The third act of the Bolshoi theatre version of *Mazepa* from 2021 is placed in 2014. On stage is a lone bus, burnt out after the bombing.

PHOTO DAMIR JUSUPOV / BOLSHOI THEATRE

TCHAIKOVSKY'S *MAZEPA* IN THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR.

Rescuing a cultural hero for a sovereign nation

by **Liubov Kuplevatska**

abstract

This essay considers the myths surrounding the historical figure of Hetman Mazepa and their artistic expressions. More specifically, it compares and contrasts two recent stage versions of Pyotr Tchaikovsky's Mazepa opera by theaters in Kharkiv in 2017 and Moscow in 2021, at the time of the Russian military operations on the territory of Ukraine. The desire of Ukrainian directors to return honors to the national hero is opposed by the Russian interpretation of the image of Mazepa as an archetype of a traitor. The essay shows how the Ukrainian version updated the plot and liberated the Mazepa myth from Russian and Soviet imperial distortions, thereby connecting the opera's events with the contemporary struggle for a sovereign state. Meanwhile, underneath its modernist surface, the Russian version maintained the opera's age-old metropolitan view of Ukraine as inferior.

KEYWORDS: Mazepa, myth, national identity, opera version, Tchaikovsky.

Russia's undeclared war against Ukraine in 2014 gave new life to deep-seated cultural narratives in both countries about their mutual relationship. A particular point of contention concerns the historical significance of the hetman Ivan Mazepa (1639–1709), a military commander of the Zaporizhzhian Cossacks whose life has inspired literature, paintings, and music throughout Europe for more than 300 years. This essay considers the myths surrounding Mazepa and their artistic expressions in Russian and Ukrainian arts and literature.

Arts, music, literature, and language are key to a nation's sense of itself and obtain a particular urgency when faced with a struggle for survival against a seemingly superior enemy. In Ukraine, the war resulted in fervent creation of new artistic works as well as in the reinterpretation of classical ones. This essay analyses the contrasts between two recent stage versions of Pyotr Tchaikovsky's *Mazepa* opera by theatres in Kharkiv (2017) and Moscow (2021). It shows how the Ukrainian version updated the plot and liberated the Mazepa myth from Russian and Soviet imperial distortions, thereby connecting the opera's events with the contemporary struggle for a sovereign state. Meanwhile, underneath its modernist surface, the Russian version maintained the opera's age-old metropolitan view of Ukraine as an inferior colony.

"WHILE RUSSIANS HAVE CONDEMNED HIS BETRAYAL OF THE TSAR, UKRAINIANS HAVE CELEBRATED HIM AS A NATIONAL HERO."

Mazepa: the man and the myth

Ivan Mazepa was the leader from 1687 to 1709 of the political entity on the left bank of the Dnipro River variously recognized as the Hetmanate, Left Bank Ukraine, or Cossack Ukraine. During the Great Northern War (1700–1721), Mazepa's Cossacks broke away from Moscow and sided with the Swedish King Charles XII in his campaign against Peter the Great. Following their defeat at the hands of the Russian Tsar at Poltava in 1709, Mazepa went into exile and died soon after. Known during his lifetime for his political shrewdness and support of the arts, Mazepa's surprising turn against Muscovy forever earned him a mythical stature in Russian and Ukrainian historical narratives. While Russians have condemned his betrayal of the Tsar, Ukrainians have celebrated him as a national hero.[1] Mazepa's controversial role in the history of Russian-Ukrainian relations and the abundance of myths surrounding his eventful life have been the subject of several studies.[2] In fact, the scholarly discussions and artistic interpretations of Mazepa's deeds gave rise to a whole field of "Mazepiana" almost from the outset.[3]

The inaugural author of Ukrainian Mazepiana was hetman Pylyp Orlyk (1672–1742). An ally of Mazepa, Orlyk championed Mazepa's aspirations for a sovereign state and authored the Bendery Constitution in 1710, which was one of the first in the world to enshrine the separation of powers. In 1695, Orlyk penned the panegyric "Alcides Rossiyski tryumfalnym lawrem koronowany" [The Russian Hercules crowned with a triumphal laurel], which celebrated Mazepa's achievements. Beyond the Slavic world, where Mazepa became better known as "Mazeppa", the French enlightenment philosopher Voltaire touched on the hetman's role in the war between Charles and Peter in his historical works on the two rulers. In all likelihood, Voltaire drew on the testimony of Orlyk's son, Hryhor, as he presented Mazepa and the idea of Ukrainian independence in a positive light in his *L'histoire de Charles XII* published in 1731. "Ukraine has always aspired to be free,"[4] Voltaire wrote in one of the earliest statements of support for Ukrainian statehood. In the later work, *Histoire de l'empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand* commissioned by the daughter of Peter the Great, Empress Elizabeth I, and published 1759–1762, Voltaire instead cast Mazepa as a foolish and disloyal barbarian. Nevertheless, in revisions of his book on the King Charles XII of Sweden, Voltaire did not alter his original view of Mazepa and Ukrainian independence.[5]

Voltaire's literary contributions held immense sway across Europe, serving as the foundational wellspring from which authors, composers, poets, and painters would draw inspiration. The Mazepa myth, symbolizing a romantic hero fighting for his state's independence, captivated artists across Europe. In 1818, Lord Byron penned the poem *Mazeppa*, which soon appeared in numerous translations.[6] Inspired by Byron's poem, Théodore Géricault painted Mazepa twice in 1820 and 1823 and Eugène Delacroix followed suit in 1824. Victor Hugo wrote the poem *Mazeppa* in 1828 and between 1851 and 1854, Franz Liszt composed the symphonic poem *Mazeppa*.[7]

Russian Mazepiana

After the death of Mazepa the Russian empire's secular and religious authorities thoroughly discredited him and sought to erase

Portrait of hetman Ivan Mazepa on a Ukrainian banknote and his words "but die for the faith and defend your freedoms".

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Ivan Mazepa and his ally Swedish king Karl XII after the defeat against Russia at Poltava, by Carl Cederström.

traces of his legacy.[8] The artistic interpretation of Mazepa in Russia, however, largely emerged much later as a counter reaction to the romantic interpretations in western Europe. First out, though, was the Decembrist revolutionary Kondraty Ryleyev, who sympathized with Mazepa's mythological resistance to autocracy. In 1825, Ryleyev published the poem *Vojnarovskij* about a Ukrainian nobleman, Mazepa's nephew, who supported the hetman's defection to the Swedish side. In Ryleyev's poem, Mazepa was not a traitor, but a fighter against Russian despotism. The author's political engagement, however, ended up costing him his life as he was executed together with five other Decembrist leaders the same year the poem was published.

A few years later, in 1829, Alexander Pushkin set the lasting tone for the Russian Mazepiana with the narrative poem *Poltava* about the Russian army's decisive victory against the invading Swedish troops. Commissioned by the Russian Tsar Nicholas I, the poem's central theme revolved around the treasonous and ungodly Mazepa. The poet's task was to create a Russian version of the Mazepa myth, which would differ from the idealized romantic image of the Ukrainian hero popular in Europe.[9] Pushkin delivered, but nevertheless he could not help disclosing Mazepa's motive:

> **A fortunate hour is upon us;**
> **The time for glorious battle nears.**
> **For far too long we've bowed our heads,**
> **Without respect or liberty,**
> **Beneath the yoke of Warsaw's patronage,**
>
> **Beneath the yoke of Moscow's despotism.**
> **But now is Ukraine's chance to grow**
> **Into an independent power;**
> **Defying Peter, I will raise**
> **The bloody banner of our freedom.**[10]

Half a century later, Pushkin's poem inspired Pyotr Tchaikovsky's eponymous opera composed between 1881 and 1883. Victor Burenin wrote the libretto, but Tchaikovsky finalized it and included the Pushkin lines above. Despite this admission of Mazepa's honorable ambitions, according to Thomas Grob, "Pushkin nevertheless assumes that it was the country's natural fate to become part of Peter's Russia."[11] Pushkin's poem and Tchaikovsky's opera fueled the imperial Russian narrative about Mazepa. Over the years, the poem assumed a central role in the Russian history and literature curriculum, through which it served the Russification project and helped shape an imperial mentality.

Mazepa in the Soviet Union

The imperial struggle against the glorification of the Ukrainian hetman's image was sustained by the Soviets. Tchaikovsky's opera was first presented on a Soviet stage on October 6, 1922, two months before the creation of the Soviet Union, which purported to unify fraternal peoples. In the following years, the opera was staged in Kyiv in 1933, at the Bolshoi Theatre and at the Leningrad Opera and Ballet Theatre in 1934, and abroad in New York, Vienna, Prague, and Sofia between 1933 and 1937. The opera served as a medium through which the conventional colonial narrative about the interplay between fraternal nations and the shared historical origins of Russian-Ukrainian unity was brought to life. It highlighted a historical connection over three centuries, which was posited as the foundation for a new historical community—the Soviet people. As Vitaliĭ Masnenko has pointed out, the "brotherly" mythology was "an effective tool for political manipulation aimed at the social mobilization [...] for the needs of the empire."[12] Arguably its clearest expression came with the 1944 lyrics of the Soviet anthem, which defined Russia's role in the Union: "An unbreakable union of free republics, the Great Rus has sealed forever."

In Soviet Ukraine, Mazepiana that did not conform to the Russian interpretation of the relation between the colony and the metropole was generally repressed if not outright banned. Ukrainian authors of Mazepiana such as Stepan Rudansky, Pantelejmon Kulish, Bogdan Lepkij, Volodimir Sosiura, and Ivan Pavliuk

found their works hushed by the authorities, while the drama by Ludmila Starits'ka-Cherniahivs'ka was explicitly prohibited. It was only once a sovereign Ukrainian state was declared in 1991 that patriotic Ukrainians could openly celebrate Mazepa's struggle for autonomy and make him a cornerstone of contemporary national identity projects.[13] While Putin's Russia reclaimed the Soviet heritage as its own, Ukrainian citizens sought to liberate the country from its Soviet legacy in the 2005 Orange revolution and the 2013–2014 Euromaidan.

Staging *Mazepa* during Russia's war against Ukraine

Russia's undeclared invasion of Ukraine in 2014 provided a new context for the *Mazepa* opera to highlight Russian and Ukrainian visions of the self. In 2017, the Kharkiv State Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre, the first permanent Ukrainian opera house, offered Kharkivites a new interpretation of Tchaikovsky's opera.

The original plot revolves around a tragic love story between Maria, a young woman, and Mazepa, an ally of Tsar Peter the Great of Russia. Maria runs away with Mazepa, her godfather, causing her family shame. In retaliation, her father informs Tsar Peter about Mazepa's plans to ally with Sweden against Russia. Peter dismisses the warning and hands over Kochubey, Maria's father, to Mazepa for execution. Maria learns of her father's impending death too late and descends into madness. After a failed alliance with Sweden and defeat in the Battle of Poltava, Mazepa encounters the now-insane Maria, who no longer recognizes him. She later mistakes her dying childhood friend Andrei for a child and sings him a lullaby as he passes away, marking the culmination of a tale of love, betrayal, and revenge.

Timed to coincide with the 330th anniversary of Ivan Mazepa's election as Hetman, the Kharkiv production deviated from the traditional Russian colonial narratives by not glorifying the Russian army and not portraying Mazepa as a traitor, while maintaining the romance between the elderly hetman and the young Maria. The producers created their own version of the text and, accordingly, made changes to the musical dramaturgy of the opera and its language. The production wanted to show Mazepa as a national hero: "After all, now we need a new look at the personality of this statesman, which would restore historical justice."[14] as Vladimir Garkusha, stage conductor and the chief conductor of the theater, commented in an interview before the opening of the show.

IN THE NEW INTERPRETATION, the elderly statesman is presented as a tormented man, caught between his love for Maria and his duty towards Ukraine. Ultimately, his duties towards the state took primacy and he put aside his feelings and personal allegiances. The director of the Kharkiv version, Armen Kaloyan, explained that, in his understanding, "the hetman's main goal was the European future of Ukraine. He understood that living under the rule of Russia and Poland was painful for Ukraine, [...]. After all, the Russian autocracy rigidly built its empire, not allowing freemen on its borders. And this completely excluded any hope for Ukraine's independence. Therefore, going against Peter I, uniting with the Swedes, seemed to Mazepa the only way to gain independence for Ukraine. Unfortunately, in the process of achieving such a lofty goal, sacrifices are inevitable..."[15].

The Kharkiv show was widely celebrated, as Mazepa's attempt to liberate Ukraine from the Muscovite yoke echoed with the country's contemporary struggle for sovereignty. Especially the opera's opening and final acts when the 17th-century Cossack folk song *The black field is plowed* was sung reminded audiences of the ongoing military struggle in the eastern Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The lyrics, preserved by the author, translator, and ethnographer Ivan Franko (185 6–1916), capture the tragedy of unburied soldiers on the battlefield.

Fragment from the text of song according to M. Maksymovich (1834):

1.
The black field is plowed, hey, hey!
The black field is plowed
and sown with bullets.
White body dragged, hey, hey!
And covered in blood.

2.
A cossack is lying on a bush, hey, hey!
A cossack is lying on a bush,
With scarlet kerchief his eyes are covered, hey, hey!
With scarlet kerchief,
With kerchief his eyes are covered.

3.
There is neither coffin, nor grave, hey, hey,
There is neither coffin, nor grave,
There is neither father, nor mother
No one to call, hey, hey
There is no one to bother.[16]

In Russia, music critics were perplexed as to why the song was included in the opera. One media outlet considered it "Stepan Bandera's favorite song",[17] seeking to discredit the production by tying it to the violent and radical war-time leader later celebrated as a Ukrainian national hero.[18] Commentators also objected to the end of the opera when photographs of the "heavenly hundred" killed during the Euromaidan appeared in the background. Even the production's choice of Ukrainian language was considered an affront to good taste. As one commentator noted, Ukrainian "is completely unsuitable for the melody of opera."[19] Such a statement echoes the long history of Russian repression of the Ukrainian language codified by the Valuev circular of 1863, which defined Ukrainian as a dialect, prohibited Ukrainian-language teaching, and made Russian the language of high culture.[20]

Perhaps as a response to the Ukrainian staging of Tchaikovsky's *Mazepa*, the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow presented its own, modern interpretation of the classical opera in 2021. The production was led by director Yevgeny Pisarev who placed each of the three acts in a different historical time. The first act was

The Kharkiv staging of the opera *Mazena* in 2017 was timed for the 330 years anniversary of Ivan Mazepa's election as Ukraine's Hetman.

set in the historical period of Mazepa and Tsar Peter the Great, around the battle of Poltava (1709). The events of the second act played out at the beginning of the 20th century, in the time of the Russian Civil and the Second World Wars, while in the third act unfolded in during Russia's contemporary war in Ukrainian Luhansk and Donbass, against the background of a burned bus with dead bodies and soldiers in uniforms. According to Pisarev, the opera shows how Ukraine "is doomed to eternal ordeals because of the Hulyaipole mood seething in the blood."[21] These words clearly hinted at Ukraine's struggle to contain the Russian invasion disguised as a rebellious insurgency.

THE BOLSHOI PRODUCTION, although staged before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, had forebodings of the worsening of the conflict to come, as it prioritized political tension at the expense of the tragic love story between Mazepa and Maria. A commentator put it in vivid terms: "the image of Ukraine today is associated not with romance, not with Gogol, not with a quiet night near the Dnieper [...], but with the theme of war and the victims in the Donbass. Therefore, the starting point in Pisarev's play was war, conflict, and the destruction of the home."[22] The Russian production emphasized the omnipresence of war in Russian – Ukrainian relations and its tragic consequences.

An article on the new production contained the key to understanding the show in its title: *Requiem for Ukraine*.[23] According to a critic, the opera "focused on painful issues of national history of the last three centuries,"[24] yet at the end of the day, the performance demonstrated the traditional imperial Russian narrative perspective on Ukraine as the colony. Eventually, both the Kharkiv and the Moscow interpretations differed significantly from Burenin and Tchaikovsky's libretto. The only common feature of the original and modern versions was the war: The war for independence in the Ukrainian version and the transhistorical eternal war in the Russian. The Russian performance however remained on the program in 2022, so that Russia's full-scale illegal war of aggression against Ukraine launched on February 24, 2022, added yet another historical layer of significance to the text.[25]

Conclusions

In 2010, the historian Gary Marker observed that Mazepa continues to inspire competing stories and "to engage political and artistic imagination even now."[26] The undeclared Russian war against Ukraine in 2014 and the full-blown invasion in 2022 have only heightened the resonance of Mazepa. The competing interpretations of Tchaikovsky's opera in Kharkiv and Moscow were merely a prelude to Ukraine's existential struggle faced with Russia's genocidal attempt to wipe the country off the map. As Ukraine's national identity is redefined in light of Russia's indiscriminate targeting of civilians, bombing of hospitals, and abduction of Ukrainian children for Russification in foster families, the role of Russian cultural heritage in Ukraine is reassessed. This has led to the banning of the Russian language and to the boycott of Russian culture including the music of Tchaikovsky.[27] However, the Kharkiv opera production, predating the full-scale invasion, demonstrated the potential for repurposing Russian music in celebration of Ukrainian national history. Exposing the imperial myths and restoring the significance of national heroes, no matter how contradictory their views may seem, is one way to shape the national consciousness of Ukrainians in an independent state. The Ukrainian version of the *Mazepa* opera was an important step towards expressing the Ukrainian national identity in the musical arts. As the authors of the Kharkiv theatre project stated: "During the national political and artistic renaissance, this performance will reveal the image of Ivan Mazepa for contemporaries in a new way,"[28] as an exam-

"THE ONLY COMMON FEATURE OF THE ORIGINAL AND MODERN VERSIONS WAS THE WAR: THE WAR FOR INDEPENDENCE IN THE UKRAINIAN VERSION AND THE TRANSHISTORICAL ETERNAL WAR IN THE RUSSIAN."

ple of the formation of national self-consciousness, the return to Ukraine of its heroes and a telling of the historical events without the rigid framework of the imperial myth about Mazepa.

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