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# The Battle of Poltava as a Realm of Memory and a Bone of Contention<sup>1</sup>

KRISTIAN GERNER

## THE BATTLE OF POLTAVA AND HISTORICAL CULTURE

**T**HE PAST IS NEVER DEAD. It is not even past." This quote is from the American writer and Nobel laureate William Faulkner's novel *Requiem for a Nun*. Faulkner was referring to the role of past events in people's lives. The sentence is equally true with regard to collective memory. Concerning the latter, what matters is not the past itself but that which is told about it and how it is narrated—i.e., the story. History is a mediated record of the past.

In contemporary historiography, the notion of "realms of memory" is used to indicate how collective memories and historical emotions among citizens of different states are anchored in places, dates, monuments, and concepts. This is a combination of the postmodern focus on narration and representation, on the one hand, and the traditional anthropomorphic view that "nations" are actors, on the other. This trend was pioneered by the French historian Pierre Nora, who edited the multivolume work, *Les lieux de mémoire*.<sup>2</sup> Nora's work was followed by similar works on German and Italian history, respectively: *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte*, edited by Etienne François and Hagen Schulze, and *I luoghi della memoria: Strutture ed eventi dell'Italia unita*, edited by Mario Isnengi.<sup>3</sup> In those cases where one cannot talk of actual projects, realms of memory play a certain role in the ideological and political use of history in contemporary Europe.

When the reference is to realms of memory, the focus is not on scholarly historiography but on "historical culture." This concept does not refer to the products of scholars alone—or primarily—but rather to the contemporary political and ideological significance of the official and public interpretation of certain historical events. These events are told and retold and preserved in collective memory through a mixture of narrations, reminiscences of the

past in expressions in the colloquial language, and public ceremonies and commemorative rites.

Historical culture is not the same as cultural heritage. The latter concerns the relationship between producers in the past and contemporary inheritors, while historical culture is about the contemporary uses of material and spiritual objects of memory. The distinction directs attention to the fact that historical culture is a manifest structure of representations of meaningful pasts with a double dimension of agency; producers and interpreters belong to the same community. To complicate the epistemological aspect even further, it should be remembered that historical science does not have a coherent and closed conceptual universe. It borrows concepts from a wide range of academic disciplines; at the same time the concepts used by historians are also used in the colloquial language. In historical science, translation problems are notorious. One can reflect upon the specific denotation and connotation in each case concerning the different concepts behind the terms “history culture,” “historical culture,” “Geschichtskultur,” “historische Kultur,” “culture d’histoire,” and “*istoricheskaia kul'tura*.”

In the course of the twentieth century history as a science went through a series of epistemological challenges. Concepts such as “relativism,” “revisionism,” “postmodernism,” “the cultural turn,” and “the linguistic turn” called attention to the malleability of the past. However, at the same time history continues to be written and spoken about with “nations” as historical agents. In this kind of historiography, the “nation” acquires moral qualities and can be “good” or “evil.” Political leaders may attempt to gain legitimacy among their subjects by arguing that they are the rightful leaders of a country that has always pursued a righteous policy.

What may happen if the concepts of “realms of history” and “historical culture” are transferred to a past that is perceived as their property by representatives of two or more contemporary states? Although the distinction between history as a science and historical culture was not conceptualized at the time, it is possible to regard the binational committees that were established after the end of the world wars and after the cold war as attempts to create a common or shared historical culture among citizens in neighboring states that had a recent common history of war and occupation, and where each part had produced history books that depicted the other state and its population as the archenemy. The archetypical example is the French–German endeavor.<sup>4</sup> The aim of this and other similar initiatives was to foster deep mutual understanding between the citizens of the states involved, in spite of recent experiences and memories of enmity—understanding that would function as a panacea against chauvinism and enemy images in the future.

After the end of the communist regime the authorities in a number of Central and Eastern European states created institutes of national memory.

These initiatives purport to present a true story of the nation, placing into focus a specifically national dimension. A pertinent example is that the rationale for such an institute in Ukraine would be to promote knowledge of the Holodomor.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, keeping in mind both reconciliation and national memory projects, the confrontation is alive and well between a traditional national view of history and the postmodern or relative view of history that has been promoted by binational commissions.

In the commemorative year of 1709 the main issue concerning the Battle of Poltava was not the history of the battle as such, although there are, of course, divergent interpretations of different aspects of it from the perspective of military history. The main bone of contention concerning the place of the Battle of Poltava in the historical memory of Ukrainians, Russians, and Swedes is how to interpret its historical significance.

#### UKRAINE, EUROPEAN CULTURE, AND THE BATTLE OF POLTAVA

After the end of the cold war, some members of the political elite as well as painters, historians, and writers in Ukraine took upon themselves the task of strengthening their country's links with the West by highlighting historical events of international significance and interpreting them in a new way. The state project that was launched by Bohdan Khmel'nyts'kyi and continued by his successor, Ivan Mazepa, came to be regarded as belonging to the history of "Europe" rather than of "Russia."<sup>6</sup> In 1999 the Kyiv-based literary historian Tetiana Riazantseva offered an interpretation of Ukrainian seventeenth-century cultural history that has interesting implications for the conceptualization of Ukrainian intellectual traditions and culture as part of European high culture during the era of the Cossack State.<sup>7</sup>

Riazantseva's thesis is not about political history per se, but about literature and cultural policy. She manages to show that intellectuals in Kyiv and other cultural centers of the Hetmanate belonged to European baroque culture. There was a direct line between Kyiv and Spain in the development of special traits of "tacit" political and ideological propaganda in a certain variety of baroque poetry. Riazantseva has rescued from partial oblivion the conscious national "Ruthenian" project of the bishop and poet Lazar Baranovych (ca. 1593 or 1620–1693 or 1694).<sup>8</sup>

According to Riazantseva, earlier research has not noted Baranovych's importance in anchoring the Ukrainian literary tradition in Europe, although he has been mentioned. Only in 1996 was he finally recognized as "the founder of Baroque culture in the Cossack state." Riazantseva makes him stand out not only as a prominent adversary of Catholicism and Church Union, but also as the central figure of the golden age of national Ukrainian culture. The cultural

center of this Ukrainian Renaissance (during the baroque period) was the Kyiv Mohyla Academy in Kyiv, founded by Petro Mohyla in 1632.

Baranovych was a strong advocate of political and ecclesiastical independence from Moscow. According to Riazantseva, his and Mohyla's struggle against Catholicism was not primarily a theological issue. Resistance to Moscow was part of the bigger issue of safeguarding the rights and privileges of the Hetmanate. This emerging Russian state would belong not only in the Orthodox Byzantine tradition, but would also be a part of Western Latin culture. In this interpretation of history, the culture of the emerging Cossack state stands out as an epitome of European civilization.

Although Riazantseva's thesis is rather bold, and perhaps even exceptional, her work should not be understood as an isolated phenomenon. In Ukraine ordinary people, and especially intellectuals, some professional historians included, never became true believers in the Soviet interpretation of seventeenth-century history. After the demise of the Soviet Union and the emancipation of historiography, historians began openly to reinterpret the significance of certain historical events. One frame of interpretation was the thesis that the historical bonds with Sweden in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries had been close and beneficial. Seen from a political viewpoint, Russia represented the heritage of communist bondage and the Soviet past, whereas Sweden represented the democratic future and Europe. Selected historical events were picked out for celebration in order to corroborate this thesis. It is obvious that, in such a context, the historical fact that some Cossack leaders had sided with Peter I in 1709, a fact that went contrary to the idea of a Swedish-Cossack alliance as a main feature of the Battle of Poltava, could not become part of the story of Ukraine's tilt toward Europe.

Long before Riazantseva's thesis, the Ukrainian historian in exile Oleksander Ohloblyn (1899–1992) published a short article that carried the argument about the Europeaness of Ukrainian baroque culture into the era of Ivan Mazepa. Ohloblyn's article, which was published in 1951, was reissued on the eve of the tercentenary of the Battle of Poltava in a Ukrainian anthology on the history and cultural significance of Baturyn and the legacy of Ivan Mazepa. The article thus became a contribution to post-Soviet Ukrainian historical culture.<sup>9</sup>

Ohloblyn mentions the heritage of the baroque influence from Baranovych's time and describes the baroque architecture in Baturyn as a continuation of this tradition. But this time it is not the Spanish but the Italian connection that stands out as the factor that made the Hetmanate a participant in mainstream European culture. The architects of Mazepa's time came from Italy. According to Ohloblyn, an additional dimension of this Ukrainian–Western European connection was that the Ukrainian baroque was not self-contained but in its turn “played (at that time) the main, if not the decisive part in the Europeanization of Eastern Europe.” Here Ohloblyn quoted another Ukrainian

scholar, Volodymyr Zalozets'kyi-Sas. Ohloblyn added that "the later influences of the Ukrainian Baroque should be sought in Western Europe to which they contributed their Ukrainian share of what was but the common European heritage."<sup>10</sup>

It is worthwhile to reflect on Riazantseva's thesis (but not in its capacity as a scholarly work—in this realm, her thesis may be disputed) and Ohloblyn's republished article as counterparts to the Czech writer Milan Kundera's famous thesis from 1983 about Central Europe having been "kidnapped" by the Soviet Union and its communism. His argument was that Central Europe harbored genuine European culture and was an outpost of Western civilization.<sup>11</sup> Kundera's work helped clear the way for the Central European states of Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland to be viewed as "European" in Western Europe and North America. In a paper presented at a conference at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy in the summer of 2009, Kacper Szulecki noted that the conceptualization of a "Central Europe" by Kundera and other dissidents helped construct a sense of identity that "entailed being part of the West yet separate from it."<sup>12</sup>

Kundera's treatise was widely circulated and debated in Western Europe and North America. Hence, his perspective on the Central European states became ideologically and politically important when, a few years later, the new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, opened up new perspectives for the future of the communist bloc states. The events that led to the demise of the communist regimes in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and the German Democratic Republic in the summer and autumn of 1989 were interpreted as a "return to the West." The phrase, "being part of the West yet separate from it," is an apt characterization of the gist of Riazantseva and Ohloblyn's arguments. They tell Ukrainian history in such a way that it is possible to sketch out a future in which the wrappings of Soviet and contemporary Russian history writing are shredded and exchanged for the clothing of European history writing. Ukraine emerges as a constituent member of the European cultural community and by implication, as a prospective member of the European Union, but naturally with a special relationship with Russia. The latter is certainly "separate" from the West and not part of it.

Historiography in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic had to adapt to the Russian and Soviet scheme of history. Basically, this was a Russocentric and highly moralistic and nationalistic variety in the nineteenth-century tradition. In this historiography, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Sweden was viewed as an enemy and Russia as a friend of the Ukrainian people. Ever since the policy of glasnost was introduced in the late 1980s, the dominant trait of Ukrainian historiography has been a profound reevaluation of the significance of the Cossack state. It is depicted as a proto-state, presaging contemporary Ukraine.<sup>13</sup> Hetman Bohdan Khmel'nyts'kyi's political project is now portrayed

as a precursor of contemporary sovereign Ukraine, and Ivan Mazepa's "union" with Charles XII is viewed as a continuation of that project. When the tercentenary of 1709 was approaching, the view that Ukraine's historical bonds with Europe should be highlighted was anchored in the highest echelons of the Ukrainian state administration.

The historiographic tradition of presenting Ukraine as part of Europe—in contrast to Russia—naturally links it with the historical Polish-Ukrainian Commonwealth and with Habsburgian Austria. However, because of the choice of the tercentenary of the Battle of Poltava as a suitable event to demonstrate the thesis of Ukraine's European identity, Sweden came into focus rather than Poland, Lithuania, Austria, or distant Spain or Italy. The straight line between Spain and Ukraine in the baroque culture—the linchpin of Riazantseva's thesis—and the Italian dimension of Ukrainian baroque architecture during the Mazepa era, as highlighted by Ohloblyn, were not relevant in the Swedish-Russian-Ukrainian context. Thus, on 2 April 2008 the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine under Yulia Tymoshenko adopted the following resolution:

To establish an Organizational Committee for preparation and celebration of the 300th anniversary of events related to the military-political statement of Hetman Ivan Mazepa and Ukrainian-Swedish Union/Treaty [...].

To approve the action plan related to the preparation and celebration of the 300th anniversary of events related to the military-political statement of Hetman Ivan Mazepa and Ukrainian-Swedish Union/Treaty up to 2009.

The Ministries, other central executive authorities, National Academy of Science, Poltava, Chernihiv and Zaporizhia oblast public administrations shall ensure the implementation of the action plan approved by this Resolution using the funds allocated by the state and local budgets for respective programmes as well as the funds from other sources.<sup>14</sup>

The focus of the celebration of the 300th anniversary was to be the Battle of Poltava. In addition, there were plans to commemorate another event that same year: the treaty that was signed at Velyki Budyshchi between Sweden and the Hetmanate on 28 March 1709. This short-lived union had been forgotten in Sweden for centuries. Now three hundred years after its inception it was recalled as a vital Ukrainian historical link with Europe. Representatives of the Swedish Embassy in Ukraine and Swedish historians were invited to take an active part in the celebrations marking both the alliance of Velyki Budyshchi and the Battle of Poltava.<sup>15</sup>

## THE BATTLE OF POLTAVA AS PART OF RUSSIAN HISTORY

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Russian Federation acquired the status of successor state to the Soviet Union. Under President Vladimir Putin, the historical memory of the Great Patriotic War in 1941–45 began to be commemorated in the same manner as during Soviet times. For example, the Soviet national anthem, which had been abolished under President Boris Yeltsin, was reintroduced as Russia's anthem, with minor changes in the text allowing for Russia to take the place of the Soviet Union. In legal terms the Russian Federation was a successor state to the dissolved Soviet Union. However, in keeping with identity politics under Putin, Russia is presented to its citizens as a continuation state. There has not been any Russian counterpart to the German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to grips with the past) after the defeat of the Third Reich. Officially, the history of the Soviet state is held in high esteem in contemporary Russia.

In the context of discussing the shared history of contemporary Ukraine and Russia, it is crucial to note that the public and official Russian stance on historical events, in which Russia and other states share a common history, is Russocentric. This is a legacy from the Soviet period. Concerning Russian perceptions of the relationship with Ukraine, William Zimmerman has described the phenomenon as *perezhitki proshlogo*, or “vestiges of the past.”<sup>16</sup>

In Russian and Soviet historiography, the period from the beginning of the Great Northern War in the year 1700 until the end of the Second World War in 1945 has been treated as the gradual fulfillment of a manifest destiny for the Russian state and people. This means that the Battle of Poltava in 1709 is interpreted as the first link in the success story of the Russian great power and the Soviet superpower. The second link is the victory over Napoleon's invading army in 1812, called the Patriotic War. The third link, of course, is the victory over Hitler's army in 1941–45, which is called the Great Patriotic War. From the Russian point of view, it is inconceivable to think of the Battle of Poltava as the Cossack State's war of liberation from Russia. On the contrary, the result of the battle is understood as the consolidation and fulfilment of Bohdan Khmel'nyts'kyi's endeavors and the Pereiaslav Agreement of 1654. As Frank Sysyn has written, Soviet historiography under Stalin “turned Khmelnytskyi into the icon of the ‘Reunification of Ukraine with Russia.’”<sup>17</sup>

It is an undeniable fact that people who identify themselves as Russians have usually understood Ukraine and Belarus historically as being one with Russia and the Ukrainians and Belarusians as naturally belonging with the Russians. In a book containing detailed case studies exploring the development of a national identity within Russian-speaking communities of five former Soviet republics, including Ukraine, published by the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House), British scholar Neil Melvin even wrote of “assump-



tions underlying the Russian imperial belief in a common and united Slavic identity—usually presented as an all-Russian identity.”<sup>18</sup> According to the results of a poll conducted in Russia in 1997, 56 percent of respondents considered the Russians and Ukrainians to be one nation (*narod*).<sup>19</sup> The implication is not that a majority of Russians would not be prepared to recognize Ukraine as a separate state today: the issue is whether a Russian understanding of history has room for a separate Ukrainian history prior to 1991.

The position of Ukraine vis-à-vis Russia may be compared with the pairs Austria-Germany and Sweden-Finland. German history is undeniably multifaceted, but it is a fact that a separate Austrian national identity is the product of political developments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Swedish-Finnish case is more straightforward. Sweden and Finland emerged as a unitary state during the time of Christianization at the end of the first millennium. After the partition of Sweden in 1809 the two halves continued to be similar in terms of religion, laws, and political culture, but each half developed a distinct national identity. The final confirmation of the bifurcation was the establishment of the sovereign state of Finland in 1917.

After 1809, and especially after 1917, Swedish historiography to a large degree omitted or neglected the history of the eastern half of the pre-1809 kingdom—that is, Finland. The latter was tacitly recognized as a separate unit to such a degree that to speak of a certain Swedish amnesia concerning Finland as part of Sweden before 1809 is entirely warranted. Only in 2009, when the bicentennial of the separation was celebrated by the political classes in Sweden and Finland and through contributions by professional historians in both countries, was Swedish society reminded of the Finnish dimension of its history and of Finnish history after 1809.<sup>20</sup>

The Finnish dimension of Swedish historical culture was recognized also in relation to the other Swedish anniversary in 2009, the tercentenary of the Battle of Poltava, because the Swedish Institute chose both Finnish and Swedish historians to represent the “Swedish viewpoint” on the occasion of commemorative seminars held in Kyiv and Poltava (see below).

Concerning the tercentenary celebration of the Battle of Poltava and Ukrainian-Russian relations, the question is much more complex than the bicentenary celebration of the year 1809 and Finnish-Swedish relations. Whereas it is comparatively easy to construct Swedish and Finnish history as basically taking place in distinct territories, with Stockholm unambiguously “Swedish” and Turku and Helsinki equally unambiguously “Finnish,” Russian and Ukrainian histories are intertwined. Both originate in medieval Rus’. During Soviet times Ukrainians and a host of other nationalities were recognized as nations in their own right in the Soviet family of nations, but their respective “national” histories and historical mythologies had to be reconciled with “the Russian grand narrative within a framework of a Russian-dominated concept of

the ‘friendship of peoples.’”<sup>21</sup> Under Stalin, the common Russian and Ukrainian destiny was a salient feature of Soviet historiography. The apotheosis of eternal Russian-Ukrainian friendship and unity reached its climax in the fateful year of 1944, when the German army was being rolled back from occupied Ukraine. The 290th anniversary of the Pereiaslav Agreement was commemorated in a manner that “symbolized the dominant presence of the Russian elder brother” and on the 235th anniversary of the Battle of Poltava “[s]peakers praised the unbreakable union of Russians and Ukrainians.” After Stalin, “Russian patriotic intellectuals” were eager to present a unitary history that did “justice to Russia’s historical greatness.”<sup>22</sup>

Discussing the identification of Ukrainians and Russians with the respective post-Soviet states, a Russian political scientist affiliated with the Center for East European Research in Moscow, Andrei Okara, has called attention to the crucial role of the Poltava victory for the consolidation of Peter I’s project and the establishment of the Russian Empire. Okara notes that for Peter’s empire the Battle of Poltava became the “foundation myth,” and that this empire was consolidated at the cost of potential Ukrainian statehood.<sup>23</sup> This is a very important observation. The gist of the argument is that the victory at Poltava cannot be excised from Russia’s history without causing major damage to the existing narrative of the Petrine state and empire-building project, and all of Russian history before the revolutions in 1917, appear to be of minor consequence.

The official Russian celebration of the tercentenary of the battle had all the characteristics of a national feast, an act of homage to the Great Russian nation. The issue was the conflict with Sweden and the glorious Russian victory. The Ukrainian dimension was simply ignored.<sup>24</sup>

#### SWEDEN AND THE TERCENTENARY OF THE BATTLE OF POLTAVA

Historically, Russia and Sweden were major competitors for military and political hegemony in the Baltic Sea region. From the mid-sixteenth century until 1721, the main object of this contest was the stretch of land between the Gulf of Finland and the Black Sea where the states of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, Poland, and Ukraine, as well as the Russian region of Kaliningrad, are located today. The period from the Livonian War in the mid-sixteenth century to the end of the Great Northern War in 1721 is known as the “Great Power Era” in the Swedish historiography.

The Great Power Era was not held in high esteem in social-democratic Sweden after the Second World War. In the teaching of history, a sense of collective guilt for Sweden having been an imperialist power in the Baltic Sea region doomed the entire era almost to oblivion. It is worth noting, however,

that Swedes who have a clouded view of the past have preserved some notion of Sweden as a Great Power. At the same time that the original Great Power Era was condemned as “historical Swedish imperialism,” identification with “great powerness” probably inspired Swedish political leaders to pose as representatives of a moral Great Power in the twentieth century; for example, with regard to the Vietnam War of the 1960s and 1970s. In the “new” Central and Eastern Europe that emerged after the demise of the Soviet empire, Sweden’s great power history was awakened again and put to diplomatic use. The great power of old experienced a second coming in virtual guise.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Sweden reactivated its ancient tilt toward the east. In order to counteract the Russians’ tendencies of isolation from the Baltic region, the Swedish government inaugurated a policy of symbolic separation of what the Swedes labelled “Northwest Russia” from the rest of the Russian state. This construction of a “Baltic Russia” was clearly inspired by historical memories of the Swedish occupation of Novgorod in the early seventeenth century and the attempt to unite this Russian state with Sweden. The Swedish scholar Per-Arne Bodin argued that the Swedish government’s assistance policy toward the Russian Federation related, “more or less consciously,” to the Swedish occupation of Novgorod almost four hundred years earlier: “Today, exactly as in the seventeenth century, Sweden perceives Novgorod as her sphere of interest.”<sup>25</sup>

In Swedish historiography, society, and historical memory, the Battle of Poltava has traditionally been treated as primarily a Swedish-Russian affair, although Ivan Mazepa and his Cossacks are usually mentioned. After 1991 Ukraine became known in its own right as a country with its own history. In 2009 Sweden officially celebrated the tercentenary of the Battle of Poltava as both a Swedish-Russian and a Swedish-Ukrainian event.

In June 2009 the Russian dimension of the celebration of the Battle of Poltava was the focus of a bilateral Swedish-Russian history seminar held at the Museum of History in Moscow, as well as of a presentation of a joint Swedish-Russian history project at the Army Museum in Stockholm, an anthology entitled *Poltava: Prisoners of War and Cultural Exchange*. Published in Swedish and Russian editions, the book project was financed by the Swedish Academy of Sciences and the investment company Vostok Nafta. The seminar in Moscow was addressed by the Swedish Ambassador to Russia, whose Russian counterpart gave a speech at the seminar in Stockholm.

In their introduction to *Poltava*, the cultural counselor at the Embassy of Sweden in Moscow, political scientist Lena Jonson, and the director of the Russian-Swedish Center at the Moscow-based Russian State University for the Humanities (RGGU), historian Tamara Salycheva-Torstendahl, note that for Sweden the defeat at Poltava in 1709 “inaugurated a process of reconsideration that resulted in the country founding its role as a normal minor European state.”

As concerns Russia, Jonson and Salycheva-Torstendahl remark that the Great Northern War forced Peter to reform his country in order better to resist the Swedish enemy.<sup>26</sup>

In a chapter on the role of the Battle of Poltava in Swedish and Russian historiography, Salycheva's husband, the distinguished Swedish historian Rolf Torstendahl, turns the battle and its aftermath into an exclusive Swedish-Russian affair.<sup>27</sup> He makes no mention of the Hetmanate and Ivan Mazepa or Ukrainian perceptions and Ukrainian historiography, and thus does not discuss the consequences of Peter's victory for Ukraine. The remaining nineteen chapters of *Poltava* are devoted to such topics as Swedish prisoners of war in Russia during and after the Great Northern War, Russian prisoners of war in Sweden during the war, Swedish influence on the administrative and military reforms of Peter I, Russian and Swedish propaganda during the war, and the imprint of the Battle of Poltava on Swedish historical culture. The Cossacks and Ukraine are conspicuous by their absence. This does not imply any conscious neglect. It is testimony to the fact that Ukraine has remained absent from the mainstream Swedish historical imagination.

The Ukrainian dimension of the tercentenary of the Battle of Poltava was the subject of two conferences organized jointly by the Swedish Institute and the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy in October 2008 and June 2009. Both conferences were held in two cities, Kyiv and Poltava—in Poltava they were held under the aegis of the local authorities—and both events highlighted the salience of the Battle of Poltava and of Ivan Mazepa in Ukrainian historical culture. The 2008 conference was explicitly devoted to Ivan Mazepa and his times, with Russian historians taking part along with Swedish and Ukrainian scholars.<sup>28</sup> The 2009 seminar had a broader perspective. In addition to the Russian and Ukrainian dimensions, the European dimension was also acknowledged, in vivid contrast to what was presented at the contemporaneous Swedish-Russian initiatives in Moscow and Stockholm.

The seminar at the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy can best be described as a joint Swedish-Finnish presentation. Sponsored by the Swedish Institute, the seminar was opened by the Swedish and Finnish ambassadors to Ukraine. After their introductory remarks, two Finnish historians, two Swedish historians, and two Swedish linguists presented papers on, respectively, Swedish and Russian contacts on the eve of the Great Northern War, the Swedish-Russian Campaign of 1708–9 through the eyes of the Slovak Lutheran bishop Daniel Krman, the communications system of Charles the XII, the place of the Battle of Poltava in the broader context of the European wars in the early eighteenth century, the geopolitical change in the western borderlands of Russia and Northern Europe as a consequence of the founding of St. Petersburg and the Battle of Poltava, and the Battle of Poltava as a Pyrrhic victory for Russia in the sense that the European orientation that had been fostered in the Cossack state, as epitomized

by Petro Mohyla's academy, did not become part of Russian culture. Rather, for the next two hundred years the authoritarian Muscovite tradition was preserved in spite of successive modernization—Europeanization—projects introduced by Catherine II, Alexander I, and Alexander II.

In addition to the Swedish and Finnish scholars who took part in the conferences in Kyiv and Poltava in 2008 and 2009, some Swedish military historians, archeologists, and independent historians focused on the tercentenary of the Battle of Poltava. For the most part, however, their papers do not focus on Ukrainian history per se, but on King Charles XII and on Ivan Mazepa as Charles's ally.<sup>29</sup> The Swedish Institute published the Finnish and Swedish papers from the seminar on 1709 in a bilingual Swedish-English edition.<sup>30</sup>

Concerning the two strictly separate Swedish commemorations of the tercentenary of the Battle of Poltava (the one in Moscow and Stockholm and the other in Kyiv and Poltava), it must be acknowledged that the Moscow and Stockholm events made the strongest impact on the Swedish public. Thanks to the presentation at the Army Museum in Stockholm and the Swedish edition of the Russian-Swedish book edited by Jonson and Salycheva-Torstendahl, the Russian-Swedish celebration caught the attention of the general public in Sweden. The Ukrainian-Swedish celebration, which took place only in Ukraine, was covered by the Ukrainian press and the local television in Poltava, but not in Sweden.<sup>31</sup> And the Swedish Institute's publication of the Finnish and Swedish lectures at the seminars in Kyiv and Poltava is a bilingual Ukrainian-English work and thus is not aimed at the Swedish public.

#### 1709 AS A BONE OF CONTENTION

The place in historical culture of the 1709 events is truly a bone of contention. Historians and the broad public in Russia, Ukraine, and Sweden are still advancing divergent perspectives of the well-known historical actors in these events: Peter I, Charles XII, and Ivan Mazepa; a hero for one is a villain for the other. The Ukrainian focus in 2009 on Swedish-Ukrainian historical traditions of friendship and cooperation was bound to stir up emotions among contemporary Russians, who hold Peter I in high esteem. Charles XII is regarded as an enemy of the Russian state—although respected as a worthy military adversary—and Ivan Mazepa has always been referred to as a traitor and renegade. Only Mazepa's activities before 1708 are praised in contemporary Russian history. During her presentation at the conference, "Ivan Mazepa i ioho doba," the distinguished Mazepa expert and Russian historian Tatiana Tairova-Iakovleva stated: "The hetman of the two banks of the Dnieper, Ivan Stepanovych Mazepa, cavalier of the Order of the Holy Apostle Andrew the First-Called, contributed greatly to the creation of the Russian Empire. His

relationship with Peter over the course of eighteen years was an example of intimate and mutually beneficial cooperation."<sup>32</sup> This is a rehabilitation of Mazepa as an historical actor in his capacity as a contributor to Peter I's project; yet the Ukrainian hetman's "union" with Charles XII is glossed over.

When the celebration of the Battle of Poltava was placed on the historical cultural agenda in Russia, the Russian Orthodox Church reaffirmed its refusal to revoke the centuries-old excommunication of Ivan Mazepa. Moreover, Russia's ambassador to Ukraine, Viktor Chernomyrdin, reacted negatively to the suggestion contained in point four in the Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine passed on 2 April 2008 to erect "monuments to Ivan Mazepa and Karl XII, and a memorial arch of Reconciliation on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of [the] Poltava Battle."<sup>33</sup> According to the then Ukrainian Ambassador to Sweden, Borys Ponomarenko, whom this author met on the occasion of the ambassador's visit to Lund University in May 2008, ambassador Chernomyrdin declared intemperately that such an act would be as disgraceful to Russians as a statue to Hitler would be.

In 1709 an actual battle took place at Poltava, which involved Tsar Peter's Russia, Charles XII's Sweden, and Ivan Mazepa, the leader of the Ukrainian Cossack proto-state. In 2009 the battle was revived in the historical cultures of contemporary Russia, Sweden, and Ukraine. At stake today is the whole issue of whether Ukraine's future lies with Sweden and the European Union or with Moscow. The Ukrainian commemorations of the Union of Velyki Budychchi and the Battle of Poltava served as proof of Ukraine's historical bonds with Europe. Official Russia did not endorse this aspect of the commemoration. In this context it is worthwhile recalling a statement made by Prime Minister (and former President) Putin in May 2009—that is, on the eve of the tercentenary of the Battle of Poltava: "You certainly should read Anton Denikin's diary; specifically the part about Great and Little Russia, Ukraine. He says nobody should be allowed to interfere between us. This is only Russia's right."<sup>34</sup>

#### NOTES

1. This paper is an elaboration of themes discussed in Kristian Gerner, "Ukraine and Sweden: Constructing a Shared History," in *Ivan Mazepa ta ioho doba: Istoriia, kul'tura, natsional'na pamiat': materialy mizhnarodnoi naukovoï konferentsii*, ed. V'iacheslav Briukhovets'kyi et al. (Kyiv, 2008), 41–49; Kristian Gerner, "Diplomatic Use of History in Swedish–East European Relations," in *Diplomacy in Theory and Practice*, ed. Karin Aggestam and Magnus Jerneck (Malmö, 2009), 299–313; Kristian Gerner, "The Poltava Battle—a Pyrrhic Victory?," in *Poltava 1709/2009: The Poltava Battle—Perceptions over Time*, [ed. Inger Envall] (Stockholm, 2009), 24–28; and Kristian Gerner, "Peremoha shvediv i kozakiv pid Poltavoïu u 1709

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  8. *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, vol. 1 (1984), <http://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/pages/B/A/BaranovychLazar.htm> (accessed 28 May 2009).
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  10. *Ibid.*, 284.
  11. Milan Kundera, "The Tragedy of Central Europe," *New York Review of Books*, 26 April 1984, 33–38. (The article was first published in French under the title "Un Occident kidnappé ou la tragedie de l'Europe centrale," *Le Débat*, no. 17 [1983]. It later appeared in various languages in a number of other European periodicals.)
  12. Kacper Szulecki, "Smashing Concrete with Words: The Central European 'Dissidents,' Their Representations and Discourses" (paper presented at the Changing Europe Summer School IV, *Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe before and after the End of Socialism*, Kyiv, Ukraine, 27–31 July 2009, at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy), 2. See [http://www.changing-europe.org/download/Summer\\_School\\_2009/Szulecki.pdf](http://www.changing-europe.org/download/Summer_School_2009/Szulecki.pdf), (accessed 13 January 2010).
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  22. *Ibid.*, 160.
  23. Andrei N. Okara, “Ukrainskaia diaspora kak sistemoobrazuiushchii faktor rossiiskogo gosudarstva,” *Russkii zhurnal*, 22 November 2001, <http://old.russ.ru:8085/politics/20011122-oka-pr.html> (accessed 18 January 2010).
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  28. *Ivan Mazepa ta ioho doba: istoriia, kul'tura, natsional'na pam'iat'*, an international scholarly conference held at Kyiv and Poltava, 15–17 October 2008.
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  30. [Envall], *Poltava 1709/2009*.
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  32. Tat'iana Tairova-Iakovleva, “Ivan Mazepa i Rossiiskaia imperiia” (paper presented at the international conference, *Ivan Mazepa ta ioho doba*), 26.
  33. Cabinet of the Ministers of Ukraine, *Resolution 02 April 2008 #567-r*.
  34. <http://www.kyivpost.com/news/nation/detail/42032/> (accessed 26 January 2011).