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Poland and Ukraine in a Moving Geo-political Space: Confronting the Myths of Sarmatia: Who is and Who is not “In between?”

З часів Ялтинської конференції головним принципом політики Радянської імперії була підтримка подвійних стосунків з усіма сусідніми державами та запобігання створенню регіональних альянсів у Східній Європі. У випадку з Польщею та Україною ця політика, співпадаючи з історичною ворожістю цих двох націй, незважаючи на спроби примирення антирадянських дисидентів в обох країнах, певною мірою пережила імперію, її результати можна побачити в популярній культурі нових незалежних держав з обох кордонів Європейського союзу. Ця робота розглядатиме приклади національних оповідей (нарративів), які відновили зв'язки, були перероблені та переписані відповідно до політичного розвитку та проблем посткомуністичних східно-центрально-європейських незалежних держав Польщі та України.

Since Yalta, the leading principle of Soviet imperial policy was to maintain binary relationships with all satellite states and to prevent the creation of regional alliances within Eastern Europe. In case of Poland and Ukraine this policy coinciding with historical animosities between the two nations, which despite the reconciliation efforts of anti-Soviet dissidents in both countries, to certain extent outlived the empire and its results can be detected in the popular culture of the new independent states on both sides of the border of European Union today. This paper will focus on examples of national narratives which are being re-connected to, revised, and re-written according to political developments and challenges of the post-communist East Central European independent states of Poland and Ukraine.

It was the policy of the Soviet Union to maintain binary relationships with each of its satellite states and to prevent any possible regional alliances which could possibly become a counterpart force vis a vis the Soviets. This policy was easy to implement especially due to the old and new deep rooted animosities between the region's nation states. In fact the only two countries which were not harboring any animosity against each other and instead had a history of friendly relations, Poland and Hungary did cause the Soviet Union rather big problems in 1956.

All post Soviet states (NIS) but also to some extent all East European People's Democracies, are since the fall of USSR engaged in the process of nation building. This process entails not only assertive systemic transformations (remaking of legal and economic systems) but also reassessing and re-writing history: adopting some national

symbols and myths while rejecting others. This process does not indicate a “fabrication” of history and “myths” in historiography cannot be perceived as inventions, as Andrew Wilson¹ contends “when acting as ethnic entrepreneurs, nationalist historians must sell a plausible product that is both effective and affective.” So the main function of historical myths or narratives is to choose from the repertoire of historical occurrences those, which can be presented in an engaging and persuasive manner in order to help constitute and strengthen the collective identity of the nation. While all nations are engaged in these processes (through school programs and mass media) some have more success than others for “some myths fit better popular tradition than others,” says Wilson. This paper will discuss the myth of ancient Sarmacia and how this myth has been adopted, rephrased or rejected by contemporary Polish and Ukrainian national

¹ Andrew Wilson, “Myths of National History in Belarus and Ukraine” in *Myths and Nationhood*.

narratives.

Ukrainians and Poles remained at odds over history as old as the 17th century and as new as 1920s and 1940s. But, as Ilya Prizel² points out, it was this very struggle, and persistent “constant confrontation” (after Rudnytsky) between Poles and Ukrainians that provided both nations with powerful myths and symbols in the process of establishing their respective national identities.

Independent Poland after 1989, and sovereign Ukraine after 1991, both entered into a new phase of building foreign policy and international relations outside of the Russian reason of state. This paper will address a few cultural representations of this new trend in political culture of both countries.

For the first time since the war both Poland and Ukraine has moved into an active voice. No longer mere objects of Moscow’s political manipulations, they now struggle to reinvent themselves externally, in the international context of Europe (Western and Central), military alliances, and internally, in terms of national self definition. No longer can the Polish (or other East-Central European) self definition be explained as (or excused by) sharing “the collective experience ... a specific sense of history that is forced on us against our will³.” In Poland the first few years of independence were marked by a strong clash between the Roman Catholic conservative view on the essence of religious nationality and the secular critical and satirical trend within Polish culture.

Since 2006 victory of ultra conservative trend in nationalistic new administration of the twins, Poland seems to be entrenching itself in the tradition of particularistic ideology of mixture of anti-West European Catholic values with a European fortress components which are specifically aimed at stopping the perceived deluge from its non- EU members states namely Ukraine and Belarus. This set of policies and values are strongly reminiscent of the Sarmatian ideology of Polish nationalism

Czeslaw Milosz perceived significant similarities in the East Central European (Polish, Hungarian and Czech) sensitivities. His definition was rooted also in geo-politics: in terms of common objectification, within the sphere of influence, and of the more powerful neighbors⁴. Others, like Adam Michnik has always talked about Poland’s links to Europe. And now, in the second decade of

freedom, the Polish identity is being once again reinvented or rather re-phrased in terms of the gaze towards the East. Though Poles, like most Eastern European intellectuals, rationally agree that the smaller countries of the region should work together to counteract more powerful neighbors, “emotionally, culturally and even geo-politically, the new gaze eastward is still at least equally important to most Poles: the view across the vast eastern territories that for centuries were part of the historic Poland⁵.” In cultural everyday practice Poles now switched its national dress from the peasant Krakowian outfits in which children and grown ups were dressed up for official occasions into the stylized Sarmatian dress, the oriental Polish gentry “kontusz” or tin made armor of even older “knights” of King Sobieski. These are the special uniforms used now for Easter parades around the cathedrals. Last April, I was shocked when some 10 “knights” suddenly dropped to the church floor with a terrible noise when their metal armor hit the stone while the bishops were passing by with the holy Tabernacle.

At the end of the XIXth century, a national narrative of an uplifting history appeared. Instead of dwelling on the recent defeats of the national uprisings, the glory of the 17th century gentry’s democracy was recalled in historic epic novels.

The dominant metaphors of Polish national identity became then Sarmatism, an ideology of the Polish nation understood as a gentry’s state. It combined the myth of the gentry’s “golden freedom” with moral righteousness stemming from their role in the defense of Western European civilization against the encroaching hordes of the savage infidels, located usually to the east and south of the territory of the Polish Commonwealth. Sarmatism also assured the Polish gentry a special relationship with God which resulted in permanent protection of Providence over Poland. Thus, the Sarmatian religiosity nationalized Roman Catholicism.

This kind of Polish nationalism was popularized by Henryk Sienkiewicz, the impact of whose novels is unparalleled in the history of Polish literature (1905 Noble Prize). He has been also the subject of the most heated intellectual controversy and a litmus test for political opinions in Poland.

In a generally sluggish market on the eve of the second post communist decade, a film adaptation of

² Ilya Prizel, “The Influence of Ethnicity on Foreign Policy The Case of Ukraine” in Roman Szporluk (ed) *National Identity and Ethnicity in Russia and the New States of Eurasia* 1997

³ Czeslaw Milosz, Budapest Roundtable” *Cross Currents* 1989, no 10 p. 20.

⁴ Czeslaw Milosz’s definition of Central Europe: “all the countries that in 1939 were the real or hypothetical objects of a trade between Soviet Union and Germany” *Cross Currents* no 10 p.18.

⁵ Timothy Garton Ash, “Does Central Europe Exist?” In *The Uses of Adversity: Essays in Fate of Central Europe*, Vintage, New York 1983

his historic epic *With Fire and Sword* attracted a multimillion audience within the first few months since its release in February 1999. This film's popularity reflects the acceptance on the part of Polish audience to revise its views on the eastern mission and religious tolerance, and redefine the borders of "Polishness"

Sienkiewicz's Trilogy appeared in installment in a daily "Slowo" from 1883 to 1888⁶). The first part of the Trilogy⁷, *With Fire and Sword*, altogether some 800 pages, has a romantic plot of two rival officers (Pole Skrzetuski and Cossack Bohun) in love with one woman. Their pursuits of her are played on the background of the uprising of Bohdan Khmelnytsky, a Ukrainian national hero, considered by Poles a traitor. Written "in order to hearten the spirit" of the readers two decades after the failure of the last of Polish insurrection, the novel promoted a new national pride which compensated for the collective low esteem stemming from continuous defeats on the battlefield. Incorporating pieces of documents, historical accounts, and written in the language of gentry memoirs and Baroque poems, Sienkiewicz created a historical epic with a cast of characters that lived on in the minds of generations of Poles.

In Poland, the novel along with its two other parts was credited with awakening and maintaining a high level of Polish patriotism during the turbulent XXth century.

In Ukraine, *With Fire and Sword*, the title and the work itself, has been viewed as an ironic summing up of Polish expansionist ambitions toward its eastern neighbor. Ukrainian critics and historians point out that *With Fire and Sword* paints the Polish gentry's national image at the expense of depicting the Ukrainian 17th century population in the manner that caused more harm to the 20th century Polish Ukrainian relations than any other literary work. For example, a Ukrainian American historian, Frank Sysyn writes: "Ukrainians viewed Sienkiewicz as a purveyor of hatred and falsehood." While Ukrainian scholars view the Chmielnicki Uprising as a "touchstone of Ukrainian identity" and compared it in significance to the meaning of the Reformation for Germans and of the French

Revolution to the rest of Europe (Hrushevsky), Sienkiewicz portrayed it as a rebellion by primitive and a wild mob (*czern*) led by a drunken and cruel Polish-Ruthenian nobleman who started the war as a means of seeking private revenge on a neighbor who seduced his wife. Generally speaking, the novel started the perception on "the struggle between the Cossacks and the Commonwealth as one between barbarity and civilization⁸."

When director Jerzy Hoffman, after decades of efforts announced in 1997 that he will film *With Fire and Sword*, the news were greeted with mixed feelings and a great deal of apprehension on the part of both Polish and Ukrainian critics. The result surprised all.

It became a national celebration of mass pilgrimages to see a three hour long film. Before *With Fire and Sword* could be filmed, communism had to fall. To touch the nationality issues pertaining to the Polish/Ukrainian/Russian relation would be too politically volatile under even the most reformist of communist governments within the Warsaw pact. The block itself had to crumble before this topic could be filmed. And then it had to wait yet another decade before funds were raised and sponsors found for this most expensive of Polish large-scale productions.

Besides an impressive international cast, Hoffman hired 20,000 extras, used 260 horses, and footed the highest bill for a film ever made in Poland. The leading national daily, *Gazeta Wyborcza* published over 500 articles about the film, mostly during its filming and after the release. The ministry of education had based on the film one of the three topics (most often chosen by students) for the mandatory exam essays for all high school graduation. There have been TV competitions about knowledge on the novel and the film, reviews of it among the general population and a proliferation of books on the topic of the film as well as its literary prototype. But the real proof of its success is an unparalleled audience: over 6 million Poles saw the film since its release in February 1999. The film's audience in Poland greatly surpassed in size the audiences of Titanic. Ironically, its release coincided with the entry of Poland into NATO,

⁶ Jerzy Krzyzanowski "Introduction" *With Fire and Sword*, Hippocrene, New York 1991, p.XI

⁷ second part of the Trilogy was the *Deluge* about the Polish resistance against the Swedish invasion on 1655, and third one, *Colonel Wolodyjowski* about the later wars with Turkey.

⁸ Frank E. Sysyn, *Between Poland and the Ukraine. The Dilemma of Adam Kysil*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1985 p.228

⁹ Hoffman was born in 1932, in the eastern part of pre-war Poland as a child of two doctors. The family survived the war in the Soviet Union. His father fought with the Polish contingent of the Red Army. Hoffman himself did not share the anti-Russian sentiments so prevalent among Polish filmmakers. He, in fact, did not even share the schooling they had. Unlike the leading figures of Polish film, Hoffman did not study at the Lodz School of Film. He received his training instead at the Moscow Film School during the last days of Stalinism. When in 1968 during the official state anti-Semitic campaign in Poland, secret service agents "discreetly" suggested that he leave the country, Hoffman agreed. "However, since my wife was a Soviet citizen, and I graduated from film school in Moscow, I'll settle in the Soviet Union" he said. He was then left alone and one part of the Hoffman's Trilogy was soon released

along with Hungary and the Czech Republic, and not Ukraine.

In fact, Jerzy Hoffman's⁹ films' box office successes can only be compared with the successes of the novel by Sienkiewicz. The film, which offers a new take on Polish-Ukrainian-Russian relation, has struck a cord with the audience. The romance with the East as well as the myth of the bulwark or rampart of Western culture (or Christianity) appears like the legitimizing entry to Europe while turning the attention away from the West. Both nationalist and anti-nationalist camps had therefore their own reasons to see *With Fire and Sword*.

The films' departures from the novel are striking and well planned. Some necessary departures are in the plot structure, in linguistic deletions (of Latin) but the most important are combinations of casting and directives on how to play the role which resulted in a contrast to the literary message about the Ukrainians.

The dialogue follows very closely the novel's rapid action-subjected dialogue, though it further simplifies the message. The narration is in Polish and usually follows parts of the novel narration. All the narration is in Polish while the dialogues are in several languages: Polish, Ukrainian and Mongolian. The switching of linguistic codes is especially revealing in regard to the scenes involving the polyethnic individuals' ethnic/national representations. The "true Polish" characters insist on speaking only Polish, whether to Poles, Ukrainians or Tatars. The dominant code is such asserted with the assumption that the "others" must know it. The Ukrainians, on the other hand, speak either Polish or Ukrainian, dependent on the linguistic context.

Historically, the most meaningful departure is the rationale for the uprising, or, as the Ukrainians describe it, the Great Cossack War. The Cossack rationale, never addressed in the novel, was their desire remains free within the Polish Commonwealth, to preserve their religion and culture as the subjects of the Polish king. The Cossack gentry demanded the equal Polish gentry's privileges. Sienkiewicz painted the uprising as the result of blind mob hatred and Khmenytsky's private humiliation resulting from the marital infidelity of his wife with a Pole.

Hoffman made brilliant casting decisions when he chose Ukrainian actors to play Khmelnytsky (Bohdan Stupka), and the witch Horpyna (Ruslana Pysanka), and a Russian actor to play Bohun (Aleksander Domagarov). Though Ukrainian critics opposed the last casting decision, it really was much better than if the Polish sex-symbol and a tough guy Boguslaw Linda played it, as was originally considered. Domagarov, though Russian,

was able to create a new romantic, seductive and altogether quite enticing image of the Cossack hero.

Khmelnytsky (Bohdan Stupka) in the film emerges as an honorable man, and a great military and political strategist. It was the portrayal of Khmelnytsky in the novel that assured Sienkiewicz such ill fame in Ukraine (as a renegade Polish nobleman, drunk and conniving, who, because of his private affair who raised the Ukrainian peasant masses and the free Cossacks against the Commonwealth). In the film, Khmelnytsky, the statesman, analyzes events and discusses social reasons for the uprising with his officers.

The ultimate "other," the true pagan savages in the novel and in the film, is the Islamic Tatars who also speak a totally different language which is always subtitled, as neither Poles nor Ukrainians understand it. The Crimean Khan, to whom Khmelnytsky seeks support against the Polish army, is portrayed as a quintessential oriental monarch, expecting and receiving blind obedience from his subjects. The khan has a feared army of cruel and skillful fighters in his command. His motivation (unlike those of Polish magnates) is pure greed and he is cunning and calculating. And here again, Hoffman introduces a novelization of the literary prototype. The Khan himself appears twice with a young officer whose face he strikes lovingly in front of his court and somehow bemused looking Khmelnytsky. The blind obedience and subjugation is visualized here in terms of a dominant homosexuality towards a transvestite. Just as Horpyna's occult witchcraft was not visually sufficient to put her beyond the boundaries of civilization, so here is the same sign of transgression against western norms of sexual respectability.

The historical film, in analogy to the historical novel, selects and gives shape to history, writing it by imposing meanings. Historical film interprets national history for the broad public, and thus produces, organizes and homogenizes public memory. Hoffman tries to produce a history which will from now on portray Poles and Ukrainians as *pobratymcy*. In trying to do justice to the novel which had an opposite message, Hoffman delivers a confused message in which the "other" is shifted to strong women (witch) and Muslim Tatars.

Finally, I would argue (contrary to the joyful Polish critics greatly relieved with Hoffman's success in avoiding further antagonizing the Ukrainians) that the ambiguous national identities of various characters and preferences to the Polish language and culture (religion) by Ruthenians in Polish military service, indicate a continuous anti-Ukrainian bias. Though the leading Ukrainian (male) characters are cleared of the savage elements, those are just transferred onto their female

characters. Additionally, the Ukrainian masses both peasants as well as Cossacks remain represented as brutal and savage, as in any nationalistic propaganda film.

While the Sarmatian myth appears to remain a predominant topos in Poland, a Ukrainian historian, Jaroslav Hrycak¹⁰ is announcing the death of the Sarmatian myth in Ukraine. Ukraine rejects Sarmatism as part of the old Polish nobility expansionist ideology. And independent Ukraine has picked the image of a free Cossack peasant as its national emblem instead.

A recent book of essays commissioned by German cultural foundations (der Deutschen Wirtschaft im BDI and Deutche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung) and titled Sarmackie Krajobrazy, Czarne: 2006 (Sarmatian Landscapes: Voices from Lithuania, Bialorus, Ukraine, Germany and Poland) outlines the various ways intellectuals of these countries perceive and define the concept of "Sarmacja."

In the Sarmatian Landscapes several essays by Ukrainian intellectuals (Jaroslav Hrycak, Andrii Bondar, Mykola Riabchuk, and Oksana Zabbuzhko) move the imagined territory of Sarmatia from the Polish lands across the EU border to Ukraine and in case of Andruchovyh, to the eastern Ukraine beyond the left bank of the Dnieper River. For Ukrainian scholars the term does not connote any positive meaning. It indicates the country in between Europe and "the other continent" meaning Russia with its now post-Soviet imperialism. Denying the concept of Sarmatia any positive meaning indicates on some level rejection of the old historic (and presently non-existent) Polish imperialism towards Ukraine. This rejection testifies to on the one hand opposition to the Polish domination and on the other desire to maintain national sovereignty. Finally it also speaks to deep resentment of once again the European rejection of Ukraine despite its great 2004 victory which had been achieved by the nation according to the best 'European standards.'

Ukrainian identity is still perceived in terms of the "in-between" mentality. While Czeslaw Milosz defined the Eastern Europe in the 1980s as a region "in between the West and the Soviet Union," the situation has changed at least from this side of the border, since 2004 and the expansion of European Union. It appears that Poland has successfully moved into the West and is now part of Europe being culturally and civilizationally homogenized into the "European standards." The place of the "non-Europe," "the other" is being awarded for

Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova. This definition of Ukrainian Sarmatia focuses on the backwardness of Ukraine's infrastructure and the clear division into two nations. With a great amount of irony if not sarcasm he describes the Eastern and southern Ukraine as a place which is fairly deeply russified.

The lands between Baltic and Black seas have been in ancient times named Sarmatia. Numerous peoples speaking dozens of languages live in someone else's shadow. All nations live in the shadows: Poles in the shadow of Germans, Ukrainians, Byelorussians and Lithuanians in the shadow of Poles and Russians. What we have in common best defines Andruchovyh in his albeit a bit long litany

East Central Europe appears to him as

- Terrain of particular historical tensions, such as mass deportations and even a few genocides
- A space where the feeling of undeserved injuries (krivdi) even today are a physiological category, like an atmospheric pressure which could be measured in specific units, not yet agreed upon,
- A part of the world where it became customary to be proud of something that really should be a source of sad reflection: of being "in between" the East and the West
- A strip of land where states mutate, an in-between-empires space
- A territory between Russians and Germans and since May 1, 2004, between Russia and European Union
- A space in which without a trace disappear stolen in EU cars and partially also European Union funds
- A small fatherland of illegal cheap labor force, the so called Polish plumbers and not only Polish dancers, strip-teasers and whores
- A sphere from which human parts, organs are exported, and where unknown parents abandon their children
- A territory of crossing cultural-genetic influences, where to these times in the villages men wear hats and women scarves on their heads
- A place of mostly horrible roads and in this sense an anti-Roman civilization
- A part of the world three fourth Slavic, and therefore most likely to abuse alcoholic beverages
- A part of the world in which until 1939 a medieval German (or Jewish) was freely spoken
- A territory on which still most people know Russian but often pretend they don't

¹⁰ Jaroslav Hrycak, "Koniec Sarmacji" in: Sarmackie Krajobrazy. Glosy z Litwy, Bialorusi, Ukrainy, Niemiec i Polski, Czarne 2006

- A space in which too many languages are spoken to be considered any sort of community with the possible exception of the Tower of Babel
- A territory in which not only Estonians cannot understand their kin-- Magyars but even Serbs cannot understand more than kinsfolk Croats,
- Territory on which no one understands Gypsies ...
- A territory which everyone understands the other in terms of a daily bread, cigarettes and a glass of wine

A space of a drastic and chronic existential uncertainty for which reason this space is often considered especially religious (and which perceived itself as such)

Andruchovych, writing after 2004, is indicating that Europe moved to include all the new "European" States and East Europe, the real "Sarmacja" are relegated to the states from the EU excluded: Ukraine and Belarus.

As for Ukraine, Andruchovych points out that despite the fact that the basic rule of independence is to peacefully abolish by people themselves the tyrannical, totalitarian rulers, which Ukrainians most definitely did, they are nevertheless not wanted in Europe where roads are smooth train new run on time, and water runs freely straight from the faucets both during the day and night. For, Orange Revolution was of the highest "European Standards."

Andruchovych is asking why despite this readiness Ukraine is not invited and Ukrainians must apply for visa to all EU countries? His answer is because of Russia. Because they (EU) does not want to annoy Moscow. In this part of his essay

Andruchovych speaks of the whole Ukraine because the exclusionary EU policies affect both parts of the country equally. However, in a next part of the essay, he clearly differentiates between the east and the west – following the old maps and atlases which distinguish between so called European and Asiatic Sarmacja. He then moves the negative concept of sarmacja to the territory beyond the east bank of Dnieper River. He characterizes this new/old Sarmacja as a place which consists of a dry step which is haphazardly and "anachronistic industrialized" a place where the population speaks Russian, is basically proletarian and "traditionally criminal" (sic) a place of refuge from various prisons, a home of homeless recidivists, where people tend to be loyal to any authority "as long as they do not mess with their Soviet monuments," dislike and distrust the West, where Europe is perceived as a cozy and an artificial construct conceived in Kiev. For him the true "in between" West and East is the eastern and southern Ukraine, not the whole of Ukraine as stated in other parts. An Andruchovych claim that East Central Europe has does tremble and moved far into the eastern part and frontiers of Ukraine facing then "the other continent" – Russia.

While it is perfectly understandable that Ukrainian scholars reject the basically anti-Ukrainian (from old Poland) myth of Sarmacja, and even use this concept in pejorative context contrary to the function of Sarmacja in the national-conservative ideology of Poles. For Ukrainian intellectuals Sarmacja connotes backwardness, provincialism, lack of refinement, and criminal mentality. But it is less obvious to a Pole why would they assign all these negative characteristics to the

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