, *Cossack Myth*, 364.

⁷⁵ Fedyshyn, *Germany's Drive to the East*, 144.

⁷⁶ Mark von Hagen, "'I Love Russia, and/but I Want Ukraine,' or How a Russian General Became Hetman of the Ukrainian State, 1917–1918," *Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 29, nos. 1–2 (2004): 115–148.

⁷⁷ Skoropadskyi, "Manifesto to the Ukrainian People," 285–86.

identified above as a node of the text's circulation.⁷⁸ The dynastic claim ran, moreover, to the loyalist rather than the rebel line. The title had been borne by Khmelnytsky and by Mazepa, but also by Ivan Skoropadsky, the hetman installed after 1709 who had declined to follow Mazepa, while the family of Skoropadskyi's wife descended from the Kochubeis, who had warned Peter I of Mazepa's intentions.⁷⁹ The founding text raises Mazepa as a latent threat of rebellion; the hetman of 1918 claimed descent from the men who had refused him.

The regime's institutional accomplishments were considerable by the standards of the era. It successfully established a ministerial framework, a State Senate, enhanced tax collection, and stabilized the currency. Additionally, it sent envoys to European capitals to seek recognition.⁸⁰ The regime's cultural contributions were even more remarkable, the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences was inaugurated in November 1918 under the leadership of Volodymyr Vernadsky and the Kamianets-Podilskyi State Ukrainian University was founded in the same year. This was accompanied by a broader expansion of Ukrainian language education and the increased use of Ukrainian in state administration.⁸¹ The Hetmanate constructed more state infrastructure than any other government during the revolutionary period.

It obtained less support than any of the others. The economic strategies it implemented were beneficial to large landowners. This led to opposition from both the peasantry and the socialist parties that had backed the Central Rada. Attempts to reinstate property rights led to widespread dissatisfaction in rural areas and, in some regions, sparked armed resistance against the Hetman.⁸² Symbolic rejection, however, preceded the effects of the land policy. Bohachevsky-Chomiak records that the progressive Ukrainian intelligentsia regarded Skoropadskyi as an outsider, a tsarist general who did not share its ethos, and that distrust had hardened as early as October 1917, when the Congress of Ukrainian Free Cossacks elected him honorary otaman; to that milieu he appeared a potential Napoleon.⁸³ Liudmyla Starytska-Cherniakhivska was among the few members of the Rada's executive board to urge cooperation with the regime, remarking afterwards that the Socialist-Federalists had been afraid to compromise their socialist purity.⁸⁴ The objection was thus registered in the vocabulary of ethos and personification before it was registered in the vocabulary of policy. Nationalists criticized its reliance on German military strength and its abandonment of democratic processes. In November 1918, Skoropadskyi released a federal manifesto promoting closer ties with a potential non-Bolshevik Russia, which many nationalists interpreted as a step back from independence, hastening the creation of a broad opposition coalition.⁸⁵ That manifesto also redeployed the Cossack vocabulary in the opposite

⁷⁸ Bohachevsky-Chomiak, *Feminists Despite Themselves*, 354 n. 31. The attribution of the collection to a Myklashevsky is hers and is offered without further citation; for the Starodub milieu and the Myklashevsky estate see Ploky, *Cossack Myth*, 231, and appendix, 369.

⁷⁹ Fedyshyn, *Germany's Drive to the East*, 150; Bohachevsky-Chomiak, *Feminists Despite Themselves*, 354 n. 31.

⁸⁰ Pavlo Skoropadsky, *Spohady. Kinets' 1917 – hruden' 1918*, ed. Jaroslaw Pelenski (Kyiv and Philadelphia: Institute of Ukrainian Archaeography of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, 1995), 57.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 45 – 49.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 66 – 67.

⁸³ Bohachevsky-Chomiak, *Feminists Despite Themselves*, 135. On Skoropadskyi's standing among the Free Cossacks and his organization of the First Ukrainian Corps, see also Fedyshyn, *Germany's Drive to the East*, 140.

⁸⁴ Bohachevsky-Chomiak, *Feminists Despite Themselves*, 135–36. She also notes that under the Hetmanate a number of Russified conservative families, Skoropadskyi's among them, returned to a conscious Ukrainian identification (*ibid.*, 135), which tells against reading his symbolism as merely instrumental.

⁸⁵ Jeremy Smith, *Red Nations: The Nationalities Experience in and after the USSR* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 35–39.

direction, grounding the projected all-Russian federation in Ukraine's friendship with the Don, Kuban and Terek Cossacks.⁸⁶ Within seven months the same symbolic material had been used to authorize a separate Ukrainian state and to authorize its reintegration into a reconstituted Russia. With the German defeat eliminating the military guarantee, the Directory led by Vynnychenko and Petliura initiated an uprising; Skoropadskyi stepped down on 14 December 1918, after serving for less than eight months.⁸⁷

The Argument: Two Cossack Pasts

The Hetmanate's downfall is often linked to its reliance on Germany, its land policies, and its limited social foundation, and these reasons are valid to a certain extent. This article introduces another element related to symbolic legitimacy. This suggestion is not entirely new, and it is important to specify the precedent. In *The Cossack Myth*, Plokhy notes that the elitist interpretation of the myth, as depicted in the *History of the Rus'*, "*momentarily prevailed over its egalitarian version*" in 1918, just before the socialist revolutionaries overthrew Skoropadskyi.⁸⁸ This point is made in two sentences at the end of a book that focuses more on the creation and reception of a text than on the legitimacy of a government. The following discussion aims to clarify the mechanism mentioned and to articulate three assertions that the brief statement implies.

Skoropadskyi referred to the original text's register. His authority was based on the Cossack heritage, which he highlighted using the register that the national movement had downplayed for seventy years. The hetmanacy as a role for a military leader from an officer elite. Typically, this is seen, if considered at all, as a distortion of the myth as an authoritarian misuse of a democratic tradition. However, Section 3.2 argues that the reality is quite the opposite. The *History of the Rus'* was created by the Cossack officer class during its integration into the imperial nobility, aiming to gain recognition for that nobility. Its author did not oppose integration into the empire; rather, it was written in the context of imperially integrated notables focused on lost corporate privileges. Skoropadskyi was not distorting the myth. He was, in the most literal sense possible, employing it as its creators intended.

The popularisers had deliberately reversed the original narrative, fully aware of their actions. Skoropadskyi encountered not the original myth but its reinterpretation. Kostomarov, Drahomanov, and the popularising literature had redefined the martial and aristocratic aspects of the Cossack heritage, emphasizing instead a narrative centered on communal democracy, federalism, and popular liberty. According to Plokhy, the Cyril-Methodians acknowledged that the foundational text did not substantiate the populist aspect of their claims, with some explicitly rejecting its elitist elements as reflective of landowners' conservatism.⁸⁹ This reinterpretation was subsequently disseminated through Shevchenko's poetry, reading societies, *Kievskaiia Starina*, and Hrushevsky's synthesis, reaching a broad audience over three generations. Consequently, a Ukrainian peasantry, whose understanding of Cossack mythology was shaped by these channels, was taught to associate the Cossack past with liberation from landlords. Skoropadskyi, however, employed this narrative to justify the restoration of landlords.

⁸⁶ Skoropadskyi, "Edict Calling for the Formation of an All-Russian Federation," 14 November 1918, translated in Fedushyn, *Germany's Drive to the East*, appendix G, 287–88.

⁸⁷ Ihor Kushko, "Legal Status of the Directory of the Ukrainian National Republic as a Body of Collegiate Authority (November 1918–November 1919)," *Modern Science – Moderní věda* 4 (2021): 71–79

⁸⁸ Plokhy, *Cossack Myth*, 364.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 364.

The two registers had also developed distinct geographical characteristics. The disparity was not solely intellectual. As demonstrated in Section 5.1, the martial register found its main institutional representation in Habsburg Galicia through the Sich Riflemen, whereas the democratic-populist interpretation was most extensively spread in the Russian-controlled provinces, home to most of the population. The revolutionary governments from 1917 to 1921 inherited a myth with two registers that had evolved in different jurisdictions under varying political circumstances, and they had never been reconciled due to the absence of a political platform necessitating such reconciliation.

The consequences of that unreconciled divergence became visible almost immediately. In May 1918, within weeks of the coup, a Ukrainian group in Odesa proposed replacing Skoropadskyi with Archduke Wilhelm von Habsburg, known in Ukrainian as Vasyl Vyshyvanyi and serving as an officer of the Sichovi Striltsi, as hetman or king of Ukraine; the proposal drew support from the Zaporozhian Division and from the Galician Sich Riflemen stationed at Oleksandrivsk.⁹⁰ The episode is instructive beyond its futility. The martial register of the myth, elaborated in Habsburg Galicia, was available within weeks to authorize a Habsburg archduke against the sitting hetman, and it was available in the same vocabulary of hetman, Sich and Zaporozhian descent that the sitting hetman had used to authorize himself. A symbolic resource that can be attached to a Poltava landowner and to an Austrian prince in the same season is not performing the work of legitimization at all.

The discrepancy was thus not solely rhetorical. Lypynsky's conservative-statist interpretation of the Hetmanate, as discussed in Section 3.2, was intellectually accessible, internally consistent, and, according to the evidence presented in Section 3.2, more convincingly supported by the myth's textual origins than its populist counterpart. However, it appealed to a significantly narrower audience. Skoropadskyi's governance relied on a version of the Cossack myth that was accepted by a small conservative segment but largely rejected by the broader population, who had been educated to oppose it. He drew upon the reservoir, in Smith's terminology, while depending on an interpretation that the creators, in Hobsbawm's terminology, had chosen not to establish.

From this, a broader assertion regarding the role of invented tradition in political legitimacy can be inferred. The adaptability of a myth serves as an advantage during mobilization, as a symbol open to various interpretations can attract groups with otherwise little in common. Cossack mythology was versatile enough to support Ryleev's constitutionalism, Pushkin's imperial patriotism, Kostomarov's populism, Drahomanov's federalism, Shevchenko's martyrology, and Lypynsky's conservatism. This versatility made it an effective tool for a movement that was both regionally fragmented and ideologically diverse.⁹¹ However, this flexibility turns into a disadvantage when it comes to institutionalization, as governance necessitates choosing a single interpretation, thereby transforming a unifying symbol into a divisive one. Smith's insight that symbols endure by adopting new meanings and roles highlights why they cannot be depended upon to grant authority: a symbol that can signify anything cannot specifically authorize anything. The Cossack heritage could support the notion of a Ukrainian state but could not legitimize any particular Ukrainian state, as it had been developed in conflicting ways by the intellectuals who had made it politically influential.

⁹⁰ Oleh S. Fedyshyn, *Germany's Drive to the East*, 169.

⁹¹ Plokhy, *The Cossack Myth*, 50–64.

Two clarifications are necessary. Firstly, the argument is additive, not substitutive: it does not replace the material reasons for the Hetmanate's collapse but highlights a situation where those material issues became politically insurmountable. A government whose symbolic authority aligned with its people's perception of that symbolism might have weathered an unpopular land policy; the Directory, for instance, ruled despite unpopularity and lasted somewhat longer. Secondly, the argument addresses legitimacy rather than causation in a strong sense. The assertion is that the Hetmanate was unable to utilize the symbolic resources its founding act seemed to call upon, not that a symbolic mismatch alone led to the regime's downfall.

Separate qualifications concern the popular reception of the title itself. Fedyshyn holds that despite the socialists' distaste for the elevation of a military chieftain to head of state, the tradition of the Hetmanate retained a particular place in popular memory, and especially among the peasantries.⁹² The argument advanced here does not require denying this. The claim is not that the peasantry lacked a memory of the hetmancy but that the memory it possessed was the one the curators had built, in which the hetman stood against the landlord rather than for him. The title therefore produced recognition and refusal simultaneously, which is a more damaging outcome for a new regime than incomprehension would have been.

This finding aligns with and enhances the broader historiographical conclusion that the failure of Ukrainian statehood between 1917- 21 cannot be attributed to a single cause. Instead, it was the result of the interplay between political fragmentation, institutional deficiencies, military weaknesses, and external interventions.⁹³ According to the analysis presented political fragmentation extended into the symbolic realm. The central myth of the national movement was fragmented and the Hetmanate revealed this division.

Conclusion

In the decades preceding 1917, the Cossack heritage provided Ukrainian nationalism with its most potent symbolic resource. This heritage included a documented instance of self-governance, an elective executive, a martial tradition, and a grievance against a specific imperial authority. Intellectuals of the nineteenth century transformed this material into a national narrative. However, they articulated it in varying registers, resulting in a myth whose ambiguity was integral to its widespread influence.

The narrative presented here introduces an additional complexity to the well-known account. The foundational text of the myth was not a nationalist document but rather one concerned with estate politics, produced by a Cossack officer class seeking acknowledgment of its nobility. Within a single generation, its initial audience derived four politically incompatible interpretations from it. The democratic communal interpretation, which eventually prevailed, was an addition by intellectuals who were aware of its textual instability yet propagated it nonetheless. By 1900, the myth that reached the Ukrainian public was not only ambiguous but ambiguous in a specific and significant manner. The most prevalent interpretation was the one least supported by its foundational document.

In 1918, the reestablishment of the hetmancy marked the transformation of the myth into a constitutional reality while simultaneously revealing its limitations. Skoropadskyi's

⁹² Fedyshyn, *Germany's Drive to the East*, 150.

⁹³ Plokhyy, *The Cossack Myth*, 130.

administration established more enduring institutions than its peers but enjoyed less legitimacy. This discrepancy is partly explained by the contrast between the aristocratic-military Cossack heritage he referenced to, historically more genuine, and the democratic communal Cossack history taught to his people. Ploky, drawing on Ivan Drach, uses the metaphor of a spent rocket stage, jettisoned after fulfilling its purpose, to illustrate this imbalance: the vehicle continues its journey on a path no longer shaped by the aspirations of those who constructed the initial stage.⁹⁴ The intellectuals who initiated the Cossack myth had no influence over its future role in legitimizing actions a century later, and the myth, designed to support a movement, was not suited to sustain a government.

The subsequent evolution of the myth confirms rather than modifies this interpretation. The revolutionary era was recontextualized within a national narrative as a foundational moment of statehood post 1991. Following 2014, it gained increased significance as a precedent for resistance and sovereignty. On both occasions, the Cossack and revolutionary histories served as moral and symbolic resources rather than definitive historical facts and their meanings were subject to contestation. This contestation is not a flaw in the myth rather, it is the condition for its ongoing utility and as shown in 1918, the boundary of its political reliability.

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⁹⁴ Ploky, *Cossack Myth*, 363.

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