

CONNEXE 5 | 2019

**Divided Memories, Shared Memories, Poland, Russia,
Ukraine: History mirrored in Literature and Cinema**

>>>>> INTRODUCTION

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In 2017, general-interest magazines illustrated the centenary of the Russian Revolution with stills from Eisenstein's *October* [Октябрь] (1927). One strikingly showed soldiers rushing across a square to represent the storming of the Winter Palace by Bolshevik fighters on 7 November 1917. In reality, the actual assault was slow and even laborious. But for Western audiences, this film sequence has become an archive image, a piece of history. This type of substitution of artistic representation for historical reality conflicts with the positive construction of our knowledge of the past. Indeed, historians long refused to include literature and films in their historical research, as well as art in general, which has been mainly analysed from an aesthetic point of view.

The opening up of the archives following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the USSR in 1991 did, however, shake up historians' research. For example, where once the bibliography on Eisenstein's *October*¹ mainly contained formal studies about the movie, matters changed with access to Soviet archives in the early 1990s. It emerged then how far the history of the film was actual history, providing valuable lessons for understanding Soviet communism. Frederick Corney has shown how *Telling October* (Corney 2004, 183) became fixed as a result of institutional constraints and the political balance of power. Bolshevik veterans of the Revolution were invited to "memory evenings" by the Communist Party's history institutes and their statements were intended to underpin the writing of the film script. However, this script was altered as Stalin's gang gained the upper hand over the Left Opposition led by Lev Trotsky.

As soon as Eisenstein's film was released, it came up against another obstacle: the target audience of communist workers were not impressed by all its political conformity. This time the problem was its over-complex form (Sumpf 2004). So *October* had a short run and left little trace at the time. It only gained a wider audience as the fiftieth anniversary approached. The Soviet authorities had it restored and exported it to many countries. Its avant-garde form no longer shocked Soviet audiences and it even had the advantage of reflecting the regime's avant-garde origins at a time when the Khrushchëv cultural thaw had just come

¹ See in particular the French-language bibliography compiled by the Cinémathèque Française, https://www.cinematheque.fr/sites-documentaires/eisenstein/rubrique/ressources/bibliographie_par_film/octobre-impression.php

to an end. In the West, particularly in France, where the film had been banned for political reasons in 1928, its formal innovation now inspired public enthusiasm (Aunoble 2016, 59–60, 110; De Baroncelli 1966). *October* conveniently represented the Revolution in West and East and even supplanted authentic images. Although *October* does not itself faithfully recount Ranke’s “*wie es eigentlich gewesen*” (how things really were), the film’s history is part and parcel of not only cultural but also political and social history.

Modern attitudes to sources have radically changed. The use of literary texts and movies is an accepted practice in historical research, in line with the increasing use of personal archives (private diaries, memoirs, letters, photographs, etc.). Moreover, historians now tend to consider archival sources that may be called “traditional” with a more critical eye. How these archives were produced and preserved affects their reception by researchers: they are no longer seen solely as data but also as a social construct and discourse. Literary, artistic and cinematic material can now be approached with a well-honed method. However, films and literature are part of the writing of history in another sense. During a century when mass culture reached the people, films and novels brought a vision of the past and helped build the common memory of nations.

The communist authorities were well aware of the impact of the arts on historical consciousness. The Soviet films *Bogdan Khmel’nitskiy* [Богдан Хмельницький] by Igor’ Savchenko (1941) and Eisenstein’s own *Ivan the Terrible* [Иван Грозный] (1944) reflected the shift in Stalinist discourse towards an increasingly obvious nationalism. Bohdan Khmel’nyts’kyi is also a key figure in Soviet Ukrainian literature, from Ivan Lé to Pavlo Zahrebel’nyy. Zahrebel’nyy also wrote a series of novels on medieval Rus’ (*The Wonder* [Диво], 1968; *The First Bridge* [Первоміст], 1972; *Death in Kyiv* [Смерть у Києві], 1973; *Eupraksia* [Євпраксія], 1975) that counterbalances the “Great Russian” vision of Kyiv exemplified by Valentin Ivanov (*Original Rus’* [Русь изначальная], 1961, and *Great Rus’* [Русь великая], 1967), evidence of a degree of plural if not pluralistic historical discourse.

The State kept a close eye on its creative talents to avoid the past foreshadowing the present. It is well known that Eisenstein never made the third part of *Ivan the Terrible*, in which a tsar’s madness might too easily evoke a dictator’s paranoia. The same was true in Poland, formally independent but subject to its powerful neighbour: the historian and writer Paweł Jasienica had to take account of censorship in his series of novels (1960–1972) reinterpreting Poland’s history from the 10th to 18th centuries. Many topics were touchy and required “blanks” in the

text. In the Soviet Union, in both Russia and Ukraine, the Gulag, the Ukrainian Famine and some aspects of the “Great Patriotic War” could not be mentioned publicly. Vasilij Grossman’s novels *Life and Fate* [Жизнь и судьба] (1950–1959), *Everything Flows* [Всё течёт] (1955–1963) and Fridrikh Gorenshteyn’s *Atonement* [Искупление] (1967), *Psalm* [Псалом] (1974) and *Travelling Companions* [Попутчики] (1985) could only be published in Russia at the end of the Soviet period (Amacher 2004). Even Oles’ Honchar’s *The Cathedral* [Собор] (1968), with its emphasis on Ukrainian traditions, ultimately incurred the anger of the Soviet authorities although the author considered himself a representative of socialist realism.

The new freedom of speech that accompanied the collapse of the communist bloc also enabled the return of national narratives that were clearly one-sided, and thus contradicted each other. Questions and conflicts of memory burst forth once the communist regimes disappeared, revealing long repressed processes. Even now, thirty years after the end of these communist regimes, the reinvention and reinterpretation of history continue in Poland, Russia and Ukraine. Figures once seen as traitors are given pride of place in the new national pantheons. Old statues continue to be dismantled, streets, squares and even towns renamed. History is appealed to by civil society (intellectuals, media, public opinion, historiography) and political elites, who use the past to justify their ideological positions and legitimise their political programmes. In each separate country, these divergent historical policies stoke the fires of “memorial wars,” fought out on screens, in books and sculpture.

Russian cinema since 1991 has largely continued to include Ukraine in the heroic Soviet story (Andrey Malyukov’s film *The Match* [Матч], 2012). This has given rise to incidents. For example, *We’re from the Future 2* [Мы из Будущего 2 (2010)], with a script by Aleksandr Shevtsov dealing with the UPA,² was banned in Ukraine. Independent Ukraine, meanwhile, promoted a new national interpretation of its 20th-century history (eleven films, including four by Oles’ Yanchuk), particularly of the 1930s to 1950s. Polish cinema seems to have been revitalised since Andrzej Wajda’s *Katyń* (2007). A historical genre has emerged, marked in particular by Jerzy Hoffman’s *Battle of Warsaw 1920* [Bitwa Warszawska 1920 (2011)]. The dynamic nature of Polish cinema allows it to represent even the Ukrainian discourse on history. In 2019, Agnieszka Holland’s *Mr Jones* gave a greater resonance to the criticism of the 1933 famine provoked

² UPA: the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, seen by nationalists as having fought against both totalitarianisms, Nazi and Stalinist, but considered to have been collaborators by those on the left and Russia sympathisers.

by the Soviet authorities in Ukraine, than had Oles' Sanin's Ukrainian film *The Guide* [Поводир] in 2014.

Literature, of course, contributes a major part to national narratives. In Ukraine, from nostalgia for the Austro-Hungarian Empire (*Felix Austria* [Фелікс Австрія] by Sofiya Andrukhovych, 2014) to the failure in nation-building after 1918 (*Tango of Death* [Танго смерти] by Yuriy Vynnychuk, 2012) and the cruelties inflicted during integration into the Soviet empire (*Sweet Darusya* [Солодка Даруся] by Maria Matios, 2004), it is noticeable that the western part of the country (Galicia, Bukovina) appears to monopolise this tragic memory. Is it any wonder? Daily life during the Soviet period is recalled more by Ukrainian authors writing in Russian such as Aleksey Nikitin (*Victory Park*, 2014) and Andrey Kurkov (*The Gardener from Ochakov* [Садовник из Очакова] 2010), even if the Maidan protests compelled Kurkov to rethink his own position between Ukraine and the “Russian world.” Writers in Russia have also made use of history, especially Soviet history, such as Lyudmila Ulitskaya (*The Kukotsky Enigma* [Казус Кукоцкого], 2000; *Jacob's Ladder* [Лестница Якова], 2015, and Zakhar Prilepin (*Abode* [Обитель], 2014). Since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Prilepin has rallied to President Vladimir Putin, and even commanded a volunteer battalion during the war in the Donbas (*Everything that Must Be Solved... Chronicle of an Ongoing War* [Всё, что должно разрешиться... Хроника идущей войны], 2016).

Older themes such as the Cossacks continue to crystallise differences between countries. Jerzy Hoffman's *With Fire and Sword* [Ogniem i Mieczem] (Poland, 1999), Yuriy Ilyenko's *A Prayer for Hetman Mazepa* [Молитва за Гетьмана Мазепу] (Ukraine, 2001), Mykola Mashchenko's *Bohdan-Zynoviy Khmel'nyts'kyu* [Богдан-Зиновій Хмельницький] (Ukraine, 2006) and Vladimir Bortko's *Taras Bul'ba* [Тарас Бульба] (Russia, 2009) are films presenting three opposing views of the 17th-century Cossack revolts. And yet there is the occasional surprising overlap: the actor Bohdan Stupka plays Cossack leaders in films for all three countries. So, the discourse behind a film is not everything, and career considerations may operate independently of geopolitical pressures.

Over the last three years, the editors of this thematic issue have studied a broad research topic entitled *Divided memories, shared memories. Ukraine/Russia/Poland (20th–21st centuries): An entangled history*, and some of its findings have appeared in several publications.³ After preliminary consideration of the

³ In particular, Korine Amacher, Éric Aunoble and Andrii Portnov, eds, *Histoire partagée, mémoires divisées. Ukraine, Russie, Pologne* (Lausanne: Antipodes, 2020 (forthcoming)).

driving forces behind the “making” of academic history and official history,⁴ we have sought to examine how history has been represented in the various arts (literature, cinema and sculpture) throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries in three countries where various population groups have lived together and various states have faced each other. For a thorough discussion of such a wide range of material, specialists in these fields attended a conference held at the University of Geneva in December 2018. Their purpose was to interrogate the artistic treatment of certain events and figures described in contradictory narratives in 20th-century Poland, Russia and Ukraine. Some of the conference papers have been specially rewritten for this issue.

Our selection opens with **Oleksandr Zabirko**’s article on Mikhail Bulgakov’s novel *The White Guard* [Белая гвардия] (1926) set in Kiev during the Civil War. He shows how the novel was read and re-read in the light of changing political viewpoints over the 20th century, finally echoing today’s tensions between Russia and Ukraine. Although in Ukraine Bulgakov’s work seems to be linked to a search for “historical truth” (and, by extension, “historically justified” vengeance), in Russia, fiction appears rather to trump history.

In the second article, **Olena Palko** examines the role of Mykola Khvyly’ovyy (1893–1933), a major writer in 1920s’ Soviet Ukraine,⁵ a leader in the struggle for a Soviet Ukrainian literature independent of Russian models. He was both an independent thinker and a militant communist, and his suicide in 1933, just as Stalinist purges began to hit Ukrainian artist circles, marked the end of a decade of transition that had been open to artistic experiment and a degree of ideological and political pluralism.

Khvyly’ovyy kept up a polemical dialogue with both the Moscow authorities and Ukrainians in exile. **Trevor Erlacher**’s article examines the public interactions between figures as different as Mykola Khvyly’ovyy and the national literary critic Dmytro Dontsov (1883–1973), supporter of “integral nationalism,” despite the

4 Korine Amacher, Andrii Portnov and Viktoriia Serhienko, eds, *Official History in Eastern Europe, Transregional Perspectives* (Osnabrück: Éditions Fibre, 2020 (forthcoming)); Korine Amacher, “Mikhail N. Pokrovsky and Ukraine: A Normative Marxist Between History and Politics,” *Ab Imperio* 1 (2018): 101–132; Éric Aunoble, “Commemorating an Event That Never Occurred: Russia’s October in Soviet Ukraine in the 1920s,” in *Echoes of October International Commemorations of the Bolshevik Revolution 1918–1990*, Jean-François Fayet, Valérie Gorin, and Stefanie Prezioso, eds. (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2017); Andrii Portnov and Tetiana Portnova, “Soviet Ukrainian Historiography in Brezhnev’s Closed City: Mykola/Nikolai Kovalsky and His ‘School’ at the Dnipropetrovsk University,” *Ab Imperio* 4 (2017): 265–291; Андрей Портнов и Татьяна Портнова, “‘Без почвы’ Виктора Петрова и ‘Собор’ Олеса Гончара: две истории украинской литературы XX века.” *Неприкосновенный запас* 2 (2019): 116–133.

5 Little of Mykola Khvyly’ovyy’s work has been translated into English or French. See *Stories from the Ukraine*, trans. George S. N. Luckyj (New York: Philosophical Library, 1960) and *La route et l’hirondelle*, trans. Oles Masliouk, (Monaco: Éditions du Rocher “Maison Nikolskaïa,” 1993).

physical and ideological borders between Soviet Ukraine and inter-war Poland. At a time when nationalism and socialism were not universally considered to be mutually exclusive, there existed both in Soviet Ukraine and south-east Poland a mixture of right- and left-wing agitation for a revolutionary, anticolonial and modernist Ukrainian literature.

Next, **Estelle Bunout** examines Henry Sienkewicz's novel *With Fire and Sword* (1882–1888) about the 17th-century Cossack revolts that left their mark on the history and collective imaginations of Poles, Ukrainians and Jews. In 1932, fifty years after it was written, in an independent Poland that still felt threatened by its German and Russian neighbours, the withdrawal of the novel from Polish school lists of set texts aroused a fierce controversy about the patriotic education of Polish youth, against the backdrop of tensions between the Polish State and its Ukrainian minority.

In his article, **Denys Shatalov** interrogates Soviet memory of the 1943 massacres of Poles by Ukrainian nationalists in Volhynia. To that end he analyses a neglected source, the memoirs of Soviet partisans, which during the Soviet period were the main source of information about these massacres. In these memoirs, accounts of the massacres functioned primarily as propaganda tools intended to forge Soviet public opinion. Although these accounts do not shed more light on the events, they do illustrate the way Soviet propaganda set about shaping the representations of the past.

Éric Aunoble examines the cooperation between Poles and Soviets to produce films about the two major figures of communism, Lenin and Feliks Dzerzhinskiy. He concludes that disagreement did not occur over ideological matters, because a consensus about Leninism had been formed or restored after 1956. Tensions between the “fraternal” countries did however arise concerning the representation of the two nations and the organisation of these vast cross-border projects.

This thematic issue is also supported in the “Open Fora” section by **Vita Susak**'s article on Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935), the father of radical abstract painting. His heritage is now in dispute between Russia, where he made his name, Ukraine, where he lived, and Poland, where his parents were born. Vita Susak analyses the battle for memory around the painter and provides current examples of the use of his name and work in the political and cultural narratives of the three countries.

Needless to say, this thematic issue makes no claim to be exhaustive. Many other examples could be examined. However, although the sample is selective, the articles we have chosen do illustrate how far literature and cinema contribute to the

construction of historical memory. These essential sources have not yet enjoyed the attention they deserve from historians. This thematic issue has the modest aim of demonstrating the importance of art in the historical representations of three countries. We hope it will draw readers' attention to what the inclusion of art can add to discussions of the conflicts of memory still current in Central and Eastern Europe.

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