

On Reading Ukrainian Literature in the 1920s and Now

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Literature, as is widely known among those conversant with Ukrainian culture, has always played a significant role in Ukraine's nation-building process. This was especially true in the nineteenth century, but it is no less true of Ukraine's collective resistance effort against Russia's full-scale aggression today. With Ukraine fighting for its freedom and dignity and the international community torn between solidarity and hesitation, Ukrainian writers today often serve as ambassadors for their country in cultural and political venues all around the globe. The interest in Ukrainian literature that international publishers and literary institutions have shown since 2022 is often focused on poetry and prose that have a direct link with the ongoing war. However, both the war-related creativity boom that we are witnessing and the belated discovery of Ukrainian literature by international readerships should not lead to the conclusion that only recent writing from Ukraine is of interest. Ukrainian literature in its historical development has both much to offer readers and many unexplored sides awaiting scholarly work. In this contribution, I will explore two articles that deal with issues pertaining to the circulation of Ukrainian literature among Ukrainian and international readers.

Olena Palko's article "Reading in Ukrainian: The Working Class and Mass Literature in Early Soviet Ukraine" is a great example of a truly scholarly approach to Ukrainian literary culture of the first half of the twentieth century. Palko discusses the reading habits and preferences of workers living in Ukraine in the first years of Soviet rule. In the twenties the young Soviet state decided to strengthen its popularity among the masses and achieve its social goals by promoting local languages and cultures. In

Ukraine this meant overcoming the traditional imperial Russification policies that had condemned Ukrainian to the status of a dialect and prohibited publication and schooling in Ukrainian. Combining both original archival data and available sources from the few publications on the subject, Palko provides compelling insights into the dynamics of the so-called *korenizatsiia*, a term generally translated as nativization or indigenization.

Palko argues that between 1923 and the end of the decade the entire architecture of Soviet Ukrainian literary production became much more attuned to the tastes of mass readers than it had been just a few years earlier. Mass readers were keen to read and ready to do so in the Ukrainian language, but they wanted interesting, accessible books. As Palko notes in her conclusions, “New Soviet readers barely knew of the avant-garde writers. Those who did pick up their books out of curiosity or as demanded by their Ukrainian language tutors could comprehend neither their themes nor the language. Instead, they sought a book which was useful, didactic or instructive.”¹

In this regard, Palko’s work is a contribution to a much-needed rethinking of how scholars generally approach the Ukrainian literary heritage of the 1920s. The leading paradigm goes by the name of “executed Renaissance,” with reference to the killing of hundreds of Ukrainian writers and intellectuals in the thirties and the brutal repressions of the twenties that condemned Ukrainian culture to decades of oppression in the context of a renewed, merciless Russification wave.² Palko’s article

¹ Palko, “Reading in Ukrainian,” 367.

² On {Au: Text missing. On scholarly discussions around Ukrainian culture of the 1920s in the context of Soviet repressions see Hryn. “The Executed Renaissance Paradigm Revisited,” 68–70.

is also a reminder of the importance of studying mass literature and its dissemination to get a fuller picture of literary history, something that scholars too often forget.

While Palko's insights are of great help in better understanding the cultural dynamics of the twenties, Roman Ivashkiv's article "Translating Ukrainian War Poetry into English: Why It Is Relevant" offers a compelling discussion of Ukrainian war poetry of the 2010s and its international dissemination through English-language translations. The object of Ivashkiv's inquiry can best be approached as a reminder that Russia's aggression started in 2014, not in 2022, with the invasion of Crimea and parts of eastern Ukraine. Of course, Russian imperialism against Ukraine has even deeper roots, but we can take 2014 as the beginning of the most recent phase.

Ivashkiv focuses on two anthologies, *Letters from Ukraine* and *Words for War*, published in 2016 and 2017, respectively. Ivashkiv explicitly draws on Jacques Derrida's concept of relevance. Derrida gives a very general definition of what a relevant translation is. Interestingly, a relevant translation is for Derrida one that "honors its debts."³ Ivashkiv explicitly "extend[s] the modifier 'relevant' beyond its 'economic' parameters to apply more broadly to the translation's socio-political significance."⁴ What Ivashkiv is rightly telling his readers is that translations of Ukrainian poetry and literature in general are badly needed. That those he comments on in his article are of quality is guaranteed by the names of their editors and the scrupulous analysis that Ivashkiv has carried out on them.

The article reads like a poetry translation workshop, with Ivashkiv comparing interlinear and published translations, as well as proposing new versions. He reassures

³ Derrida, "What Is a 'Relevant' Translation?," 177.

⁴ Ivashkiv, "Translating Ukrainian War Poetry into English," 38.

his readers that “poetry is translatable,”⁵ which should be seen as an invitation to translate more, although between 2022, when this article was published, and now, many more translations of Ukrainian poetry into English and other languages have reached bookstores around the world.

Palko’s and Ivashkiv’s articles are fine examples of the important and diverse research that has been conducted in the field of Ukrainian literary studies over the last few years. On the other hand, it would be hard to ignore the undeniable dearth of articles on Ukrainian literature and culture published outside of Ukraine. This dearth is the result of those deeply rooted colonial attitudes in academia that have only recently captured the attention of the Slavic studies community. It would be unjust to deny that the situation has started to change, albeit not as fast as one would hope. The further normalization of the presence of Ukraine-related themes in the humanities is a much-needed step forward for justice and global security.

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⁵ Ivashkiv, “Translating Ukrainian War Poetry into English,” 60.

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