

Reading in Ukrainian: the working class and mass literature in early Soviet Ukraine

ABSTRACT

This article examines the working-class audience in Soviet Ukraine and the changes in its reading appetites during the 1920s. Under the Soviet nationalities policy of *korenizatsiia* introduced in 1923, the print-runs of Ukrainian-language literary products increased significantly. Nonetheless, as this article argues, those numerous publications often did not reach Ukrainian readers and if they did, they could hardly satisfy the interest appetites of an ever-growing Ukrainian audience. As the book reviews collected in the second half of the 1920s showed, the worker readers were interested in a certain type of literature – entertaining, easy to comprehend, dealing with contemporary issues and characters – that was not yet available in Ukrainian. Nevertheless, once that literature began to emerge in the late 1920s, the interest in contemporary books in Ukrainian increased. By examining every aspect of reading in Ukrainian – production, dissemination and consumption of the printed word – this article highlights the decisive role of Soviet readership in determining future official Soviet Ukrainian literature. The case of Soviet Ukraine emphasises regional specifics and introduces an important language component to the Bolshevik reading revolution of the 1920s-early 1930s, largely ignored in the scholarship.

KEYWORDS: reading revolution, reading appetites, libraries, Soviet Union, the Ukrainian language

Boris Veide, an ethnic Latvian from a village near industrial Melitopol' in southern Ukraine was one of the builders of the Dnieper Hydroelectric Station, the major industrial achievement of the Soviet first Five-Year Plan. In Zaporizhzhia, Veide kept a diary providing a detailed account of his everyday life during the formative Soviet decades.¹ Interestingly, his diary *Zapiski Stroitel'ia* (Notes of a Builder) contains abundant references to literature. As recorded, Veide 'read avidly' and spent all his free time with books, 'his true friends'.² At times, he was carried away by 'the world of adventure', captivated by popular fiction, especially the French novelist Pierre Benoit. Nevertheless, soon he was 'fed up with this colonial and bourgeois romanticism and returned to *Moi Universitet* by [Maxim] Gorky, and *Tsement* by [Feodor] Gladkov.' As he observed, 'these books provided an answer to my doubts about a chosen path; I saw – I have made a right choice'.³

Workers like Veide benefited most from the Bolshevik cultural revolution. Undoubtedly, the Soviet nationality policy of *korenizatsiia*, introduced Union-wide in 1923, played a key role in the early Bolshevik cultural projects. *Korenizatsiia*, among other goals, aimed to tackle the imperial legacy of urban Russification in the border republics through promotion of local languages, cultures and literature, Ukrainian in this case. Yet, among the abundant references to contemporary literature, Veide's *Zapiski* failed to mention a single book in Ukrainian or by a Ukrainian author. Veide's reading appetites — those of an average worker in an everyday industrial centre in Soviet Ukraine — suggest how difficult it was to enforce linguistic Ukrainization (meaning, de-Russification) in this multi-linguistic region. By the decade's end, however, many more workers in Soviet Ukraine would choose a contemporary Ukrainian book for their pastime, as this article will show.

This shift in readers' preferences resulted from two processes that coincided in Soviet Ukraine. As elsewhere in the Soviet Union, in the 1920s, Ukraine went through accelerated

socio-cultural modernisation, which resulted in the democratisation of print culture and the creation of a mass readership. The Bolshevik ‘reading revolution’ eventually led to the hegemony of ‘middle-brow’ tastes in Soviet Union, as Evgeny Dobrenko and Stephen Lovell have convincingly shown.⁴ As well as social modernisation, Soviet border republics underwent rapid development in terms of national languages and cultures as a spin-off of the *korenizatsiia* campaign. *Korenizatsiia* led to widespread literacy in native languages and, eventually, to the increased interest in literary products in those languages.

In conventional narratives, the generation of writers working in Ukraine during the twenties has become known as the ‘executed renaissance’ (*rozstriliane vidrodzhennia*).⁵ This paradigm, introduced by the survivors of the Stalin purges who ended up emigrating after the Second World War, rests on the view that this decade was marked by a unique period of cultural flowering violently interrupted by Stalin’s terror. Without downplaying the key role of the ‘executed’ avant-garde generation in developing Ukrainian culture, this article focuses on the origins of another important current of the 1920s: mass Soviet literature in the Ukrainian language. While Ukrainian avant-garde writers and cultural managers theorised the future of Ukrainian literature,⁶ the authorities and readers alike anticipated that Soviet writers would narrow the gap between the intelligentsia and the people and create literature for the masses. By examining every aspect of reading in Ukrainian – production, dissemination and consumption of the printed word – this article highlights the limitations of Ukrainian literary *korenizatsiia* and examines the decisive role of Soviet readership in determining future official Soviet Ukrainian literature. Those writers who embraced the literary preferences of the mass public and complied with the official view on Soviet literature eventually contributed to the creation of Soviet-Ukrainian literature, which, using Stalin’s famous formula, was Soviet in content and Ukrainian in form.

This examination of the working-class audience and its reading appetites in Ukraine builds upon existing scholarship on print culture during the 1920s. The case of Soviet Ukraine highlights regional specificities and introduces an important language component to the Bolshevik reading revolution of the 1920s-early 1930s, largely ignored by Dobrenko and Lovell. This article is also informed by seminal works on the implementation of the *Ukrainizatsiia* policy in Ukraine. While George Liber's important study of the 1920s nationalities policy shows the remarkable success of Ukrainian-language book publication by considering the print-runs,⁷ this article argues that those numerous publications often did not reach Ukrainian readers and if they did, they could hardly satisfy the interests and appetites of an ever-growing Ukrainian audience. Instead, reading in Ukrainian became a useful tool to help Russian-speakers and non-Ukrainians in Ukraine's urban spaces identify themselves with Ukrainian culture, and the Ukrainian Soviet government in general. Similarly, this article engages with the recent findings of Myroslav Shkandrij.⁸ Popular tastes in Ukraine were not necessarily conservative; instead, during the 1920s there was increased demand for a certain type of literature – entertaining, easy to comprehend, and dealing with contemporary issues and characters – that was widely available in Russian. These reading preferences could not be satisfied by existing Ukrainian reading materials. Once that literature began to emerge in the late 1920s, the interest in contemporary books in Ukrainian increased.

Debating the language question

The entire Bolshevik doctrine depended on the party's ability to mobilise the working masses and make them willing contributors to the process of socialist building. In the Ukrainian context, where the working class was scant, this meant reaching out to the Ukrainian-speaking peasantry, the main source of the future workforce. To facilitate

uninterrupted rural-to-urban migration, it was argued that the party, in the words of a high party official Volodymyr Zatons'kyi, should make cities 'less hostile and foreign (*chuzhoi*) to these new-comers by creating an environment where the peasant gets used to seeing Ukrainian signs, announcements, and posters.'⁹ Emphasis on Ukrainian-speaking peasants, however, presented Bolshevik ideologists with a dilemma, since enforcing the use of Ukrainian in multi-national yet predominantly Russian-speaking industrial centres could result in the mass dissatisfaction of non-Ukrainian workers.¹⁰ In the end, *korenizatsiia* was not about Ukrainians only, and the party committed itself to promoting the native languages and cultures of all national minorities across the Soviet Union.¹¹

The Russians were a separate case, however. On the one hand, as 'the former great-power nationality', they were not subject to the party's affirmative actions.¹² Neither could the Russian-speakers in Ukraine be Ukrainianised. As Stalin explained in his letter from 26 April 1926 to Lazar Kaganovich, the newly appointed KP(b)U First Secretary, imposing Ukrainization 'from above' on those Russian-speaking workers in Ukraine 'contradict[ed] the principle of the free development of nationalities [...] and [was] equal to national oppression'.¹³ He predicted that forced Ukrainization could provoke 'an outbreak of anti-Ukrainian chauvinism among the non-Ukrainian proletariat' as well as 'a struggle for the alienation of Ukrainian culture from the All-Soviet culture, a struggle against "Moscow"', against Russians, against the Russian culture and its greatest achievement, Leninism, altogether'.¹⁴

Mykola Skrypnyk, the Commissar of Education since 1927, maintained Stalin's view on the gradual Ukrainization of Ukraine's working class. Yet his concern was how to get workers to identify themselves with Ukrainian culture and language. Since compulsion could not be used in respect of workers (the Ukrainian language was obligatory only for government employees), the linguistic Ukrainization of workers could only be achieved by

creating a total Ukrainian urban environment: a favourable setting, in which working masses would either convert or become inclined towards the Ukrainian language and new proletarian culture.¹⁵ This was to be accomplished by, firstly, increasing the prestige of the Ukrainian language and culture, and, secondly, bringing Ukrainian culture directly to the workers, which included evening language and country studies courses, public lectures in Ukrainian, the distribution of books and periodicals, and the organisation of reading circles, concerts, theatre performances and film shows.

The implementation of *Ukrainizatsiia* was at its heart paradoxical, however. Maximum efforts were made in order to popularise the Ukrainian language, literature and culture; millions of workers went through evening language courses at the time when standard Ukrainian language did not yet exist. Matthew Pauly has convincingly shown how inherently contradictory the implementation of *Ukrainizatsiia* was across Ukraine, when teachers and educators, despite having no command of the language, were expected to ‘break the tongue’ of their students.¹⁶ The first official and universal codification of Ukrainian was adopted in 1929, only to be revisited again in 1933.¹⁷

The role of the printed word was decisive in constructing and transmitting Ukrainian identity through language. Nonetheless, many of those ascribed as Ukrainians did not consider the vernaculars they spoke in everyday life as the Ukrainian language. For instance, the official reports from the Donbas area showed that 15% of workers of Ukrainian origin spoke Ukrainian at home. Yet they spoke ‘people’s [*narodnyi*] Ukrainian and did not understand literary [*literaturnyi*] Ukrainian’.¹⁸ In urban industrial centres a mixture of Ukrainian and Russian, or *surzhyk*, was commonly in use. Workers in Soviet Ukraine did not consider their language to be the same as in Western Ukraine, often complaining that they could not understand books written ‘*po-galyts’ki*’ (in the Galician language).¹⁹ Another report from the Ukrainian south-east had shown that the miners in

Luhansk considered themselves as *khokhly* (a pejorative exonym to denominate Ukrainians, which dates back to the seventeenth century), and the language they spoke as ‘*khokhliats'ka*’ and were surprised to learn that ‘*khokhol*’ meant Ukrainian.²⁰ Needless to say, the Russian spoken in Ukraine was also not the Russian of Moscow.

Debating the question of mass literature

While unanimous on the language issue, party officials and writers in Soviet Ukraine were split over the question of mass literature. During the so-called Literary Discussion of 1925-28, as estimated by the contemporary Ukrainian literary critics Oleksandr (Abram) Leites and Mykola Iashek, around 600 contributions on the topics of proletarian art, the social role of reading and the ‘ideal’ reader appeared in the Soviet press.²¹ The most heated debates concerned the question of a mass audience, however. The need to meet the expectations of the new reading public was widely advocated by the members of mass literary movements established in Ukraine, in line with the party vision of proletarian culture. In 1921, an All-Ukrainian Peasant Writers’ Union *Pluh* (Plough) was established by Serhii Pylypenko, the editor-in-chief of the Kharkiv newspaper *Sil'ski Visti* (Rural News); and in 1923, the Association of the Proletarian Writers *Hart* (Tempering) was founded by Vasyl' Ellan-Blakytnyi, the editor-in-chief of the Kharkiv-based governmental newspaper *Visti VUTsVK*. These organisations promoted the idea of mass literature, which according to Pylypenko, included orientation towards a mass readership; a simple and accessible style and language; common topics; priority of content over form; as well as frequent engagement with readers. In general, literature was regarded as a mass movement, composed of ‘literary forces – from the highest in their quality and talent to the lowest, to *robsil'kory* [worker and peasant correspondents] and wall newspapers’ contributors.’²²

The approach of regarding ‘a sign outside the State Publishing House, the aphorism on a fence, and the verse on the toilet wall’ (as mocked by Mykola Khvyl’ovyi) as fine literature was opposed by the ‘Olympians’ – a nick-name given to those Ukrainian writers who devoted themselves to high culture.²³ Championed by the *Hart* members Khvyl’ovyi, Oles’ Dosvitnii and Mykhailo Ialovyi, the followers of this current argued that art could not become a substitute for general enlightenment. They defended the idea that literature should not be diminished to suit middle-brow tastes but, on the contrary, should set up certain standards to encourage readers to raise their preferences. Khvyl’ovyi warned against the devaluation of artistic activity and meeting the tastes of a mass audience. Instead, he defended the idea of a hierarchy, which should be based not on class, but on level of education and culture. He believed in ‘the new art [that] is being created by workers and peasants. On condition, however, that they will be intellectually developed and talented, people of genius.’²⁴ These three writers formed the core of a new literary organisation, the Free Academy of Proletarian Literature – *Vil’na Akademiia Proletars’koi Literatry*, (VAPLITE) – during the years 1925-1928. VAPLITE defended an elitist approach to art, endorsing literature for intelligent readers, and not for semi-educated peasants and newly promoted workers. The slogan ‘let’s go for quality’ was the main criteria for creative writing produced within the Free Academy.²⁵

Throughout the 1920s, two visions of Soviet literature – high-brow on the one hand, and mass literature on the other – competed for state endorsement, access to publishing houses and distribution networks and, most importantly, readers. VAPLITE became the most important literary phenomenon of the 1920s. In fact, the majority of the ‘executed renaissance’ generation were associated with VAPLITE. Nevertheless, their adherence to high culture barely found support amongst Soviet officials, for whom literature was a tool to transform the values of Soviet people. Most importantly, the literary outputs of the

VAPLITE writers did not correspond to the expectations of Soviet readers, as this article intends to show.

Institutionalisation of reading

Party officials and cultural managers regarded reading as the key instrument in achieving proletarian Ukrainization. A book in Ukrainian could reach mass readers and make them interested in Ukrainian culture without coercing those Russian-speakers to learn the language. Consequently, every aspect of reading was quickly brought under strict state control. Firstly, despite declared non-interference in the literary sphere – as defined by the resolution of the Politburo of the TsK KP(b)U ‘Concerning Ukrainian Literary Groupings’ issued on 10 May 1925 and the All-Union resolution ‘On Party Policy in the Sphere of Literature’ from 1 July 1925 -- the party closely supervised the activity of existing literary groups and frequently intervened when the preferred alignment of literary forces was under threat.²⁶ Second, by the 1930s, all independent operators on the book market were liquidated providing the state with the monopoly on publishing.²⁷ Most importantly, the party ensured its control over book distribution. As Dobrenko has explained, huge print-runs of state publishing houses were chiefly aimed for libraries and to a much lesser extent the market.²⁸ In Soviet Ukraine, as throughout the Union, libraries were unified within a centralised network managed by the Central Bureau of Political and Educational Work (*Tsentral'nyi Kabinet Politprosvitroboty – Golovpolitprosvit*) of the Soviet Ukraine’s Commissariat for Education (*Narkomos*).

The shaping of the new Soviet reader was put at the centre of library work; while the methods of nurturing readers became the object of Soviet library science. In Soviet Ukraine, a separate research institute - the Ukrainian Scholarly Institute of Book Studies – *Ukrains'kyi Naukovyi Instytut Knyhoznavstva, (UNIK)* – was established in Kyiv in 1922

as part of the National Book Chamber of Ukraine (*Knyzhkova Palata Ukrainy*). Like all-Soviet research centres, this Institute had scholarly interest in understanding the demands of common readers. Yet, unlike in Russia, this task was coupled with the need to secure literary Ukrainization: namely to provide recommendations on how to bring Ukrainian authors closer to their readers. While in Russia printing materials were seen key in internalising Soviet values, in Soviet Ukraine literary products were also meant to assist Russified workers' re-identification with Ukrainian culture. Throughout its existence, UNIK occupied an intermediary role between readers, writers and publishers. The institute worked closely with the republican libraries to record readers' preferences, define mass demand, and prepare instruction manuals on how to ensure the production and dissemination of books in Ukrainian that would correspond to the share of ethnic Ukrainians in the republic and to their literary preferences.

In January-April 1928, the UNIK's special Department of Reading and Readership Studies (*Kabinet Vyvchennia Knyhy i Chytacha*) undertook a major empirical sociological study of the republic's libraries.²⁹ By studying library holdings and the literary preferences of Ukrainian readers (*ukrains'kyi chytach*), UNIK aimed to devise a universal methodology for libraries on how to work with their readers and to provide recommendations to publishing houses in Soviet Ukraine on how to cater for readers' tastes.³⁰ The study consisted of three constitutive parts. The first part was designed to elicit statistical information about the republican libraries, their holdings, and the qualifications of librarians to evaluate the progress that had taken place to date in Ukrainianizing the library. The final report was based on the information received from 22 *okruha* (administrative units) libraries with broad all-republican representation.

The second part of the study concerned reading preferences of the library borrowers. Standardised survey forms (*kartka popytu*, a request form) were sent out to all participating

libraries, designed firstly to gather statistical information on the readers (age, sex, occupation, party membership, education) and, second, to record readers' requests and their motivations for choosing a book verbatim (*doslivnyi zapys popytu*).³¹ To collect the data on readership, UNIK relied on 45 librarians from 28 *okruhy*. Those were the so-called *bibkory* (*bibliotechni korespondenty* or library correspondents), who had volunteered to assist with the study.³² For the benefit of the study, readers were unaware of their participation; and librarians were discouraged from getting involved in the process of choosing a book.³³ During six sample days, more than 7,000 anonymised survey forms were collected, with 6,285 forms analysed.³⁴ The last part of the study aimed to examine the attitudes of readers towards fiction. When returning a book to the library, readers were asked to fill in a short, anonymised form, in which they were encouraged to share their general impressions of the book and to specify what they liked or disliked about it. By mid-1929, more than 500 book reviews were returned to UNIK.³⁵

Due to the limited role of librarians in defining readers' requests and collecting the qualitative data, the 1928/29 library survey provides an excellent case study for examining the reading habits of mass readership in Soviet Ukraine.³⁶ This article will mainly focus on working-class readers' preferences with regards to Ukrainian literature.

Production of books in Ukrainian

Book publishing in Ukrainian was prioritised by the 1923 decree on 'On Measures for Guaranteeing the Equality of Languages and on the Equal Development of the Ukrainian Language', according to which the Soviet government assumed responsibility to ensure 'a place for the Ukrainian language corresponding to the numerical superiority of the Ukrainian people on the territory of the Ukrainian SSR.'³⁷ The publishing system in Soviet Ukraine was regulated by Narkomos. Under its auspices, an All-Ukrainian Publishing

House (*Vsevydav*) was established in May 1919, later renamed as the State Publishing House of Ukraine (*Derzhavne Vydavnytstvo Ukrainy*, DVU or *Derzhvydav*). *Derzhvydav*, a dominant publisher on the book market, became the main driver of the production of books in Ukrainian, as prescribed by the *Ukrainizatsiia* policy.³⁸ Already in April 1925, its chief Pylypenko reported that DVU production was 85% Ukrainianized. This was achieved due to the mass production of ‘popular thin books in Ukrainian’, as Pylypenko explained.³⁹ Thereafter, book production in Ukrainian increased steadily, eventually reaching 70% of titles and 77% of copies by 1929.⁴⁰

Table 1: Book production in Soviet Ukraine in Ukrainian and Russian.

Year	Language	Number of titles	Number of copies	Percent of titles	Percent of copies
1923	Ukrainian	419	2,650,795	16.3	25.3
	Russian	2,069	6,350,789	80.5	60.8
1925	Ukrainian	1,722	15,004,190	43.6	50.7
	Russian	2,110	13,349,288	53.4	45.1
1926	Ukrainian	1,719	14,089,441	50.1	60.6
	Russian	1,539	8,473,791	44.8	36.5
1927	Ukrainian	2,146	12,577,085	55.9	58.7
	Russian	1,575	8,393,833	41	39.2
1928	Ukrainian	2,679	21,361,908	60.9	60.2
	Russian	1,456	9,912,462	33.1	27.9

Source: George Liber, “Language, Literacy, and Book Publishing in the Ukrainian SSR, 1923-1928,” *Slavic Review* 41, 4 (1982): 680-81.

Historian George Liber has tallied the data for 1923-1928 (see Table 1) which, if taken at face value, provides an optimistic view. The increase in the number of literary products in Ukrainian created a certain habit of seeing and reading Ukrainian literature and

a genuine interest in Ukrainian books. As one worker from Donbas mentioned to a *Visti* reporter: ‘Often when we see a Ukrainian book appear in the factory, a mass of these [Russified] workers gravitate to the book and pass it around from hand to hand’.⁴¹ However, a ‘division of labour’ arose regarding the types of books published in Russian and Ukrainian. Ukrainian-language publications dominated among teaching and agitational material: as for instance in 1924/25, when over 70% of Ukrainian publications were textbooks.⁴² There was a significant increase in the publishing of Ukrainian fiction too, but the preference was for the classics. In 1927, for instance, the print-runs for pre-revolutionary Ukrainian authors were over three times those for contemporary Soviet Ukrainian authors.⁴³ Russian-language publications continued to dominate the field of scholarly, scientific, and documentary publication (see Table 2).⁴⁴

Table 2: Types of books produced in Ukrainian and Russian in Soviet Ukraine in 1926.

Genre	Number of Titles (Ukrainian)	Number of Copies (Ukrainian)	Number of Titles (Russian)	Number of Copies (Russian)
Popular Literature	402	2,580,600	458	3,923,160
Belles-lettres	267	1,370,450	126	766,650
Children’s Literature	80	468,500	49	588,500
Teaching Materials	222	7,409,000	78	992,361
Methodological Literature	178	738,381	128	521,300
Scholarly works	236	460,450	285	711,225
Official Documents	245	355,110	283	461,315
Other publications	89	706,950	132	509,280

Source: *Litopys Ukrains'koho Druku* (Kharkiv, 1926).

The data on book publication does not fully reflect the situation of Ukraine's book market though, since all sorts of books published in Russia were also sold and distributed in the territory of Soviet Ukraine. Most importantly, book production in Ukrainian does not suggest how many of those books actually reached their audience (through book trade and library distribution), how popular Ukrainian literature was at the time, and whether there was a demand for it.

Dissemination of Ukrainian books

As mentioned above, the distribution of books in the Soviet Union was organised primarily through libraries, and working-class readers gained access to books at workplaces through trade-union libraries. Hence, libraries and librarians were recognised as key in achieving the goals of proletarian Ukrainizatsiia.⁴⁵ However, Ukraine's libraries needed to be Ukrainianized first, since library holdings available in Ukrainian corresponded neither to the number of ethnic Ukrainians in the republic nor to the number of library readers who self-reported as Ukrainian. According to the 1926 Soviet census, there were over 23 million ethnic Ukrainians in the republic (80% of total population); approximately seven million individuals of all nationalities were literate in Ukrainian;⁴⁶ and more than a third of all library readers (38.5%) were recorded as Ukrainians.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the 1928 library survey showed that only 9% of library holdings were in Ukrainian against 83% in Russian (original-language and in translation).⁴⁸ As the survey report revealed (see Table 3), for every 100 copies of books in Russian, there were 11 books in Ukrainian, five in Yiddish, one in Polish and three in other languages.⁴⁹ The failure of Ukrainianizing Ukraine's libraries was obvious.

Table 3: Number of copies of books in Ukraine's libraries by language of publication (results from 22 libraries) January-April 1928.

Language	Literature for Adults	Literature for Children	Together
Ukrainian	42,116	1,420	43,586
Russian	386,795	18,653	405,448
Polish	4,279	43	4,322
Yiddish*	17,989	523	18,512
German, English, French and other Languages	13,487	222	13,709
Total	464,716	20,861	485,577

**Ievreis'ka* in the document.

Source: Instytut Rukopysu, F. 47, od. zb. 210, 291

The all-Ukrainian survey of library readers highlighted a link between interest in and demands for Ukrainian publications, and readers' social/class origin (see Table 4). The largest number of requests for Ukrainian fiction was recorded among students, whose interest was often shaped by the school curriculum. In addition, by the end of the 1920s, many more students were ethnic Ukrainians of proletarian and peasant origin, who entered post-secondary education as a part of *vysuvanstvo* (*vydvizheniie*, in Russian) campaign.⁵⁰ The preference for Ukrainian books among government employees can be attributed to compulsory language courses as part of the Ukrainizatsiia programs. As the statistics suggest, women in all categories requested Ukrainian books more frequently than men. This can be explained by the fact that many women were unskilled and only recently moved to cities, where they eagerly joined the Ukrainizatsiia courses, seen as having the potential to improve their employment opportunities.⁵¹

Table 4: Requests for books in Ukrainian among the readers of Kyiv Libraries of Political Education according to social status and sex, 1926/27.

	Workers	Government employees	Students	Others	Working and Komsomol youth	Other youth
Number						
Male	134	61	71	66	59	86
Female	61	46	61	150	34	90
Percentage						
Male	12.92	14.35	17.94	11.15	11.73	13.93
Female	20.74	18.03	23.64	15.15	22.97	15.22

Source: N. Fridieva, 'Chytach Kyivs'kykh Politosvitnikh Bibliotek v 1926/27 r.', in

Biblioteka i Chytach na Ukraini, (Kyiv; Kharkiv, 1930), 181.

At the same time, low levels of interest in Ukrainian literary outputs were reported among party activists. Despite the fact that by 1929 Ukrainians constituted 61.3% of the Komsomol membership, only 10% of the KP(b)U and Komsomol members requested a book in Ukrainian: in contrast to 20% of requests that were for foreign books in translation and 23% for Russian original-language literature.⁵² According to one commentator, the indifference of party activists was ‘shameful’, since it proved that ‘communists and *komsomol'tsi* were not only not the champions [...] in mastering the Ukrainian cultural values, but they significantly lag behind’.⁵³

The lowest interest in Ukrainian fiction, however, was recorded among workers. The enquiry into the reading habits of worker-readers in Kyiv for 1926/27 – with a total of 4,247 reader requests analysed – showed that only 11% of male and 8% of female workers

requested a book in Ukrainian.⁵⁴ It becomes obvious that despite reinforced *Ukrainizatsiia*, workers continuously resisted non-obligatory *Ukrainizatsiia*-related cultural and linguistic programs, and Ukrainizers failed to engage the working class with Ukrainian culture.⁵⁵ As a contemporary Kharkiv reporter suggested, the workers' dislike of Ukrainian literature was due to their little awareness of the *Ukrainizatsiia* policies and the indifference of party activists in promoting *Ukrainizatsiia* among workers, as well as to general neglect of the worker readers' literary interests.⁵⁶

UNIK scholars unanimously linked the low interest in Ukrainian literature to librarians' lack of engagement in directing readers' preferences.⁵⁷ Indeed, Soviet librarians were tasked to guide readers, to recommend to them 'the best and most necessary books, furthering the cause of building socialism';⁵⁸ and in Ukraine they were obliged to 'create interest for the Ukrainian book'.⁵⁹ As the survey showed, working-class readers often had no specified request when they came to the libraries, asking for 'something interesting' or 'some novel'.⁶⁰ Librarians, who had dealt 'incorrectly' with such unspecified requests and offered foreign fiction or Russian contemporaries in response, were reproached for missing the opportunity to introduce workers to Ukrainian literature as instructed by Narkomos. By contrast, in those libraries where librarians actively promoted Ukrainian books in response to unspecified readers' requests, an increase in the issues of books in Ukrainian (original-language and translations) as well as in their variety was observed.⁶¹

Liber has argued that the linguistic transformation of book publishing in Ukraine during the 1920s was the most important indicator of the *Ukrainizatsiia* success. However, as seen from these library surveys, the large numbers of books produced under *Ukrainizatsiia* did not reach their readers. Readers in general were not interested in the Ukrainian letters and library holdings did not meet the needs of those who were interested. Overall, as the study showed, only 66% of readers' requests for Ukrainian literature in

public libraries were satisfied, against 70% of those for original Russian and 73% for foreign literature.⁶² In addition, there was a clear discrepancy between books which could be of interest and use for readers and those which were available on the bookshelves. Many regional reports mentioned that libraries held books in Ukrainian purchased in the period 1920-1923 that 'nobody uses'.⁶³ Hence, the statistics on book publishing hardly help us assess the literary Ukrainizatsiia. Instead, a close examination of library borrowings can provide more insight into the language preferences of the mass reading public, their motivations for reading in Ukrainian, and their expectations for the emerging Soviet Ukrainian literature.

Book consumption: favourite authors

The 1928 library survey confirmed that Ukraine's mass readers favoured entertaining literature and *belles-lettres*, since around 60% of total readers' requests were for artistic literature. Out of 3,711 total requests for fictional literature, 26% were for foreign, 25% for Russian, and 9% for Ukrainian fiction.⁶⁴ The 'author repertoire' in these three categories was as follows: 106 foreign, 120 Russian and 40 Ukrainian authors were requested during the period of study.

Ukrainian readers expressed strong interest in world literature. Among foreign authors, the top positions were occupied by the American writers of adventure stories Jack London and James Curwood, as well as the writer of social novels Upton Sinclair. They were followed by the American author of novels about the Native American way of life: James Fenimore Cooper and the Irish-American author Thomas Mayne Reid. The top list also included French realist novelists Guy de Maupassant, Victor Margueritte, Victor Hugo, and Claude Farrère; German romantic author Bernhard Kellermann; Italian feuilletonist Guido da Verona; Polish realist writer Stefan Żeromski; Spanish novelist

Vicente Blasco Ibáñez; English science fiction author H. G. Wells and the Irish author of the Soviet bestseller 'The Gadfly', Ethel Lilian Voynich.

It is important to note that at the time of the 1928 library survey, most translations were in Russian. Gradually, translations into Ukrainian started to appear in the 1920s. The Ukrainizers were well-aware of the need for Ukrainian translations. A literary critic Volodymyr Sukhno-Khomenko urged for world literature in Ukrainian translations. Only then, he noted, Ukraine would have its 'Edisons, Einsteins, and Tolstois'.⁶⁵ Unfortunately, this encouragement could hardly match the ambitious undertaking of their Russian fellows – a translation project *Vsemirnaia Literatura* (World Literature) administered by Gorky, amounting to some 120 titles of foreign classics for mass readers published between 1918 and 1924.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, many professional translators and writers engaged in translating world classics into Ukrainian. In 1925, an illustrated monthly magazine *Vsesvit* (The Universe), the only periodical in Soviet Ukraine dedicated to featuring foreign literature in Ukrainian translation, was founded by Ellan-Blakytnyi, Khvyl'ovyi and Oleksandr Dovzhenko. *Vsesvit's* policy thereafter was to feature only those translations which had not yet appeared in Russian. In the years 1927-1930 the magazine published translations of French communists Henri Barbusse, Jules Vallès, and Raymond-Louis Lefebvre; German expressionist writer Leonhard Frank; and Hungarian revolutionary Kahána Mózes.

By the early 1930s, a few important translation projects were completed, such as a full collection of works by London (published in 1927-30), a 10-volume series of de Maupassant, a 27-volume series of French novelist Émile Zola (1929-32), eight volumes of works by the French novelist and Nobel Prize Winner Anatole France, a volume of selected works by the French novelist Honoré de Balzac (1934), Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and *Salammbô*, a volume by Denis Diderot (1933), odd volumes by

playwright Molière, philosopher Voltaire, romanticist Prosper Mérimé, and adventure stories by youth writer Jules Verne. Nonetheless, these few successful translation projects could hardly influence the overall trend in book consumption. Moreover, the choice of works for translation was rarely market-defined; instead it reflected a translator's own preference, as in case of Valer'ian Pidmohyl'nyi – by far the craftiest translator from French. Pidmohyl'nyi, was a fellow-traveller modernist writer who, after being harshly criticised for his own 'anti-proletarian' prose in the late-1920s, switched to translations and prepared most of the multi-volume series of French classics.⁶⁷ Moreover, limited funds were available to support the translation projects, and the print-runs of Ukrainian translations were significantly lower than of original-language literature.⁶⁸

At the same time, Ukraine's readers favoured Russian fiction, with a clear preference for Russian contemporary writers over pre-revolutionary ones. To a certain extent, the survey results contradict Shkandrij's statement that 'readers in both languages preferred nineteenth-century authors and entertaining literature to contemporary writers and what the Communist Party authorities considered politically correct subject matter'.⁶⁹ Certainly, Russian classics featured prominently among the readers' requests, with Feodor Dostoevsky, Aleksandr Pushkin, Lev Tolstoy, Ivan Turgenev, Aleksandr Kuprin, Nikolai Gogol, Ivan Goncharov and Konstantin Staniukovich among the most sought after authors. Nevertheless, during the library study, worker-readers asked for those pre-revolutionary authors only 87 times out of 465 total requests for Russian fiction.⁷⁰ Instead, more than 80% of requests were for contemporary writers. The top-listed authors were Gorky, a founder of socialist realist literary method, and Aleksandr Serafimovich, whose short stories described hardships of peasant life under the tsar. Among other widely known authors were Sergey Malashkin with his novel about Komsomol youth, *Luna* [The Moon], young doctor-writer Vikentii Veresaev, socialist realist novelist Gladkov, proletarian-

Siberian writer Lidia Seifullina, author of science fiction and historical novels Aleksei Tolstoy, creator of stories of nautical theme Aleksei Novikov-Priboi, novelist and a war correspondent Ilya Ehrenburg, author of novels about the civil war Dmitrii Furmanov, and a satirist Mikhail Zoshchenko. The remaining 226 requests were for contemporaries mentioned only once.⁷¹

The requests for Ukrainian artistic literature present a very different pattern, when compared to that of Russian fiction. During the period under study, there were 334 total requests for Ukrainian literature, out of which only 38, or 11.4%, were for Ukrainian contemporary writers (for Russian this proportion was 81.3%).⁷² If limited only to working-class readers, the requests were even less diverse: the names of only seven contemporaries were mentioned out of 111 requests for 25 writers in total, or 6.3%.⁷³ There was a clear preference for Ukrainian pre-revolutionary classics (see Table 5). Among the top-listed authors were Panas Myrnyi, Marko Vovchok, Ivan Nechui-Levyts'kyi, and Arkhyp Teslenko, who wrote novels and short stories about peasant life before the revolution; Ivan Kotliarevs'kyi, whose parody of Virgil's *Aeneid* was the first literary text written in the popular Ukrainian vernacular; the author of historical novels Panteleimon Kulish; satirists Hryhorii Kvitka-Osnov'ianenko and Stepan Rudans'kyi; playwright Mykhailo Staryts'kyi; modernist Mykhailo Kotsiubyns'kyi and Ivan Franko. Poetry enjoyed great readership in Ukraine, with Taras Shevchenko, Franko, and Lesia Ukrainka among the most requested authors.

Table 5: Number of Requests for Ukrainian Writers based on the Survey of Ukraine's Libraries (six-day sample from 22 libraries in January-April 1928).

Volodymyr Vynnychenko	78	Volodymyr Sosiura	3
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Ivan Franko	26	Mykhailo Staryts'kyi	3
Mykhailo Kotsiubyns'kyi	25	Dmytro Buz'ko	2
Taras Shevchenko	23	Oleksii Kundzich	2
Ivan Nechui-Levyts'kyi	19	Stepan Rudans'kyi	2
Borys Hrinchenko	18	Arkhyp Teslenko	2
Panas Myrnyi	16	Hanna Barvinok	1
Marko Vovchok	14	Sava Bozhko	1
Ol'ga Kobylans'ka	12	Tymofii Borduliak	1
Lesia Ukrainka	12	V. Vil'shanets'ka	1
Panteleimon Kulish	10	Leonid Hlibov	1
Mykola Khvylovyi	7	Mykhailo Ivchenko	1
Stepan Vasyl'chenko	5	Myroslav Irchan	1
Ostap Vyshnia	5	Pavlo Tychyna	1
Oleksandr Kopylenko	5	Geo Shkurupii	1
Ivan Kotliarevs'kyi	5	Arkadii Liubchenko	1
Andrii Holovko	4	Oleksa Storozhenko	1
Hryhorii Kvitka-Osnov'ianenko	4	Oleksandr Oles'	1

Source: Kost' Dovgan', 'Ukrains'ka Literature i Masovy Chytach', *Krytyka*, 8 (1928), 39.

As for contemporary writers, Volodymyr Vynnychenko occupied the leading position – 78 out of 334 total readers' requests examined. Vynnychenko, a well-known politician of the Ukrainian People's Republic, novelist and playwright, even after his emigration in 1918, remained the most widely-read writer and continued collecting royalties from the Soviet government. Half the requests accounted for *Soniachna Mashyna* [Solar Machine], the first science-fiction and utopian novel in Ukrainian literature. This novel, written during 1921-1925, was first published in Soviet Ukraine in 1928 and had

three editions in the 1930s. Among the Soviet writers, the satirical feuilletons of Ostap Vyshnia were the most read in the country. His collection of anecdotes *Ukrainizemos'* (Let's Ukrainianize) – with the famous humoresque *Chukhraintsi*, in which he described 'a peculiar people *Chukhraintsi* in an odd country *Chukren*' – was first published in 1926 and had five editions during the three following years.⁷⁴ Apart from Vyshnia, only three other Soviet authors – the avant-garde proletarian writer Khvyl'ovyi, realist writer of peasant life Oleksadr Kopylenko and poet Volodymyr Sosiura – were requested more than twice.

Reading preferences in Ukrainian

All the above-mentioned reports presented the same limited number of names of Ukrainian writers requested/issued in the libraries. During the six-day sample in 1928, only 47 Ukrainian writers were mentioned in total, out of which only 16 were contemporary authors.⁷⁵ This lack of diversity becomes even more striking if compared to the number of writers registered in various literary groupings and unions. For instance, the bibliographical reference book on Ukrainian literature published in 1928 included entries for over 900 writers active at the time.⁷⁶ Moreover, 334 applications from Ukraine's pro-Soviet writers – out of a total of 500 submitted – were considered for membership of the Union of Soviet Writers' of Ukraine in 1934.⁷⁷ The discrepancy between the number of writers registered and those known raises questions about the quality of Ukrainian literature and its correspondence to mass readers' tastes. Indeed, this small pool of contemporaries could easily be linked to the failure of the Ukrainizatsiia policies to create interest in Ukrainian culture among the urban population. Yet, whilst this may be partly the case, it does not explain the prevalence of nineteenth-century authors. Hence, it was

not simply a matter of the language of the literary output that made working-class readers object to Ukrainian contemporary literature.

The library surveys conducted in the late-1920s highlighted one peculiarity of Ukrainian readership: workers and peasants were expected to reconstruct society and reject the past with its traditional characteristics and limitations; and yet the Ukrainian mass audience showed an indisputable and unshaken preference for the Ukrainian classics, unlike in Russian, where contemporary prose left the ‘old novelists’ far behind. This apparent social conservatism can be explained in several ways. Firstly, until 1905 book publishing and distribution in Ukrainian was banned by the Valuev Circular from 1863 and the Ems Secret Decree from 1876.⁷⁸ Thus, nineteenth-century authors had become available only shortly before the revolution. This explains high interest in the classics since audiences simply had not yet enjoyed the chance to read them, unlike the Russian ‘old masters’ that had always been available.

Secondly, mass readers preferred novels depicting life from before the revolution. Among the top-listed novels were: Kotsiubyns'kyi's *Fata Morgana* (1910), describing hardships in the Ukrainian countryside before the 1905 revolution; Franko's *Boa Constrictor* (1878) and *Boryslav Smiiet's'a* [Boryslav Laughs] (1882), recounting the early attempts of workers' revolutionary movements; and Nechui-Levyts'kyi's *Mykola Dzheria* (1878), providing an emotional account of the life of Ukrainian serfs under the tsar. Those novels offered Ukrainian readers, consisting predominantly of recent peasants and newly-emerged workers, something they could easily relate to. Also, the same audience indulged reading about ‘the former people’ (*buvshi liudy* – former Russian aristocracy), often choosing a book about the Romanovs over those set in the recent past. As one reader noted, ‘Why should we read about something we have experienced ourselves?’⁷⁹

The surveys also proved that readers preferred ‘serious’ (*solidna*) literature: big novels, thick books with realistic, well-developed plots, where ‘the life of a person is described from her birth to death’.⁸⁰ Instead, Ukrainian avant-garde writers often developed short literary genres. The shortage of ‘thick novels’ led to a conclusion that Ukrainian contemporary literature was underdeveloped and could not yet compete with the Russian or foreign ones. This ‘serious’ literature, however, was not often understood by readers with little or no education. A female peasant and a KP(b)U candidate gave the following review to the All-Union best-read novel *Tsement* by Gladkov:

The book doesn’t work for peasant readers, it’s written not as it’s supposed to be: the book doesn’t collect thoughts for us to understand and learn but scatters them around. It is long-winded, hence boring to read; the book is good and describes the age. It is suitable for a completely literate urban reader but is unfit for a peasant reader.⁸¹

Finally, the popularity of the Ukrainian classics was fuelled by *Ukrainizatsiia*. In numerous evening courses and language sessions, students were required to learn the language based on, as believed, its best examples. The reading reports are inundated with comments like, ‘I read Kvitka-Osnov’ianenko to learn Ukrainian, did not find anything interesting otherwise’;⁸² or (in Russian about Borys Hrinchenko’s Short Stories) ‘I reckon that libraries need such books so far as to introduce their readers to the works of Ukrainian writers. There is no other use for them’.⁸³ In addition, despite the wishes of Ukrainian cultural managers, in Soviet Ukraine Russian remained the *lingua franca* and was more useful for social mobility: hence, the higher prestige of Russian authors and Russian literature in general.

The popularity of Ukrainian classics can only be partially explained by ‘the issue of conservatism in popular taste’, as suggested by Shkandrij.⁸⁴ While vastly attracted to Russian contemporary literature, mass audiences opted for Ukrainian nineteenth-century authors mainly because they were not satisfied with what Soviet literature in Ukrainian had to offer. Most readers’ reviews concurred that contemporary literature was 1) ‘boring’ with its limited choice of topics; 2) ‘schematic’ with no real plot and storyline; 3) ‘too naturalistic’ and complicated in its language. Khvyl'ovyi’s *Osin'* (Autumn) was ‘not understandable’, his *Pudel'* (Poodle) was ‘no good’, his *Etiudy* (Etudes) ‘only kill the interest in reading’; Oleksii Kundzich’s *Chervonoiu Dorohoiu* (On the Red Path) was ‘something... I haven’t understood a thing’;⁸⁵ Iurii Smolych’s *Nedili i Ponedilky* (Sundays and Mondays) ‘left an impression of being translated from Russian, it is hard to read’;⁸⁶ Ivan Dniprovskiy’s *Zarady Nei* (For the Sake of Her) ‘is hard to understand, it has no theme, its ideology is completely alien to us’;⁸⁷ a response to Iurii Ianovskiy’s *Krov Zemli* (Blood of the Earth) was that ‘I don’t like it, it is very hard to read, I cannot understand it at all.’⁸⁸

Two book reviews, recorded during the *Golovpolitprosvit* enquiry of peasant readers in March-April 1928, reflect the generalised attitudes towards Ukrainian contemporary literature:

I prefer fiction, because it captures our life. I personally like all books by Nechui-Levyts'kyi, especially *Khiba revut' voly*, and Borys Hrinchenko. These authors are true Ukrainians. ... from new novels I have read only a few. I don’t like them because they write mostly about politics and industry.⁸⁹

There are no books now like we had before: traveling, adventures, or scary fairy-tales. When I was a bachelor, we had such books. Now

everything is ‘revolution-revolution’. We are fed up with it, we saw it ourselves. Of course, there are some interesting books about the revolution, but a lot of words there are illiterate, or even obscene. I cannot read it at home as a father.⁹⁰

Numerous reviews evidenced that Ukrainian contemporary literature was not able to satisfy the literary preferences of the ever-growing Ukrainian readership. As one contemporary observer concluded, ‘Ukrainian belles-lettres are failing temporarily not only because of its youth and primitive techniques, limited use of the Ukrainian language in the cities, and small number of copies of Ukrainian books available, but because *the Ukrainian author hasn’t yet learned from his readers how to write books*’.⁹¹ The study of mass reading preferences in Soviet Ukraine’s libraries allowed the UNIK scholars to conclude that there was a demand for literature in Ukrainian, which, however, was not satisfied. There was an urgent need for mass Ukrainian literature that would reflect the interests of the mass readers with its down-to-earth topics, recognisable characters, engaging plots and comprehensible language.

‘The first Five-Year plan of art’: towards ‘ideal’ Soviet readers

Back in 1925, the party recognised that the desired ‘hegemony of proletarian writers [was], as yet, non-existent’.⁹² The limited intervention of the party within the cultural sphere resulted in little institutional tension between the high art of modernism and avant-garde, proletarian literature, futurism, and the newly emerging socialist realism. By the decade’s end it became clear, however, that the construction of Soviet culture could not be spontaneous, and there was no time to wait until writers and readers alike evolve into the

‘ideal’ image party propagandists had in mind. With the introduction of the first Five-Year Plan, the cultural sphere and literature became instrumental in the success of the Soviet industrialisation effort. Every aspect of reading was transformed rapidly to accommodate the new ideology and to cater for working-class readers.

On 28 December 1928 the Communist Party Central Committee issued a resolution ‘On Serving the Mass Reader’, outlining the strategy for Soviet book publishing. Mass literature was recognised as a weapon of mobilising the masses around the party’s political and economic goals, as well as socialist and class education of the toiling masses. Henceforth, the publication of mass literature dealing with present-day themes, combatting hostile influence of all kinds and inspiring the masses, was prioritised.⁹³ This directive obliged publishers to closely work with existing proletarian literary organisations, to publish authors who were Communists and to engage new writers who were workers and peasants. Thereof, the dominant role in future Soviet literature was granted to the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP), established in 1925, and its Ukrainian partner the All-Ukrainian Union of Proletarian Writers (*Vseukrains'ka Spilka Proletars'kyh Pys'mennykiv*, *VUSPP*), formed in 1927. These groups eagerly took up the challenge of creating literature for the masses, dubbed by the RAPP leader Leopold Averbakh ‘the first Five-Year plan of art’. *VUSPP* members launched different ‘useful activities’, and aimed to raise mass consciousness and organise the will, minds, and enthusiasm of the toiling masses for socialist construction.⁹⁴ These included literary tours to factories and collective farms, discussions of manuscripts with factory-worker readers, and fieldwork on construction sites and in the countryside. Moreover, the *VUSPP* opened its ranks to workers, who were eager to master the literary craft and become ‘shock workers’ (*udarnyky*) of literature. Workers not only became the producers of literature but also

gained control over the final product – the 1928 directive encouraged publishers to turn to mass readers for reviewing manuscripts before making any decision on publication.⁹⁵

The social role of libraries also changed radically. On 30 October 1929 a resolution ‘On Library Work’ was issued that demanded the need to ‘decisively restructure the operations of the library in accordance with its growing political significance, and to transform libraries into cultural centres that actively promote the mobilisation of the masses.’ The principal goal was to ‘develop mass-oriented forms of library operation ... so that the library can serve the most important political, economic and cultural aims, and so that it in fact becomes a support base for raising the political and cultural level of the labouring masses.’⁹⁶ Thereafter, mass libraries became key in safeguarding the dictatorship of the proletariat in the reading process. The librarian’s role also became more interventionist and ‘guided reading’, or nurturing readers’ tastes, became the most important method of working with mass readers.⁹⁷

Already in late 1929, a new library enquiry was organised to evaluate the ideological transformation of youth readers (aged 17-23) in Kyiv, using the method of analysing the verbatim record of readers’ requests for books (*doslivnyi zapys popytu*). Altogether, 314 survey forms were collected from ten city libraries during a three-month study. The respondents were predominantly male (83.5%), qualified workers (70%), and non-party (53%).⁹⁸ In addition to collecting quantitative data on reading habits, around 25 of the most active library readers were asked to anonymously record their impressions from the books they had read during the six-month period.⁹⁹

The results of this survey demonstrated a new trend emerging in the structure of reading, if compared to the previous library surveys. The most important shift occurred in readers’ interest in Ukrainian literature: 29.4% of total requests were already for Ukrainian books, which was over three times higher than during the 1928 all-Ukraine survey and

almost double that of the previous enquiry into the Kyiv libraries that had been conducted in 1926.¹⁰⁰ Contemporary Soviet literature in Ukrainian also featured more prominently. Whereas in 1928, there only 11.4% of requests were for contemporary Ukrainian literature, by 1929 this share was already 20.6%.¹⁰¹ A similar increase was recorded in ‘author repertoire’: in 1928 a total of 16 out of 47 authors were Ukrainian (34%) compared to 31 out of 55 authors in 1929 (56%). Notably, the 1929 top-list included many new names: the most popular were Andrii Holovko, Petro Panch, and Vyshnia, who were closely followed by Ivan Mykytenko, Khvyl'ovyi and Ivan Le.¹⁰² Overall, requests for Ukrainian books were only 15% less than for those in Russian or foreign translations (see Table 6).

Table 6: Requests on books in Ukrainian and Russian by young worker readers in Kyiv libraries during three-month period in 1929.

Language of publication	Total names	Of these for Contemporary Authors	Percentage of contemporary authors out of the total requested
By Author			
Ukrainian	55	31	56.3
Russian	145	100	68
Foreign in translation	121	-	
By Number of Requests			
Ukrainian	436	90	20.5
Russian	510	373	73
Foreign in translation	513	-	

Source: Ia. Kerekez, 'Robitnycha Molod' i Khudozhnia Literatura', Instytut Rukopysu, F. 74, od.zv. 214, ark. 27

It is possible to observe that, against the expectations that Ukrainian would gradually become a dominant language, urban centres were becoming bilingual.¹⁰³ Whereas the

prominent linguist and literary critic Iurii Sheveliov attributed bilingualism to the failure of *Ukrainizatsiia*, I argue that bilingualism became one of this policy's significant achievements. Book reviews submitted to UNIK in 1929 were accompanied by a librarian's short note on the ethnic and social origin of the reviewer. Matching the book review with librarians' notes, it is easy to notice that reviews of some Ukrainian authors were written in Russian or in Ukrainian by non-ethnic Ukrainians; similarly many Ukrainians reviewed Russian and foreign books both in Ukrainian and Russian.¹⁰⁴ Due to the increased command of proficiency in both languages (Ukrainian and Russian), readers often expressed their motivation for requests not in terms of language but in terms of the type of literature they were interested in. Hence, by the end of the decade, new Soviet Ukrainian literature was slowly reaching out to those non-Ukrainian city dwellers and interest in Ukrainian literature was not limited to Ukrainian-speakers only.

Book reviews examined during the 1929 Kyiv survey reflected other important shifts in mass reading preferences. This survey examined only the reading habits of young readers: the first generation of Soviet workers and readers who came of age and were educated after the revolution. Those young and loyal Soviet readers had grown up in the classless society and eagerly embraced the first Five-Five Year plan, aptly defined by Sheila Fitzpatrick as a 'cultural revolution'.¹⁰⁵ Their book reviews reflected their new way of thinking about the Soviet state and its enemies which was fully aligned with the activist model of the Soviet citizen encouraged by the party and promoted by Komsomol. Those activist readers eagerly and frequently engaged in criticising alleged ideological and class enemies. Interestingly, most critical comments gathered during the survey referred to contemporary literature, both Ukrainian and Russian. For instance, Vynnychenko, the best-read author of the decade, was attacked for lack of faith in the classless society. Indeed, even back in 1927, readers were aware of Vynnychenko's 'hostile ideology' and

considered his *Soniachna Mashyna* ‘interesting even though it [did] not correspond to the demands of the day’.¹⁰⁶ In 1929, however, Vynnychenko’s ideological position could no longer be reconciled. As a reviewer put it, his *Soniachna Mashyna*

must be completely destroyed [...]. [Vynnychenko] wants to prove that the proletariat cannot play the master, that a classless society is impossible and that the class hierarchy should remain. Well, a proletarian reader even without Vynnychenko knows how things can and should be.¹⁰⁷

Instead, new Soviet readers expressed interest in recent historical events, especially the revolution and the civil war. Indeed, young readers did not have first-hand experience of those events and their knowledge was shaped by the officially-approved narrative of early Soviet history. As one reader noted in response to the Russian-language novel *Pir Narodnyi* (People’s Feast) by Mariia Boretskaia’s (1927), ‘every young worker should read this novel since he hasn’t experienced those events [the revolution and the civil wars] himself’.¹⁰⁸ Growing interest in the recent past was aptly used, or even instigated by the party educators. By the end of the decade, the revolution and the civil war acquired new, useful and didactic interpretation, where positive characters of communists were opposed by negative ‘others’. The influence of Soviet propaganda was mirrored in the book reviews. For instance, Myroslav Irchan’s *Trahediia Igo Travnia* (A Tragedy of the First of May) was ‘the most frank and honest book about the civil war; the author honestly depicted the revolutionary struggle in Ukraine, where the counter-revolutionary gangs, hidden behind the ideals of Ukraine’s independence, brutally destroyed and plundered everything on their way.’¹⁰⁹ Similarly, Panch’s *Golubi Eshelony* (Blue Echelons) offered ‘a good depiction of the events after October and those corrupted defenders of a “free Ukraine”’.¹¹⁰ Smolych’s

Fal'shyva Mel'pomena (False Melpomene) showed ‘the purposelessness of the Ukrainian counter-revolution and of those [revolutionaries] who, despite their class origin, in a chauvinistic haze became a blind weapon of the real counter-revolution.’¹¹¹

Of course, these library reviews might not represent general public opinion on the matter. They were written by library borrowers singled out for their active involvement in public life, who were often expected to express their opinion along certain lines. Yet, if those book reviews are put in line with other showings on book consumption in public libraries, a change in preferences and in the appetites of ‘real’ readers becomes more evident. The 1929 survey of youth library readers in Kyiv suggest that the change in reading appetites was not only generational (a result of the arrival of the new reader) but was also influenced by increased library intervention in the process of reading.

By the late 1920s, as Dobrenko has shown, a new methodology of ‘working with the reader’ was in full swing, by which librarians were encouraged to actively influence mass readers, even if this involved deceiving them. Instead of issuing a book requested, the librarian should be prepared to ‘bring a different one in its place, on the same subject, or shall we say one that satisfies the needs of the reader better, but which we find more acceptable’.¹¹² These two approaches combined brought into existence the ‘ideal’ reader of the Soviet propagandists: eager to engage in ideological debates, to defend the value of proletarian literature, and to pressure writers simultaneously. Gradually, the literary market also changed. A cohort of young Soviet Ukrainian writers emerged who ‘experiment with new plots reflecting the demands (*vymohy*) of the new readers’ (a reference to Pluzhnyk’s *Liaduha*).¹¹³ As a result, only 51 out of a total of 253 writers listed in a reference volume on Soviet Ukrainian literature from 1949 were also featured back in the 1928 bio-bibliographical study mentioned earlier.¹¹⁴

Conclusions

Undoubtedly, *Ukrainizatsiia* resulted in a great cultural upheaval bringing to the fore a significant pool of Ukrainian writers, academics and artists. Nevertheless, ‘real’ readers like Boris Veide from Zaporizhzhia, did not always correspond to the envisaged image of many sophisticated and avant-garde contemporaries. Veide was hardly of those ‘people of genius’ anticipated by Khvyl’ovyi. On the contrary, 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; accessible to the reader, with clear ideas and guidance; literature that was realistic and yet heroic, and optimistic; thick novels with an interesting plot and conflict that was positive, exemplary and appropriate to real life characters; a book that highlighted the role of the collective, the working class and the party in building a new society; and literature that was written in understandable and simple language.¹¹⁵

By the end of the 1920s, a new mass culture in Ukrainian was emerging. It became the meeting point between the aspirations of the creative intelligentsia and the demands of the working masses. This new mass literature was Soviet, ensuring its social usefulness, didactic purpose and ideological consistency; and Ukrainian, ensuring its reach to all those newly educated and literate workers all over the republic. It acquired its mass readership, created as a result of the revolution and solidified by the Soviet education and cultural campaigns. Most importantly, many of these new readers themselves became creators of this Soviet Ukrainian literature.

Ukrainian mass literature created during the Soviet era is not featured in the literary canon of the independent Ukraine, unlike those avant-garde writers of the ‘executed

renaissance' generation. Nonetheless, the mass literature of the Soviet era was not necessarily unworthy simply because it was Soviet or entertaining. While cultural managers nowadays are facing very similar challenges on how to make Ukrainian an everyday language for its diverse population, the historical study of Soviet Ukrainian mass culture provides an example of how to cater for the masses, how to make Ukrainian cultural products popular, and to assure high demand amongst contemporary Ukrainians.

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¹ B. Veide, *Zapysky Budivel'nyka* (Kyiv, 2012) Only the second notebook of Veide's memoirs – under his original Russian title *Zapiski Stroitel'ia* – has survived describing his life in Zaporizhzhia in 1923-34. It was published in Russian but under its Ukrainian title (*Zapysky Budivel'nyka*) in 2012.

² Veide, *op. cit.*, 42.

³ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴ E. Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Reader. Social and aesthetic contexts of the exception of Soviet literature* (Redwood City, 1997); E. Dobrenko, 'The disaster of middlebrow taste, or, who "invented" socialist realism?', in T. Lahusen and E. Dobrenko (eds) *Socialist Realism Without Shores* (London and Durham, N.C., 1997), 135-164; S. Lovell, *The Russian Reading Revolution: print culture in the Soviet and Post-Soviet eras* (London, 2000).

⁵ V. Petrov, *Ukrains'ki Kul'turni Diiachi URSS 1920-1940 Zherty Bil'shovyts'koho Teroru* (New York and Proloh, 1959); I. Lavrinenko *Rozstriliane Vidrodzhennia. Antolohiia 1917-1933* (Kyiv, 2007); for its revision see: H. Hryn, 'The 'executed renaissance' paradigm revisited', *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, 27 (2004–5), 67-96.

⁶ G. Luckyj, *Literary Politics in the Soviet Ukraine, 1917–1934* (Durham and London, [1956] 1990); M. Shkandrij, *Modernists, Marxists and the Nation: the Ukrainian literary discussion of the 1920s* (Edmonton, 1992).

⁷ G. Liber, *Soviet Nationality Policy, Urban Growth, and Identity Change in the Ukrainian SSR 1923–1934* (Cambridge, 2002).

⁸ M. Shkandrij, 'The Ukrainian reading public in the 1920s: real, implied and ideal,' *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 2 (2016), 160-183.

⁹ Quotation from T. Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: nations and nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca, 2001), 89.

¹⁰ On the social and ethnic composition of Ukraine's urban areas see: Liber, *Soviet Nationality Policy*, *op. cit.*; B. Krawchenko, *Social Change and National Consciousness in Twentieth-Century Ukraine* (Basingstoke, 1986).

¹¹ On the implementation of korenizatsiia for other national minorities, see: M.C. Fowler, 'Yiddish theater in Soviet Ukraine: re-evaluating Ukrainian–Jewish relations in the arts', *Ab Imperio*, 3 (2011), 167-188; K. Brown, *A Biography of No Place: ethnic borderland to Soviet heartland* (Cambridge, MA., 2004); J. Veidlinger, *In the Shadow of the Shtetl: small-town Jewish life in Soviet Ukraine* (Bloomington, 2013).

¹² T. Martin, 'The russification of the RSFSR', *Cahiers du Monde Russe*, 39, 1-2, (1998), 99-117.

¹³ Tsentral'nyi Derzhavnyi Arkhiv Hromads'kykh Ob'iednan' Ukrainy (TsDAHO), F.1, op.20, Spr. 2248, ark.1-7; for English translation see Luckyj, *op. cit.*, 66-68.

¹⁴ Luckyj, *op. cit.*, 67.

¹⁵ On the challenges for proletarian Ukrainizatsiia see Martin, *Affirmative Action*, *op. cit.*, 97.

¹⁶ M. D. Pauly, 'Tending to the "native word": teachers and the Soviet campaign for Ukrainian-language schooling, 1923-1930', *Nationalities Papers*, 37, 3 (2009), 251-276; M.D. Pauly, *Breaking the Tongue: language, education, and power in Soviet Ukraine, 1923-1934* (Toronto, 2014).

¹⁷ R. Horbyk and O. Palko, 'Righting the writing: the power dynamic of Soviet Ukraine language policies and reforms in the 1920s-1930s', *Studi Slavistici*, XIV (2017), 67-89.

¹⁸ TsDAHO, F.1, op.20, spr.2894, ark.104.

¹⁹ The Institute of Manuscripts of the Vernadsky National Library of Ukraine (IR), F.47, spr.215, ark.169.

²⁰ F. Holub, 'LKSMU v Kul'turno-Natsional'nomu Budivnytstvi', *Bil'shovyk Ukraïny*, 7-8 (1929), 55.

²¹ O. Leites and Mykola Iashek, *Desiat' Rokiv Ukraïns'koi Literatury, 1917-1927* (Kharkiv, 1928) vol. II.

²² S. Pelypenko, 'Nashi "hrikhy"', in *Pluzhanyn*, 4-5 (1926), 1-2.

²³ M. Khvylovy, 'Thoughts against the current', in Khvylovy, *The Cultural Renaissance in Ukraine: political pamphlets 1925-1926* (Edmonton, 1986), 109.

²⁴ Khvylovy, 'Quo vadis', in Khvylovy, *Cultural Renaissance*, *op. cit.*, 54.

²⁵ Khvylovy, 'Thoughts against the Current', *op. cit.*, 139.

²⁶ For these resolutions see: Luckyj, *op. cit.*, 277-78; K. Clark and E. Dobrenko (eds) *Soviet Culture and Power: a history in documents, 1917-1953* (New Haven, 2007), 40-44.

²⁷ Lovell, *op. cit.*, 36.

²⁸ Dobrenko, *Making of the State Reader*, op. cit., 170.

²⁹ IR, F.47, spr.210; 291. For the analysis of the survey see: K. Dovhan', 'Ukrains'ka literatura i masovyi chytach', *Krytyka*, 8 (1928), 35-46; K. Dovhan', Materialy do vseukrains'koho odsliduvannia bibliotek, in *Trudy Instytutu Knyhoznavstva*, Vol. II (Kyiv, 1931), 35-60; N. Frid'ieva, 'Tsentral'ni i okruhovi biblioteky Ukrainy', in *Trudy*, 61-82.

³⁰ IR, F.47, spr.120, ark.1.

³¹ IR, F.47, spr.120.

³² N. Frid'ieva, 'Zapys popytu, iak metod vyvchenniaa chytacha', in *Trudy Instytutu Knyhoznavstva*, op. cit., 116-117.

³³ Frid'ieva, 'Zapys popytu', op. cit., 119-120.

³⁴ Ibid., 127.

³⁵ IR, F.47, spr.214.

³⁶ Other regional surveys conducted at the same time include: an enquiry into peasant readers carried out by the *Golovpolitprosvit* in March-April 1928 (Tsentral'nyi Derzhavnyi Arkhiv Vyshchikh Orhaniv Vlady (TsDAVO), F. 166, op. 8, spr. 81; 352; 344; 345); regional surveys in Odessa (October 1926-February 1927): L. Kogan, 'Shcho chytaiut' Seliany', *Politosvita*, 2-3 (1927), 59-66; 'Chto chytaiut zhenshchiny', *Krasnyi Bibliotekar'*, 6 (1927), 18-28; 'Robitnychi chytach i khudozhnia literatura', *Politosvita*, 4 (1927), 59-68; Kyiv libraries of political education (1926-27): N. Frid'ieva, 'Chytach kyivs'kykh politosvitnikh bibliotek v 1926/27. r.', in *Trudy Instytutu Knyhoznavstva*, op. cit., 174-188; D. Balyka and O. Karpins'ka, 'Interesy chytachiv-ukraintsiv zahal'noi chytal'ni VBU,' *Zhyttia i Revoliutsiia*, 3 (1927), 334-344.

³⁷ M. Panchuk et al., *Natsional'ni Vidnosyny v Ukraini v XX st.: Zbirnyk Dokumentiv i Materialiv*, (Kyiv, 1994), 106-109.

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- ³⁸Liber, 'Language, literacy, and book publishing in the Ukrainian SSR, 1923-1928', *Slavic Review*, 41, 4 (1982), 673-685.
- ³⁹ 'Po vydavnytstvam U.S.S.R', *Nova Knyha*, 4-6 (1925), 48.
- ⁴⁰ M. Skrypnyk, 'Novi linii u natsional'no-kul'turnomu budivnytstvi', in M. Skrypnyk, *Statti i Promovy z Natsional'noho Pytannia* (Munich, 1974), 212.
- ⁴¹ Quoted in Krawchenko, *op. cit.*, 82.
- ⁴² TsDAHO, f.1, op.20, spr.2261, ark.28.
- ⁴³ M. Hodkevych, 'Ukrainis'ke krasne pys'menstvo ostannioho desiatyrichchia v tsyfrakh', *Pluzhanyn*, 11-12 (1927), 62.
- ⁴⁴ Liber, 'Language, literacy', *op. cit.*, 682.
- ⁴⁵ 'Iak vesty bibliohrafichnu robotu v zviazku z ukrainisatsiieiu bibliotek', *Nova Knyha*, 4-6, (1925), 71-72; On the role of libraries Union-wide see: Dobrenko, *Making of the State Reader*, *op. cit.*
- ⁴⁶ Liber, 'Language, literacy', *op. cit.*, 677.
- ⁴⁷ Frid'ieva, 'Zapys popytu', *op. cit.*, 76.
- ⁴⁸ Frid'ieva, 'Tsentral'ni i okruhovi biblioteky', *op. cit.*, 68.
- ⁴⁹ Only half of the survey forms received by UNIK contained information on the language of library holdings. The data in the table are based on the reports from 16 libraries, with 754,504 books in remaining libraries not classified. See: Frid'ieva, 'Tsentral'ni i okruhovi biblioteky', *op. cit.*, 68.
- ⁵⁰ H. Kasianov, *Ukrains'ka Intelligentsia 1920-30-h Rokiv: Sotsial'nyi Portret ta Istorychna Dolia* (Kyiv-Edmonton, 1992), 60-62.
- ⁵¹ On the role of women in the workforce, see G.W. Lapidus, *Women in Soviet Society: equality, development, and social change* (Berkeley, 1978), 165-166.

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- ⁵² Dovhan', 'Ukraïns'ka literatura', *op. cit.*, 38. On Komsomol membership see: Liber, 'Language, literacy', *op. cit.*, 683.
- ⁵³ Dovhan', 'Ukraïns'ka literatura', *op. cit.*, 38.
- ⁵⁴ Frid'ieva, 'Chytach kyïvs'kykh', *op. cit.*, 181.
- ⁵⁵ I follow Pauly's understanding of the category of 'Ukrainizer'. See: Pauly, *Breaking the Tongue*, *op. cit.*, f3, p.360.
- ⁵⁶ A. Mykoliuk, 'Ukrainizatsiia proletariatu', *Politosvita*, 2-3 (1927), 70-72.
- ⁵⁷ For instance, Dovhan', 'Ukraïns'ka literatura', *op. cit.*, 46.
- ⁵⁸ Dobrenko, *Making of the State Reader*, *op. cit.*, 242
- ⁵⁹ *Iak vesty bibliohrafichnu robotu*, *op. cit.*, 71.
- ⁶⁰ Frid'ieva, 'Zapys Popytu', *op. cit.*, 131.
- ⁶¹ Dovhan', 'Ukraïns'ka literatura', *op. cit.*, 44.
- ⁶² Frid'ieva, 'Zapys popytu', *op. cit.*, 137.
- ⁶³ Frid'ieva, 'Tsentral'ni i okruhovi biblioteky', *op. cit.*, 69.
- ⁶⁴ Dovhan', 'Ukraïns'ka literatura', *op. cit.*, 37.
- ⁶⁵ Quoted in Shkandrij, 'Ukrainian reading public', *op. cit.*, 166.
- ⁶⁶ M. Khomitsky, 'World literature, Soviet style: a forgotten episode in the history of the idea', *Ab Imperio*, 3 (2013), 119-154.
- ⁶⁷ I. Smolych, *Rozpovidi pro Nespokii Nemaie Kintsia* (Kyiv, 1972), 116-117.
- ⁶⁸ L. Kolomiets', *Ukrians'kyi Khudozhnii Pereklad ta Perekladachi 1920-30h Rokiv* (Vinnytsia, 2015), 14.
- ⁶⁹ Shkandrij, 'Ukrainian reading public', *op. cit.*, 161. A similar trend as for classics/contemporaries was observed in Kyiv in 1926. See: Frid'ieva, 'Chytach Kyïvs'kykh Bibliotek', *op. cit.*, 184.
- ⁷⁰ Fried'eva, 'Tsentral'ni i okruhovi biblioteky', *op. cit.*, 140.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Dovhan', 'Ukraïns'ka literatura', *op. cit.*, 39.

⁷³ Frid'ieva, 'Tsentral'ni i okruhovi biblioteky', *op. cit.*, 138-139.

⁷⁴ The phenomenon of Vyshnia is explained in M.C. Fowler, *Beau Monde on Emire's Edge. State and stage in Soviet Ukraine* (Toronto, 2017), chapter 3, 'Comedy Soviet and Ukrainian?', 95-126.

⁷⁵ Dovhan', 'Ukraïns'ka literatura', *op. cit.*, 41.

⁷⁶ Leites and Iashek, *Desiat' Rokiv*, *op. cit.*, vol. I.

⁷⁷ I. Mykytenko, 'Put' k soiuzu', *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 14 June 1934. On the formation of the Writers' Union of Ukraine see: Luckyj, *op. cit.*, 227-30.

⁷⁸ On the banning of the Ukrainian language in the Russian Empire see: J. Remy, 'The Valuev Circular and censorship of Ukrainian publications in the Russian empire (1863-1876): intention and practice', *Canadian Slavonic Papers /Revue Canadienne des Slavistes*, 49, 1-2 (2007), 87-110; A. Miller, *The Ukrainian Question. The Russian empire and nationalism in the 19th century* (Budapest, 2003); D. Saunders, 'Russia and Ukraine under Alexander II: the Valuev Edict of 1863', *International History Review* 17, 1 (1995), 23-50.

⁷⁹ IR, F.47, spr.210, ark.15.

⁸⁰ IR, F.47, spr.210, ark.17.

⁸¹ Kogan, *op. cit.*, 60.

⁸² IR, F.47, spr.214, ark.26.

⁸³ IR, F.47, spr.214, ark.398.

⁸⁴ Shkandrij, 'Ukrainian reading public', *op. cit.*, 167-68.

⁸⁵ For both TsDAVO, F.166, op.8, spr.81, ark.61.

⁸⁶ IR, F.47, spr.215, ark.161.

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- ⁸⁷ IR, F.47, spr.217, ark.14.
- ⁸⁸ IR, F.47, spr.215, ark.164.
- ⁸⁹ TsDAVO, F. 166, op.8, spr.81, ark.91, (underline in the original)..
- ⁹⁰ TsDAVO, F. 166, op.8, spr.81, ark.91, (underline in the original)..
- ⁹¹ K. Dovhan', 'Cherhova problema, (Narysy pro chytacha)', *Zhyttia i Revoliutsiia*, 2-3 (1926), 81 (emphasis in the original).
- ⁹² Clark and Dobrenko, *op. cit.*, 40-44.
- ⁹³ *Direktyvy po Voprosam Prosveshcheniia* (Moscow; Leningrad, 1931), 285-286.
- ⁹⁴ H. Borland, *Soviet Literary Theory and Practice during the First Five-Year Plan, 1928-32* (New York, 1969), 23.
- ⁹⁵ *Direktyvy po Voprosam Prosveshcheniia*, 286.
- ⁹⁶ Quoted in Dobrenko, *Making of the State Reader*, *op. cit.*, 243.
- ⁹⁷ Dobrenko, *Making of the State Reader*, *op. cit.*, 258-262.
- ⁹⁸ IR, F. 47, spr.210, ark.21.
- ⁹⁹ IR, F. 47, spr.210, ark.36.
- ¹⁰⁰ IR, F. 47, spr.210, ark.24; Frid'ieva, 'Chytach kyivs'kykh bibliotek', *op. cit.*, 185.
- ¹⁰¹ IR, F.47, spr.210, ark.27.
- ¹⁰² IR, F.47, spr.210, ark.29.
- ¹⁰³ I. Shevel'ov, *Ukraïns'ka Mova v Pershii Polovyni Dvadtsiatoho Stolittia (1900-1941). Stan i status* (Chernivtsi, 1998), 162-163.
- ¹⁰⁴ IR, F.47, spr.214.
- ¹⁰⁵ S. Fitzpatrick, 'Cultural revolution as class war', in S. Fitzpatrick (ed.) *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928-1931* (Bloomington, 1978), 8-40.
- ¹⁰⁶ IR, F.47, spr.214, ark.391.
- ¹⁰⁷ IR, F.47, spr.217, ark.5.

¹⁰⁸ IR, F.47, spr.210, ark.36.

¹⁰⁹ IR, F.47, spr.210, ark.39.

¹¹⁰ IR, F.47, spr.210, ark.38

¹¹¹ IR, F.47, spr.214, ark.215.

¹¹² Dobrenko, *Making of the State Reader*, *op. cit.*, 204-205.

¹¹³ IR, F.47, spr.214, ark.2.

¹¹⁴ L. Khinkulov, *Slovnyk ukrains'koi literatury: Pys'mennyky Radians'koi Ukrainy*.

(Kyiv, 1948); Luckyj, *op. cit.*, 228 f.

¹¹⁵ Adapted from Dobrenko, 'Disaster of middlebrow taste', *op. cit.*