

## Between Two Powers: The Soviet Ukrainian Writer Mykola Khvyľ'ovyi\*

### **Abstract: Between Two Powers: The Soviet Ukrainian Writer Mykola Khvyľ'ovyi**

The article examines the way in which Mykola Khvyľ'ovyi, one of the most outstanding Ukrainian writers and yet one of the most controversial figures of early Soviet history, was assessed in national and diaspora historiography. It is argued that the self-referential character of Khvyľ'ovyi's short stories along with the scarcity and unreliability of primary sources have contributed to creating a narrative of an ambivalent writer and communist Mykola Khvyľ'ovyi. A simplistic approach to place the writer's political and aesthetic agendas in an "either – or" paradigm, artificially fitting his convictions into a communist or a nationalistic framework, is contested by the author. The aim of this examination is, thus, to make more understandable the choices of those national intellectuals of the 1920s for whom being both Ukrainians and communists did not seem contradictory. This brings the discussion of the ideological development of Khvyľ'ovyi into a broader context, namely what it meant to be a national intellectual and what choices one was faced with, not in Moscow, but in a border republic, where any application of a national sentiment was seen as a threat to the revolutionary legacy.

*Keywords: Ukraine, Literature, Khvyľ'ovyi, Mykola, Soviet Union*

Mykola Khvyľ'ovyi, acclaimed in the early 1920s as "one of the most outstanding writers of the proletarian age",<sup>1</sup> remains one of the most controversial figures in the Ukrainian culture of the early Soviet period. Even more than eighty years after his suicide, Khvyľ'ovyi's biography, creative writings, public engagement and political viewpoints receive multiple, often contradictory interpretations. Mainly, this mixed reception originates from an inability to reconcile his Bolshevik affiliation with the outstanding role he played in national intellectual and cultural history. Not surprisingly his political and aesthetic agendas were simplistically placed in an "either ... or" paradigm. From the Soviet perspective, Khvyľ'ovyi was reproached for his national pursuit gradually evolving into anti-Soviet opposition. From a nationalistic perspective, introduced after the Second World War among émigré researchers and picked up in Ukraine in the late 1980s, an attempt was made to overlook Khvyľ'ovyi's communist affiliation and to present him as a martyr of the Soviet terror.

Worth mentioning, however, is that the ambivalence on Khvyľ'ovyi only partly comes from the different ideological standpoints of his interpreters: Khvyľ'ovyi's activity throughout the 1920s allows for multiple interpretations. This originates from the complex ideological evolution of the writer's views and orientations, reflected in his imaginative writing, primarily of 1921–1924, and political essays written during the Literary Discussion of 1925–28. In his creative texts he went through a painful experience of

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1 DOROSHKIVYCH *Pidruchnyk istoriï ukrains'koi literatury*, p. 239.

adjusting his revolutionary romanticism, a term used by the writer to designate his early literary manner, to the norms of socialist realism. His social and political essays present a gradual process of politicizing his civic stand stirred by the centralizing tendencies of the Communist Party directed from Moscow.

The misinterpretation of the writer also arises from a paucity of primary sources and the unreliability of those available. Thus, commentators often referred to his highly self-referential or autothematic<sup>2</sup> creative writings to fill the blank spots in his biography. It should be admitted that some of Khvyľ'ovyi's novels, such as *Vstupna novela* (The Introductory Novel, 1927<sup>3</sup>), *Redaktor Kark* (Editor Kark, 1923), *Na ožera* (To the Lakes, 1926), and *Arabesky* (Arabesques, 1927), are clearly self-referential. The device of using a first-person voice erases the boundaries between the writer and his characters, disperses the writer's ideas amongst the cues of his characters, and raises questions over the writer's detachment from a fictional story. As a result, Khvyľ'ovyi's prose offers an insight into his personal ideological evolution but yet, in turn, allows even bigger speculations around his life.

This article aims to trace the way the narrative on Khvyľ'ovyi was created and used either to vilify or, on the contrary, to glorify the writer. It will demonstrate how the primary sources were manipulated in order to present the required image of Khvyľ'ovyi both in the Soviet Union and in independent Ukraine. In doing so, the article will analyse how Khvyľ'ovyi's views on communism, presented in his imaginative and political writing, changed over time.

### **“I wanted to be a Ukrainian communist”**

Mykola Khvyľ'ovyi (real name Mykola Fityl'ov) was born on 14 December, 1893 in the Sumy region into a teacher's family. Abandoning his education, Khvyľ'ovyi moved to Donbas to become a worker. In 1914 he joined the army and a year later was sent to the front. Life there he recalled as “three years of marches, hunger, terrible horror that I would not dare to describe; three years of squared Golgotha on the distant fields of Galicia, the Carpathians, Romania and so on and so forth”.<sup>4</sup> It was during his military service that Khvyľ'ovyi got engaged in revolutionary activity resulting in his joining the newly created Communist Party (Bolshevik) of Ukraine (KP(b)U) in April, 1919. In 1921 Khvyľ'ovyi was demobilized and moved to Kharkiv to start his literary career.

Khvyľ'ovyi's early life is surrounded by rumours and speculation. Among his alleged achievements were his holding of high ranking positions in the Red Army<sup>5</sup> or even service in the Cheka.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, those revolutionary accomplishments are rebutted by Khvyľ'ovyi's contemporaries. For example, his fellow writer Hryhorii Kostiuk stated in his recollections that “all those hints and allegations about the active connection of the young Khvyľ'ovyi with the revolutionary underground, [...] his unique heroism and ‘dev-

2 The term is borrowed from George Grabowicz. See: GRABOWICZ Symbolic Autobiography.

3 Here and hereafter the year of the first publication is indicated.

4 Letters to Mykola Zerov in: KHVYL'OVYI Tvory u dvokh tomakh, vol. 2, p. 852.

5 HAN Trahediiia Mykoly Khvyľ'ovoho, p. 31.

6 See: PLYUSHCH Pravda pro khvyľ'ovizm; ZADESNIAN'S'KYI Shcho nam dav Mykola Khvyľ'ovyi.

ilism', – all these are only inventions and legends".<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Kostiuk claimed that while being a member of Khvylovyi's narrow circle between 1929 and 1933 (years of particularly intense persecution for Khvylovyi) he never heard any facts of Khvylovyi's heroic biography even though those facts (if true) could have saved his reputation with the Party leadership.

Those speculations might have been caused, firstly, by a tendency to ascribe plots from Khvylovyi's fictional writings to his own biography (especially *Ia (Romantyka – Myself (Romanticism), 1924*) and the less well-known *Podiaka pryvatnoho likaria (Gratitude of the Private Doctor, 1932*)<sup>8</sup>, and, secondly, by the paucity and uncertainty of primary sources covering this period. There are two frequently cited documents which could shed light on Khvylovyi's early revolutionary years: a fragment from an autobiography (first published in 1987<sup>9</sup>) and a short autobiographical note written for a *troika* during a regular KP(b)U purge in 1924 (published in 1990<sup>10</sup>). Indeed, in these documents Khvylovyi addressed his conversion into a Bolshevik: his ideology evolved from being a part of a *narodnik* circle and alliance with the Borot'bists up to becoming a card-carrying Bolshevik and a member of the Bohodukviv executive committee.

Notably, these documents are written in a very passionate way, depicting his zeal and attachment to Bolshevik ideology. Needless to say, documents prepared for a purge commission should be regarded as a kind of autobiographical writing which was deliberately styled by its author to shape his revolutionary personality.<sup>11</sup> Khvylovyi, although a party member since 1919, attempted to safeguard himself against possible reproaches concerning his connection with the Ukrainian People's Republic (a brief encounter with members of a Ukrainian Council of Soldiers), which he later called a "disorder in my uncrystallized ideology".<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Khvylovyi needed to fit his pro-Ukrainian standpoint, which started developing at around the same time, into his 'exemplary' Bolshevik personality.

Given the actual purpose of the notes, Khvylovyi surprisingly used them to confess his qualms about his party membership. While explaining how he felt to be in the Communist ranks, Khvylovyi confessed: "Ideologically [...] I see myself as a consistent Marxist-Communist, but psychologically I do not see myself as such, and I think that I have no right to hide that. [...] I face myself with the question, do I have a right to carry a Party membership card, or am I only a lumber for the party? I do not always answer those questions in the same way."<sup>13</sup>

7 KOSTIUK Mykola Khvylovyi, p. 32.

8 This short story, first published in the collection *R. XV. Rik Zhovtnevoi Revoliutsii XV (1932)*, has not been included to any of Khvylovyi's Selected Works. It was republished for the first time in 1994 (KHVYLOVYI *Podiaka pryvatnoho likaria*).

9 KHVYLOVYI Uryvok z avtobiohrafii.

10 *Kratkaia biografiia chlena KP(b)U Nikolaia Grigor'ievicha Fitileva*.

11 Based on works of HELLBECK *Revolution on My Mind*, and HALFIN *Terror in My Soul*; FITZPATRICK *Everyday Stalinism*.

12 *Kratkaia biografiia*, p. 832.

13 *Kratkaia biografiia*, pp. 836–837.

Notably, this confession confronts the reader with the attitude Khvyl'ovyi developed towards the Bolshevik party at a time of key social and economic experiments undertaken by the Communist Party in the early 1920s. Khvyl'ovyi repeatedly expressed his misgivings about the New Economic Policy which he saw as a withdrawal from revolutionary ideals. That “hopeless NEP with its wild bureaucratism and fat NEP-men”<sup>14</sup> created, according to Khvyl'ovyi, a “suffocating atmosphere” forcing him for a time to abandon his literary activity and become a factory worker to “freshen up”.<sup>15</sup> In doing so, Khvyl'ovyi, one may argue, backed himself into a corner: being a Party member meant to share its ideology and to agree with its actions, since the Party could not be mistaken. Hence, Khvyl'ovyi's questioning his compatibility with the party, “do I have a right to carry a Party membership card, or am I only a lumber for the party?”, became his personal attempt to reconcile his beliefs with the policies pursued by the Party, with which he fully identified but could not agree.<sup>16</sup>

### “Am I really superfluous because I love Ukraine madly?”

Khvyl'ovyi entered Ukrainian literature in 1921, when he moved to Kharkiv, the capital of the Ukrainian SSR, from the provincial town Bogodukhiv. The same year, he joined the circle of Vasyl' Ellan-Blakytnyi, the editor-in-chief of the Kharkiv government newspaper *Visti VUTsVK* (VUTsVK News), who introduced the young writer to the artistic and intellectual milieu. The first collection of Khvyl'ovyi's short stories *Blakytyni Etudy* (Blue Etudes), published in 1923, brought him immediate fame. Volodymyr Koriak, a well-known critic of the time, responded to this first collection as follows: “Genuinely: Khvyl'ovyi. He is excited and excites all of us, he intoxicates and disquiets, irritates, weakens, captivates and fascinates. [...] He scourges anything that is corrupt in the revolution, seeking after it everywhere in the name of his beloved idea: communism, which he had accepted as an ascetic and a romanticist”.<sup>17</sup> The publication of his second collection *Osin'* (Autumn) in 1924 established him as “one of the most outstanding writers of the proletarian age”.<sup>18</sup>

Khvyl'ovyi's imaginative writing of the early 1920s demonstrates the complicated process of ideological adaptation of an entire generation of revolutionary youth and Civil War activists to the post-revolutionary realities.<sup>19</sup> By rights, Khvyl'ovyi, a long-standing party member, an activist of the Red Army and member of a Bolshevik executive committee, became an inventor and promoter of a heroic myth of the Revolution and the Civil War in Ukrainian literature. The Civil War is thus regarded as a golden age, to which Khvyl'ovyi's characters repeatedly referred in order to oppose the triviality of the NEP years, seen by many as a perversion of the revolution.

14 Khvyl'ovyi's foreword to the collection of Ellan-Blakytnyi's poems, quoted in: *KHVVYLIA Vid ukhlyu – u prirvu*, p. 596.

15 *Kratkaia biografiia*, p. 835.

16 For similar questioning of party loyalty see: HALFIN Popov's apostasy.

17 Quoted in *LETIES/IASHEK Desiat' rokiu*, vol. 1, p. 526.

18 *DOROSHEVYCH Pidruchnyk istoriii ukrains'koiu literatury*, p. 239.

19 On the inability of the revolutionary youth to reunite their aspiration and dreams with the contradictory reality of NEP see, for example, NEUMANN “Youth, It's Your Turn!”.

For this reason, Khvylovyi with his early writings was placed on a par with his Russian contemporary Boris Pil'niak (1884-1938), the author of the unorthodox chronicle of the Bolshevik Revolution *Golji God* (Naked Year, 1922). Similarly to Pil'niak's most common metaphor for the Revolution as a blizzard, an unplanned, uncontrollable element valued for its purgative function,<sup>20</sup> Khvylovyi's revolution is depicted as a cardinal shift, a rebellion against triviality, a call for action and purification from the old false morality. It is described as being "without buttons, with elbow room, room to stretch oneself, to draw a lung-filling breath in the wide-open spaces".<sup>21</sup> Khvylovyi's expectations from those turbulent years are condensed in metaphors of a "blue Savoy", an "intangibile Commune", or a "Commune behind the hills".

In his short stories and novels written during 1921-1924, Khvylovyi presented a vivid palette of revolutionary activists and war heroes, snapshoted amidst zealous struggle for a "new unknown". Those characters included revolutionary leaders such as, for example, the main character of the folklore-style story *Legenda* (The Legend), Sten'ka, a partisan's wife who disguised herself as a man to head a detachment of red rebels, whose last words before the execution were full of optimism and expectations: "Listen! Listen! I am dying in the name of freedom. I appeal to you: sharpen the knives. Look, look at the glow: that is our liberation blazing; new outset is coming!"<sup>22</sup>

Another example of a revolutionary hero is Comrade Zhuchok, the central character of *Kit u chobotiakh* (Puss in Boots), a non-partisan cook in a field kitchen who over time is promoted to leader of a communist cell. The Comrade is seen as an ardent promoter of the "crimson revolution", a revolutionary ant (*mural'*). One of many, this Puss in Boots is "going through the wastes of the revolution" in her cap with a pentagonal star on a shaved head – "not to suit a fashion – but for the march, for convenience".<sup>23</sup>

Khvylovyi summarized that optimistic revolutionary upheaval through the words of Comrade Uliana, a character of *Sentymental'na istoriia* (The Sentimental Tale): "Heavens! You cannot imagine what a wonderful country it was. Under its sun, not only the inner world of each one of us was transformed and we were made ideal, but we were physically born anew. I swear to you! Even physically we were ideal men and women."<sup>24</sup>

However, the years of the revolution were followed by a peacetime reconstruction that required new virtues and skills. As stated by Nikolai Bukharin at the Third Congress of the Komsomol in late 1920, while the party still needed "conscious Communists who have both a fiery heart and a burning revolutionary passion", it was now especially important to develop young Communists "who have calm heads, who know what they want, who can stop when necessary, retreat when necessary, take a step to the side when necessary, move cautiously weighing and calculating each step".<sup>25</sup> This newly promoted image of a young Communist, however, diverged from the idea of socialism to which militant youth adhered during the Civil War years. Instead, those recently privileged activ-

20 On Pil'niak's account of revolution see: MALONEY Anarchism and Bolshevism.

21 "Puss in boots", in: KHVYLOVY Stories From the Ukraine, p. 16.

22 "Legenda", in: KHVYLOVY Tvory v p'ja'tokh tomakh. Vol. 1, p. 319.

23 "Puss in boots", in: KHVYLOVY Stories From the Ukraine, p. 17.

24 "Sentimental tale", in: KHVYLOVY Stories From the Ukraine, p. 77.

25 Quoted from GORSUCH "NEP Be Damned!", p. 564.

ists with the introduction of NEP became, as Sheila Fitzpatrick noted, outsiders, whose values started to be seen as alien within the society they struggled for.<sup>26</sup> Notably, at the time of reversed morals and ethics, death became the way to prove loyalty to former integrity and suicide became a means to protest against the betrayal of the revolution.

The epidemic of suicides among military youth and party members, widely recorded in NEP years,<sup>27</sup> was also echoed in Khvyl'ovyi's novels. Some of his characters in the post-revolutionary hangover mood are portrayed as being on the verge of taking their lives (e.g., the Editor Kark with his Browning (*Editor Kark*) or Mar'iana, who decided to hasten her death by getting infected with syphilis (*Zaulok – A Back Street*, 1923); others are presented on their deathbeds, happy to be dying in the name of the idea (like, Vadym in *Synii Lystopad – Blue November*, 1923), who asks, “what are our tragedies against this great symphony towards the future”<sup>28</sup>); or simply pushed to suicide being unable to break a cynical cycle of everyday existence (e.g., Khlonia, a former Communist idealist, who understood that “Lenin repeats only once in five hundred years” (*Povist' pro sanatoriïnu zonu – A Novel about a Sanatorium*, 1924).

The NEP years witnessed not only the banishing of the old heroes but also set the stage for a new pantheon. With the rise of bureaucracy, loyalty to the party no longer required idealistic sacrifices; loyalty started to be defined through unquestionable service and submission. Thus, those “chaste apostles and saint preachers” were transformed into a group of dishonourable opportunists: “now every former giant is nothing more than a nasty intellectual [*inteligentishka*], a parvenu, scum who impudently bristles up and even more impudently avouches ‘we’ (‘we’ to define not those who struggled, but those who are in ‘power’).”<sup>29</sup>

The bureaucratisation of the Soviet society was derided in Khvyl'ovyi's short story *Ivan Ivanovych*, 1929. This novel is a satire on the entire social order, whose implementers lived in a parallel world in which, it seemed, Communism had already triumphed. With artificial sincerity and optimism Khvyl'ovyi depicts the lifestyle of an average communist cell leader, who genuinely lives under communism, even more, in Thomas More's Utopia (the symbolic name of the street where the character's family lives). Ivan Ivanovich in his four-room apartment furnished with mahogany, French governess and a cook has already witnessed the “new revolutionary interpretation” of the social order, descending to reality only while changing into shabby clothes (“well aware of the transitory nature of the period in which they lived”<sup>30</sup>) to take part in a party cell meeting. Thus, in 1929 Khvyl'ovyi exposes the pervasive corruption of the long-anticipated social order, where every opportunist considers himself protected by a membership card, where the absolute truth exists on the pages of a party newspaper, where moral norms are irrelevant, where communism is already flourishing, but only for the chosen.

26 FITZPATRICK *The Legacy of the Civil War*, p. 393.

27 About suicides in the Soviet Union in the 1920s see, e.g.: PINNOW *Lost to the Collective*; PINNOW *Violence against the Collective Self*.

28 “Synii lystopad”, in: KHVYL'OVYI *Tvory v p'jat'okh tomakh*, vol. 1, p. 224.

29 “Sanatoriïna Zona”, in: KHVYL'OVYI *Tvory v p'jat'okh tomakh*, vol. 2, p. 133.

30 “Ivan Ivanovich”, in: KHVYLOVY *Stories From the Ukraine*, p. 184.

Yet, there were also other important political developments, to which Khvyľovyi responded through his characters, namely the frustration of those numerous Ukrainian communists, for whom Bolshevik authority was meant to bring along national self-determination and cultural flourishing. Those errant dreamers, same as journalist Kark (*Editor Kark*) in the years to follow could not conceive the discrepancy between the slogans of national free self-determination and the realities of the Soviet national policy. The question Kark repeatedly asked himself (“Am I really superfluous because I love Ukraine madly?”<sup>31</sup>) became the verdict for the KP(b)U members with a distinct national orientation. Moreover, with the Treaty of the workers’ and peasants’ alliance between the RSFSR and the Ukrainian SSR, signed in December 1920, according to which two republics united certain commissariats (of military and naval affairs, foreign trade, finance, labour, railways, post and telegraph, and Supreme Economic Council) “for defence purposes as well as in the interests of economic development”, the status of the Ukrainian republic was de facto reduced to that of an autonomous Russian region.<sup>32</sup> These developments were accurately observed by Khvyľovyi in 1927. He concluded that the Communist party from being a vanguard of the proletarian struggle “quietly and gradually was being transformed into an ordinary ‘gatherer of the Russian land’ [*sobiratel’ia zemli rus’koi*]”<sup>33</sup>

#### “From diversion into the abyss”<sup>34</sup>

In 1927 Khvyľovyi declared: “to my arabesques – finis.”<sup>35</sup> This meant the end to his lyrics, to his characters full of illusions, to his expectations of future change. In 1925–28 Khvyľovyi became involved in the Literary Discussion, debates that started merely over cultural issues but soon shifted into the political domain. Khvyľovyi entered those debates agitating for quality in artistic work and a new path for proletarian literature. And yet, over the course of these years he gradually developed his view, eventually calling for Ukraine to distance itself from Russia and to become sovereign, precisely worded in the dichotomy “Ukraine or Little Russia [Malorosiia]”, used as a title for a pamphlet never published in the Soviet Union.

The Literary Discussion, one of the most significant developments of the 1920s in Soviet Ukraine, began with a squib by Hrytsko Iakovenko entitled *On Critics and Criticism in Literature* and published in *Kultura i Pobut* (Culture and Daily Life), a literary supplement to governmental newspaper *Visti VUTSVK*, on April, 30, 1925. A reply by Khvyľovyi was published in the same issue. His *First Letter to Literary Youth* (“On ‘Satan in a Barrel’, Graphomaniacs, Speculators and Other Prosvita Types”) initiated a long debate between Khvyľovyi, his associates and like-minded colleagues and their opponents, representing an official party-authorised position. The most important of them were An-

31 “Redaktor Kark”, in: KHVYL’OVYI Tvory v p’jat’okh tomakh, vol. 1, p. 149.

32 ADAMSKY/KANTSELYARUK/DERGACHOV The Ukrainian Question.

33 “Woodcocks”, in: KHVYLOVY/LUCKYJ (eds.): Before the Storm, pp. 63–64.

34 Reference to KHVYLIA Vid ukhyly – u prirvu.

35 “Arabesky”, in: KHVYL’OVYI Tvory v p’jat’okh tomakh, vol. 1, p. 414.

drii Khvyliia<sup>36</sup> and Ievhen Hirschak,<sup>37</sup> prominent party figures, and Serhii Pelypenko, the leader of the mass literary movements *Pluh* (Plough).<sup>38</sup>

In his pamphlets from 1925–1926, Khvyľ'ovyi developed four central images: *prosvita*, “Europe”, art and the Asiatic Renaissance. These concepts, however, had a clear reference to the broader on-going debates around the orientation of Ukrainian culture, the social role of literature and the Ukrainian language as a means of artistic expression. Conflicting views on the status of Ukraine and its autonomous cultural development had emerged right after the October Revolution and were brought to the fore by the rivalry between the Russian-led Proletkult and Ukrainian writers: Proletkult was an acronym for “proletarian culture”, a mass movement emanating from the Bolshevik Revolution and aiming at creating a new proletarian art by forced interference in artistic creativity. Writers in Ukraine were repelled by Proletkult’s apparent Russian orientation, which “not only failed to acknowledge Ukrainian national art, culture or language, but referred to the [Ukrainian] Soviet Republic as a ‘region’ [*kraini*]”.<sup>39</sup> They received support from the Ukrainian People’s Commissariat of Education. In May 1919, Hnat Mykhailychenko, a newly appointed People’s Commissar of Education, reported at the Vseukrlitkom’s meeting that “proletarian art can reach its international goal only through channels national both in content and form”.<sup>40</sup>

The fight for literature written in the Ukrainian language was ostensibly exhausted with the introduction of *ukrainizatsiia*, the local variant of the all-Soviet nationalities policy of *korenizatsiia*, launched at the Twelfth Party Congress in 1923. The new preferential nationalities policy envisaged, among others, a number of coercive methods to compel peoples and minorities of the Soviet Union to use their native languages in public life. For these purposes, publishing and distribution of books in native languages was prioritised. The process of linguistic *ukrainizatsiia* went hand in hand with another party initiative of the time, *liknep*, or “eradication of illiteracy”. The combined results of these initiatives were two-fold. On the one hand, they created a demand for literature in Ukrainian, whilst granting writers, perhaps for the first time in history, direct access to their audience. On the other hand, however, the 1920s witnessed the emergence of a mass audience with limited artistic demands and aesthetic expectations. The question of meeting its expectations led to new fractions within Ukraine’s literary corpus.

The social developments of the time and their impact on the quality of literature were framed by Khvyľ'ovyi in the binary oppositions of “Europe vs. Prosvita” and “Olympus vs. Prosvita”. The *prosvity* (enlightenment societies) became the first point of criticism. Under these societies, a network of cultural and educational centres had been established in Ukraine during the 19th century; following the Revolution, the Commissariat of Education had used them to provide basic political education and for literacy campaigns. In addition, they became centres for propaganda work and for nurturing future proletarian writers. Khvyľ'ovyi, in turn, considered “prosvita” as a psychological category; for him it

36 E.g., KHVYLIA Vid ukhlyu – u prirvu.

37 HIRCHAK Na dva fronta v borbe s natsionalizmom, p. 226.

38 PYLYPENKO Iak na pravdyvomu shliakhu spotykaiutsia.

39 Quoted in ILNYTZKYJ Ukrainian Futurism, p. 39.

40 MYKHAILYCHENKO Proletars’ke mystetstvo.



became the embodiment of provincialism, parochial and utilitarian attitude towards literature, hackwork and mass culture as opposed to high culture and “academism”. Hence, the opposition “Olympus against Prosvita”. This opposition also applied to understanding creative writing (a gift or a skill); a writer (a talented individual with his own worldview or a trained one, prepared to reproduce ready-made plots); and a reader (is literature meant to entertain or to inspire?). “Olympus” (or “Europe”, another psychological category) in this opposition meant a full-bodied national culture.

The “Olympus vs. Prosvita” binary fully represented the state of affairs in Ukrainian letters. In 1925, there were a number of literary organisations in Ukraine. In 1922, an all-Ukrainian peasant writers’ union *Pluh* (Plough) was established by Pylypenko, an editor-in-chief of Kharkiv newspaper *Sil’ski Visti* (Rural News). Focused mainly on “the revolutionary peasantry”, the *Pluh* writers aimed to create mass literature by using “the greatest simplicity and economy of artistic methods”.<sup>41</sup> A similar orientation was adopted by the Association of the Proletarian Writers *Hart* (Tempering), initiated by Ellan-Blakytnyi, the editor-in-chief of the Kharkiv-based governmental newspaper *Visti VUTsVK* in January, 1923. Yet another incarnation of proletarian literature in Soviet Ukraine was the All-Ukrainian Association of Proletarian Writers (VUAPP, *Vseukraïns’ka assotsiatsiia proletars’kykh pys’mennykin*), formed in 1924 under the auspices of the All-Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (VAPP). These three organisations promoted the idea of mass culture. This, according to Pylypenko, included orientation towards a mass readership; a simple and accessible style and language; common topics; priority of content over form; and 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], contributors to wall newspaper and handwritten journals.”<sup>42</sup>

The approach of regarding “the sign outside the State Publishing House, the aphorism on a fence, and the verse on the toilet wall” (Khvylovyi)<sup>43</sup> as fine literature was opposed by the so called “Olympians”, championed by the *Hart* members Khvylovyi, Dosvitnyi and Ialovy. They formed a faction symbolically named “Urbino”,<sup>44</sup> arguing that art could not become a substitute to general enlightenment. This group defended the idea that literature should not be diminished to suit middlebrow tastes but, on the contrary, should set up certain standards to encourage readers to raise their preferences. Khvylovyi warned against the devaluation of artistic activity and meeting the tastes of a mass audience. 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.”<sup>45</sup> These three writers formed the core of a new literary organisation, the Free Academy of Proletarian Literature (*Vil’na Akademiia Proletars’koïi Literatury*, VAPLITE, 1926–1928), which, after *Hart*’s dissolution in 1925, became the only alternat-

41 Platforma ideolohichna i khudozhnia, p. 76.

42 PYLYPENKO *Nashi hriky*, p. 420.

43 “Thoughts Against the Current”, in: KHVYLOVY *The Cultural Renaissance in Ukraine*, p. 109.

44 A reference to the Italian city Urbino which became the predecessor of the Renaissance culture.

45 “Quo Vadis?”, in: KHVYLOVY *The Cultural Renaissance in Ukraine*, p. 54.

ive to the state-sponsored writers' unions (especially, the All-Ukrainian Union of Proletarian Writers (*Vsukraïns'ka Spilka Proletars'kyh Pys'mennykiv*, VUSPP, 1927–1932).

The literary discussion involved many contributors. Essays published by Khvylovyi, his supporters and opponents were widely discussed and received support from different sections of the Ukrainian public. The main concern of this public discussion was, however, the social role of literature: should art be subordinated to political imperatives and be didactic and useful, or should it merely be a plaything of imaginations, detached from social conditions? A letter from the Kharkiv Institute of Public Education (formerly Kharkiv University) condemned Khvylovyi's "unpatriotic orientation on literary standards set by Western Europe". Instead of highbrow writing and elitist literature, the Kharkiv Institute's staff called for "a mass literature accessible to and so badly required by workers".<sup>46</sup> A similar opinion was voiced by the members of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences in Kyiv. On May 24, 1925 a public discussion on *Paths for the Development of Contemporary Literature* was hosted by this authoritative scientific institution. One of the questions proposed was "Which Europe [does] Khvylovyi want to follow?" The critique was overwhelming; Khvylovyi was accused of advocating a Europe that was "bourgeois, philistine, and hostile to the goals of Communism". As one participant questioned: "Should one prefer the Tarzan novel of Edgar Rice Burroughs to the poetry of Maiakovskii?"<sup>47</sup> Among the Kyivan intellectuals, however, there were those who supported Khvylovyi's stance. Mykola Zerov, a Kyivan poet, translator and literary scholar, made an attempt to deprive Khvylovyi's views of political implications. According to Zerov, "Europe" in Khvylovyi's approach was nothing more than a strong cultural tradition. From this point of view, the opposition of "Europe vs. Prosvita" was framed as *kultura* vs. *khaltura*, a culture of lasting values vs. hackwork.<sup>48</sup>

Despite attempts to confine Khvylovyi's concepts to the cultural realm, it was the political undertone of the pamphlets which was discerned and picked up by the party officials. In the flow of the debates, the underlying question of Khvylovyi pamphlets, whether any cultural advance was possible in a "culturally backward nation", received a clear political sounding: a demand for political and cultural autonomy. The writer's positioning towards Russia at the early stage of the debate was defined in cultural terms. He agitated against the orientation towards Russian art. It was stated that permanent cultural dependency on Russian patterns "conditioned our psyche to play a slavish imitator", converted Ukraine into a "classic country of cultural epigonism", of "servile psychology", continuing to suffer from "cultural backwardness".<sup>49</sup> Bearing in mind this eternal impediment to comprehensive cultural development, Khvylovyi asked: "by which of the world's literatures should we set our course?" and immediately provided a definite and unconditional answer: "On no account by the Russian. [...] Ukrainian poetry must flee as quickly as possible from Russian literature and its styles."<sup>50</sup>

46 Quote in: SHKANDRIJ *Modernists, Marxists and the Nation*, p. 54.

47 Shliakhy rozvytku suchasnoi literatury, p. 7.

48 MACE *Communism and the Dilemmas of National Liberation*, p. 141.

49 "Thoughts Against the Current", in: KHVYLOVY *The Cultural Renaissance in Ukraine*, p. 124.

50 "Apologists of Scribbling", in: KHVYLOVY *The Cultural Renaissance in Ukraine*, p. 222.

It was in April 1926 after the letter of Joseph Stalin to “Comrade Kaganovich and the Other Members of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee, Ukraine K.P.(B.)” that the literary discussion acquired definite political meaning. In this letter, Khvylovyi was attacked not so much for his oppositional views, but for expressing such “defeatist” ideas while being a member of the Communist Party:

“At a time when the proletarians of Western Europe and their Communist Parties are in sympathy with ‘Moscow’, this citadel of the international revolutionary movement and of Leninism, at a time when the proletarians of Western Europe look with admiration at the flag that flies over Moscow, the Ukrainian Communist Khvilevoy has nothing better to say in favour of ‘Moscow’ than to call on the Ukrainian leaders to get away from ‘Moscow’ ‘as fast as possible’.”<sup>51</sup>

Yet, Khvylovyi’s response to this critique was worded even more sharply. In the pamphlet *Ukraina chy Malorosiia* (Ukraine or Little Russia, 1926) he stated:

“We are indeed an independent state whose republican organism is a part of the Soviet Union. And Ukraine is independent not because we, communists, desire this, but because the iron and irresistible will of the laws of history demands it, because only in this way shall we hasten class differentiation in Ukraine. [...] To gloss over independence with a hollow pseudo-Marxism is to fail to understand that Ukraine will continue to be an arena for counter-revolution as long as it does not pass through the natural stage that Western Europe went through during the formation of nation-states.”<sup>52</sup>

Such statements, issued by a card-carrying communist, were seen as a surrender to nationalism. More precisely, as if to take into account Khvylovyi party affiliation, Stalin in the above mentioned letter pointed out: “What is to be said of other Ukrainian intellectuals, those of the non-communist camp, if Communists begin to talk, and not only to talk but even to write in our Soviet press, in the language of Khvilevoy?”<sup>53</sup> Obviously, *Ukraine or Little Russia* was censored for publication. The writer was denounced as a bourgeois nationalist, and all his work was pejoratively labelled as “khvylovism”. Moreover, at the June Plenum of the KP(b)U Central Committee (1–6 June, 1926) Khvylovyi was condemned for eight deviations, including “disseminating ideas of Ukrainian fascism”.<sup>54</sup> The same year accusatory articles and literary critique, composed by party ideologists Andrii Khvyliia, Vlas Chubar, Volodymyr Zatons’ky, and Sergii Pylypenko, poured on the pages of the official newspapers.

### Hunting for a “Woodcock”<sup>55</sup>

It was around this time that a new image of an ambivalent, irresolute communist Khvylovyi who succumbed to his deep-rooted nationalist sentiments started to develop.

- 51 STALIN [Letter] To Comrade Kaganovich and the Other Members of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee, Ukraine C.P.(B.).
- 52 “Ukraine or Little Russia”, in: KHVYLOVYI The Cultural Renaissance in Ukraine, p. 227.
- 53 STALIN [Letter] To Comrade Kaganovich and the Other Members of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee, Ukraine C.P.(B.).
- 54 HIRCHAK Na dva fronta v bor’be s natsionalizmom, p. 50.
- 55 Reference to: SHAPOVAL/PANCHENKO (eds.): Poliuvannia na “Val’dshnepa”.

One of the instruments chosen for this campaign was a deliberate manipulation of the documents gathered on Khvył'ovyi by the secret services, aimed at consolidating this image and making it, so to say, authentic.

Evidence of the party's attempt to create a certain image of the communist Khvył'ovyi can be found in a recently published collection of declassified documents from the Sectoral State Archive of the Security Service of Ukraine.<sup>56</sup> This collection contains secret service reports and informers' messages to the State Political Directorate of the Ukrainian SSR, anonymous evaluations emphasizing the nationalistic and anti-Soviet content of Khvył'ovyi's writings, evidence from contemporaries and close acquaintances, reports by informers on the talks surrounding the death of the author etc., gathered between 1930 and 1933. These documents, whose value for scholarship on Khvył'ovyi is beyond doubt, nonetheless raise the question of the overall veracity of primary sources compiled by the secret services in the 1930s.<sup>57</sup> It raises the question of whether a historian can rely overall on documents deliberately prepared by numerous secret agents and if a historian, by attaching scientific value to those fabrications and misinformation, becomes a 'collaborator' of these secret services. In the case of Khvył'ovyi, would a historian retransmit further an intentionally created image of an ambivalent Soviet writer?

The intention behind the personal file S-183 on Khvył'ovyi can be gauged by bringing this collection into line with other recently published documents on the relationship between the central party leadership and the Ukrainian SSR. In one such document, namely the State Political Directorate (GPU) report *Pro Ukraïns'kyi Separatyzm* (On Ukrainian separatism),<sup>58</sup> cultural work was equated to an armed struggle for Ukrainian independence. In this official statement composed in 1926, long before the launch of nationally-based political persecutions, it was declared that "the fact that Ukrainian nationalists ceased the open struggle with the Soviet power and formally acknowledged it does not mean that they have definitively reconciled themselves with the present state of affairs and have truly given up their hostile plans".<sup>59</sup>

This secret GPU document, in which the name of Khvył'ovyi was also mentioned, encouraged informing on Ukrainian intellectuals, who have treacherously changed their tactics but not their anti-Soviet standpoints. The results of the meticulous work that secret agents conducted on the Ukrainian intellectuals are presented in another collection of declassified documents, *Ukraïns'ka Inteligentsia i Vlada: Zvedennia Sekretnoho Viddilu DPU USRR 1927–1929 rr.* (Ukrainian Intellectuals and the Authorities. Summaries of the Secret Department of the State Political Administration of Ukrainian SSR for 1927–1929).<sup>60</sup> This collection features weekly top secret reports (*svodki*) which were drafted by the Secret Department of the State Political Administration of the Ukrainian SSR during 1927 and 1929 based on operative sources and informers' reports on actions deemed to be of counter-revolutionary or anti-Soviet character. Notably, this collection of documents recounts the methods used to falsify evidence for a 1929 show trial against the so-

56 SHAPOVAL/PANCHENKO (eds.): Poliuvannia na "Val'dshnepa".

57 RÉV *Retroactive Justice*, pp. 1–3.

58 SHAPOVAL "On Ukrainian Separatism".

59 SHAPOVAL "On Ukrainian Separatism", p. 287.

60 DANYLENKO (ed.): *Ukraïns'ka intelihentsiia i vlada*.

called Union for the Liberation of Ukraine (SVU) consisting of forty-five Ukrainian intellectuals, writers and theologians who had formerly been politicians and activists.

Khvylovyi only partly escaped charges in 1929. By that time, he had already submitted two open letters of recantation denouncing his earlier views.<sup>61</sup> Yet, further proof of Khvylovyi's loyalty was required: the writer was assigned to communicate the official party line on the SVU case, covering the trial in the party press.<sup>62</sup> The insight behind this appointment is provided by Kostyuk in his memoirs. Kostyuk recalled that Khvylovyi with his colleagues, right after the arrests of the SVU intellectuals had become known, went to the TsK to express doubts about the case. Kostyuk speculates that it was the nature of the "evidence in support of the accusation", probably going beyond those forty-five already arrested, which compelled Khvylovyi to agree to take on the role of a party 'spokesman'.<sup>63</sup>

Taking into account those developments, the question arises why the personal file on Khvylovyi started to be compiled only in 1930. The opening year of the file casts doubts on the underlying motive of the GPU to start surveillance of the writer. In 1930, after several letters of recantation, the dissolution of all the literary groups Khvylovyi was engaged in and almost total silence over the last years, Khvylovyi, as corroborated by one secret report, began "to behave more quietly". Hence, was this personal file opened in preparation for further purges against Ukrainian intelligentsia members, which could be used either against Khvylovyi himself or to force him, if need be, to testify against his colleagues? The documents put together in File S-183 present an image of the communist Khvylovyi who was dangerously ambivalent about Soviet authority. It offered sufficient ground for further actions, which, however, Khvylovyi forestalled by committing suicide on 13 May, 1933.

The image of a weak, unsteady communist was consolidated after Khvylovyi's death. The main message of the official obituary notices and speeches of Party representatives was that Khvylovyi lacked revolutionary temper in a time when "proletarians and peasants of the state with enthusiasm fight in all spheres of the building of socialism"<sup>64</sup>, when "every day, every hour of our struggle put us closer to the triumph of Socialism all over the world".<sup>65</sup> Thus, Khvylovyi's decision was perceived as worthless, tragic, and ridiculous, asserting that it had "nothing to do with membership in the Communist party."<sup>66</sup> It was stressed that the Party "always valued him highly and repeatedly tried to

61 For Khvylovyi's repentant letters see: "Zaiava grupy komunistiv chleniv VAPLITE", in: KHVYLOVYI Tvory v p'jat'okh tomakh, vol. 4, pp. 567–568; "Lyst do gazety 'Komunist'", in: KHVYLOVYI Tvory v p'jat'okh tomakh, vol. 4, pp. 571–574.

62 As a result, two newspaper articles were written: *A khto shche sydyt na lavi pidsudnyh? (do procesu 'Spilky vyzvolennia Ukrainy')*, published in Kharkivs'ky proletar (16th March 1930); and *Za shchodennykom S. O. Iefremova – vozhdia, akademika, "sovisti zemli ukrainskoi", shcho palabkotyt' "velykym polumiam"*, published in Kharkivs'ky proletar (21st March 1930; 25th March 1930).

63 KOSTYUK *Zustrichi i Proshchannia*, p. 279.

64 Note on Khvylovyi's suicide in *Visti VUTSVK* (14th May 1933).

65 "Speech of comrade Kyrylenko", in: KHVYLOVYI Tvory v p'jat'okh tomakh, vol. 5, p. 142.

66 "Speech of comrade Mykytenko", in: KHVYLOVYI Tvory v p'jat'okh tomakh, vol. 5, p. 138.

disengage him from his old faults and past milieu and to move forward towards communist development".<sup>67</sup>

Within a short period of time, his life-long activity was labelled counter-revolutionary, his grave was levelled to the ground,<sup>68</sup> his writings were removed from libraries, and his name disappeared from official literary criticism. Until the early 1980s, Khvył'ovyi's name in the Soviet Union could only be used in connection with "khvył'ovism" – a general term to define class enemies. The same approach was used for the entry on the writer in the Great Soviet Encyclopaedia (1935).<sup>69</sup> Moreover, the image of a leader of a "national deviationist group of writers" was introduced outside Soviet Ukraine: in the English edition of the reference volume about Soviet Ukraine (1969) Khvył'ovyi was mentioned only through his "manifestation of local nationalism".<sup>70</sup>

### Khvył'ovism is "a modern nationalism of the 1930s"

Although forbidden in the Soviet Ukraine, debates about Khvył'ovyi's contribution to Ukrainian literature and politics flourished among the Ukrainian diaspora. Not surprisingly, the main discussion point became his collaboration with the Bolshevik party and, as its outcome, his suicide. His party membership was presented either as 1) a compelled one, which enabled him to pursue his literary activity (his unique role in the literary discussion in particular) or 2) a voluntary one with all of the negative connotations of this his betrayal and cooperation with the enemy. In other words, for some scholars, Khvył'ovyi's activity, as well as the series of his pamphlets in the mid-1920s, was "sufficiently revolutionary and explosive to stir at first a great debate, [...] and then to draw down the rage and retribution of the Communist party",<sup>71</sup> whereas others regarded Khvył'ovyi as a provocateur who "opened the window for the agents of the occupying power [the Bolshevik party] to see who would be the first to rush to it to catch a breath of fresh air" and "helped the NKVD to make short work of Ukrainian cultural and public activists either non-Communist or Ukrainian communists".<sup>72</sup>

The existing secondary literature on Khvył'ovyi offers a variety of ideologically loaded approaches to assess his personality, literary activity or public engagement. The way the writer is evaluated depends on the personal convictions of the interpreter or an uncritical interpretation of the entire period of the 1920s both in the diaspora and in the national historiography. Yet, all those different ways carry through a similar approach highlighting Khvył'ovyi's ideological ambivalence. The emphasis on one or the other side of the 'scale of convictions' often depends on the interpreter's own biases.

The way Khvył'ovyi was evaluated within the diaspora depended significantly on the ideological background of the observer. For a number of émigrés, the Bolsheviks represented the enemy who had crushed the idea of Ukrainian independence by a military offensive. However, there were a large number of those, who due to their earlier socialist

67 "Speech of comrade Mykytenko", in: KHVYL'OVYI Tvory v p'jat'okh tomakh, vol. 5, p. 139.

68 A symbolic grave to Mykola Khvył'ovyi was opened in Kharkiv in April 1995.

69 Khvylevoi Mykola, p. 488.

70 Soviet Ukraine, p. 469.

71 LUCKYJ Literary Politics in the Soviet Ukraine, p. 62.

72 ZADESNIANS'KYI Shcho nam dav Mykola Khvył'ovyi, pp. 159–160.

orientation as well as political and cultural advance in the Ukrainian SSR in the 1920s, tended towards reconciliation with the Bolsheviks, seeing the latter as defenders of the idea of a sovereign Ukraine. There was a large number of so-called Sovietophiles, including such prominent figures as Mykhailo Hrushevs'kyi or Volodymyr Vynnychenko, for whom the activity of Khvylovyi and of other nationally oriented communists symbolised the possibility of a nationally defined socialist state.

Yet, the recognition granted by the émigré socialists to the Ukrainian SSR hinged on the level of affirmative actions provided by the central government to support the republic's national development. Thereby, new tendencies in the cultural sphere appearing during the period of the so-called cultural revolution of 1928–1931 were regarded by this group, as can be seen from the letter of September 1933 from Vynnychenko to the TsK KP(b)U and TsK VKP(b), as proof of the inconsistent Soviet policy on the national question, leading to numerous suicides among high-ranking Ukrainian communists.<sup>73</sup> The suicides of Khvylovyi (13.05.1933) and the then Minister of Education Mykola Skrypnyk (07.07.1933) thus stemmed the ideological support granted by the Ukrainian left-oriented emigration to the Bolshevik party in Ukraine.

Khvylovyi's activity was assessed differently by Ukrainian right-wing groups abroad. For those observers, Khvylovyi represented an on-going national opposition to the Bolshevik authorities. One such evaluation was voiced by the leader of the Ukrainian nationalists in Western Ukraine Dmytro Dontsov, who claimed that Khvylovyi was one of those “divided souls that were unable to cope with the problem: to what extent they are Ukrainians, and to what extent they are subject to Russia”.<sup>74</sup> In particular, Khvylovyi was praised for his repeated calls to distance Ukraine from the Communist party and orientation towards Moscow. As a result of this, he was seen as a leader of a “modern nationalism of the 1930s”,<sup>75</sup> as khvylovism was defined.

The appraisals of Ukrainian communists also depended heavily on the general ideological orientation of the Ukrainian emigration. The third post-World War II wave of Ukrainian emigration strengthened the nationalistic attitude of the diaspora. This ideological “turn to the right”<sup>76</sup> consolidated the idea of a united, independent Ukrainian state as the ultimate goal of the national struggle, which, consequently, rejected leftist sentiments of any kind. The re-orientation in the way the whole generation of the 1920s was regarded had, nevertheless, dual outcomes. On the one hand, Ukrainian communists or artists, who collaborated with the regime after the October revolution, were seen as definite and inexcusable traitors to the nationalist cause.<sup>77</sup> On the other hand, however, there was another more significant development for the historiography of the 1920s. A new paradigm of an “executed renaissance” was introduced, according to which the 1920s was a unique period of cultural flourishing in Ukraine, which, if it had not been violently interrupted by the Stalinist terror, would have evolved into the highest levels of national

73 LYST Vynnychenka Politbiuro TsK KP(b)U, TsK VKP(b) i I. Stalinu.

74 RAHMANNYI Dmytro Dontsov i Mykola Khvylovyi, p. 23.

75 Introduction to DONTSOV Mykola Khvylovyi, p. II.

76 For the intellectual development within the Ukrainian immigration in the inter-war period see: MOTYL The Turn to the Right.

77 E.g., PLYUSHCH Pravda pro khvylovizm; ZADESNIANS'KYI Shcho nam dav Mykola Khvylovyi.

cultural development. This approach was applied perhaps for the first time by Viktor Petrov, pen-name Domontovych, a prominent writer, scholar and literary critic, in his manuscript *Ukrains'ka intelihentsiia – zbertva bol'shevyts'koho teroru* (Ukrainian intelligentsia – a martyr of the Bolshevik terror), first published in 1949. The paradigm was later refined by Iurii Lavrinenko in the late 1950s.<sup>78</sup>

Undoubtedly, the post-revolutionary decade revealed the greatest creative potential of Ukrainian artists. Years of revolutions, civil war, political instability, and the ideological pluralism of the early Soviet years along with the policy of Ukrainization gave rise to an unprecedented development in all spheres of national cultural life. Nonetheless, such an approach to lamp together the entire generation of the 1920s is doubtful.

Firstly, the main problem of such a martyrological cast, according to Halyna Hryn, was the idea that “national and moral criteria can be brought to bear in the evaluation of authors and their works”.<sup>79</sup> Following this view of the whole generation of Ukrainian artists and cultural workers of the 1920s–1930s as martyrs of the Soviet regime essentially praised intellectuals based not on their merit but on the year of their death. Secondly, for those Ukrainian intellectuals, who in one way or another survived the terror, their moral right to continue their creative or public activity after the majority of their peers had been executed was questioned. For example, Pavlo Tychyna or Maksym Ryl's'kyi, who not only survived the terror but also obtained privileged positions in Ukrainian cultural and political life, became targets for this sort of criticism not only from their contemporaries but also from generations to come.

Finally, this paradigm rests on a rather exclusive approach towards the Ukrainian writers and cultural tendencies of that time. It places Khvył'ovyi and VAPLITE (*Vil'na akademiia proletars'koiu literatury*; Free Academy of Proletarian Literature, a literary organisation established by Khvył'ovyi in 1925 for promoting an idea of high-quality proletarian art), at the centre of the literary process. Similarly, the Literary Discussion of 1925–28 is seen as the peak of Ukrainian cultural flowering, the muting of which marked the onset of the violent solution to the national question for the Ukrainian SSR. The idea of VAPLITE's leading position in the cultural development of the 1920s, proposed by Lavrinenko, was pursued further by George S. N. LUCKYJ (*Literary politics in the Soviet Ukraine*) and Myroslav SHKANDRIJ (*Modernists, Marxists and the Nation*).

This status, however, has been questioned in some more recent studies on Ukrainian culture of the period, e.g. Oleh S. Ilnytzyj's *Ukrainian Futurism, 1914–1930*, arguing that besides the new proletarian literature promoted by Khvył'ovyi, there were strong avant-garde voices, whose representatives failed to receive the recognition of the Party and were almost totally forgotten thereafter. Furthermore, Lavrinenko's paradigm excluded literature written either not in Ukrainian or which lacked distinctive national sentiment, for example, the work of the prominent Odessa-born writer Isaac Babel, who, for all his loyalty to the regime, was also purged in the late 1930s.

However, Khvył'ovyi, despite his suicide in 1933, embodied ‘executed renaissance’ not only due to his distinct oppositional position towards Soviet policies, but also due to his influence on the whole generation of the 1920s, purged in the following decade. Argu-

78 LAVRINENKO Rozstriliane vidrozhennia.

79 HRYN The “Executed Renaissance” Paradigm Revisited, p. 68.



ably, Khvylovyi was placed at the centre of Ukrainian culture not as much due to his own efforts, although his literary genius is undeniable, but due to the meticulous work of his interpreters, adjusting his personality and writings to the required model.

### “A day when Mykola Khvylovyi was returned to his readers”<sup>80</sup>

In 1988, after a more than fifty-year ban on his name in Soviet Ukraine, Khvylovyi was praised from the high Party tribunes of the Ukrainian SSR in connection with his 95th birth and 55th death anniversary. Moreover, a set of cultural events was organised with the TsK's approval to commemorate the unjust forgotten Ukrainian writer Khvylovyi.

It should be mentioned that it was only for those celebrations that Khvylovyi's suicide notes were made public. The widely-cited version of Khvylovyi's last words reads as follows:

“Arrest of Ialovy – this is the murder of an entire generation ... For what? Because we were the most sincere Communists? I don't understand. The responsibility for the actions of Ialovy's generation lies with me, Khvylovyi. Today is a beautiful sunny day. I love life – you can't even imagine how much. Today is the 13th. Remember I was in love with this number? Terribly painful. Long live communism. Long live the socialist construction. Long live the Communist Party.”<sup>81</sup>

However, there is a less well-known version, offered by Petrov in his 1949 monograph, who claimed that Khvylovyi's last words were:

“The arrest of Ialovy convinced me that the persecution of Ukrainian writers has begun. By my blood I can certify that neither Ialovy, nor I have any guilt.”<sup>82</sup>

These different versions resulted from the fact that Khvylovyi's suicide notes, which, needless to say, should have been preserved as case evidence, exist only in copies, whose authenticity can easily be questioned.<sup>83</sup> The fact that Khvylovyi's suicide note was made public in the Soviet Ukraine only at the end of the 1980s once again raises the question of possible manipulations of those primary sources in order to polish the writer's biography.

Details behind the disclosure of the notes became known owing to the recent publication of the memoirs of the then TsK Secretary on Ideology, Fedir Ovcharenko.<sup>84</sup> As is known, on his last day Khvylovyi invited his friend over to listen to his new novel. With

80 Reference to the articles published in the late 1980s about the need to return Khvylovyi into Ukrainian literature: GRECHANUK Den' povernennia Mykoly Khvylovoho; DRACH Vystup na plenumi pravlinnyia Spilky Pys'mennykiv Ukraïny.

81 The second one was addressed to his foster-daughter Liubov Umantseva: “My precious *Liubystok!* Forgive me, my grey-winged dove, for everything. My unfinished novel, by the way, yesterday I destroyed not because I didn't want it to be published, but because I needed to convince myself: destroyed – then I have found enough will to do what I committed now. Goodbye, my precious *Liubystok*. Your father M. Khvylovyi.”

82 PETROV Ukraïns'ki kul'turni diiachy URSS, p. 30.

83 Yet, not only the wording but even the existence of those notes can be questioned. According to the memoirs of Mariia Sosiura, who was among the first to enter Khvylovyi's study after the suicide, there were no notes on the desk. See: BURLIAI Pravda pro smert' Khvylovoho.

84 OVCHARENKO Spohady.

a short presentation (“I was struggling with this novel a lot. However, I learned how a writer in the Stalin age should behave. Maybe I could teach you as well”<sup>85</sup>) the writer withdrew to his study where a moment later he shot himself. Right after the Party Committee was informed about the incident, Khvył’ovyi’s study was sealed: all his library, personal documentation and correspondence were confiscated.

The question over the suicide notes arose for the first time only in 1971, when the Ukrainian Soviet writer Iurii Smolych addressed the TsK and its First Secretary Petro Shelest with a request to access the original suicide notes of Khvył’ovyi from the Party Archive. Smolych at that time was working on his memoirs<sup>86</sup> and planned to include his recollections on Khvył’ovyi, since he was the last to have known him personally. In his request, Smolych wrote down the content of the suicide notes as he remembered them, claiming to have been present in Khvył’ovyi’s apartment at the time of the suicide (although refuted by the testimony of Iuliia Umantseva, Khvył’ovyi’s widow at the day of the event<sup>87</sup>).

Surprisingly, his recollections were confirmed the next week at a meeting between Smolych and Ovcharenko. Yet, the decision was made not to present the notes to him, since the copies, received from the archive, were not stamped, thus considered not official under Soviet regulation. Also, according to his memoirs, Ovcharenko had doubts that such statement as “Long live Communism!”, more suited to First-of-May demonstrations, would have been included at all in a suicide note. Moreover, the match between Smolych’s recollections about the 1933 events and the content of the unstamped copies raised doubts that Smolych could have spoken with the KGB beforehand and those notes could have been deliberately edited.<sup>88</sup>

The question of the suicide notes arose once again in 1988, when Mykola Zhulyns’kyi, a well-known academician and a literary critic, invited Ovcharenko to the commemoration events dedicated to Khvył’ovyi, with the request finally to make the suicide notes public. The readings from the notes, cited earlier, became the ones widely referred to while addressing Khvył’ovyi’s death. Those words, however, were also read from the copies, whose authenticity, as has been shown, can be questioned. Those notes simply gained their official status by the fact that they were presented by a high party official.

The copies of the suicide notes offer another aspect of Khvył’ovyi’s ambivalence. On the one hand, his last words, if taken at face value, can show his disappointment and despair at not being able to match his convictions with the realities of Socialist society. On

85 Quoted from the documentary *Tžar i rab khytroshchiv* (script writers: Iryna Shatokhina, Iurii Shapoval), included on DVD in: SHAPOVAL/PANCHENKO (eds.): *Poliuvannia na “Val’dshnepa”*.

86 SMOLYCH *Rozpovid’ pro nespokii*; SMOLYCH *Rozpovid’ pro nespokii tryvaie*; SMOLYCH *Rozpovid’ pro nespokii nemaie kintsia*.

87 Interrogation of Iuliia Umantseva in: SHAPOVAL/PANCHENKO (eds.): *Poliuvannia na “Val’dshnepa”*, p. 182.

88 It should be noted that Smolych’s intentions could hardly be trusted. In her letter to Ovcharenko, Liubov Umantseva, Khvył’ovyi’s foster-daughter, characterised Smolych as one of those writers who “are playing with ‘the topics’, flirting, trying to attract readers with cheap, nasty details from the lives of distinguished writers, who died in the terrible times of Stalinism”. (OVCHARENKO *Spohady*, p. 284). Smolych, as argued by Ukrainian scholar Serhii Trymbach, was an informer of the state security (TRYMBACH *Oleksandr Dovzhenko*, p. 84).

the other hand, if they were edited by the secret service before being made public, one must question the intentions behind those actions and the idea behind their publication.

It is worth mentioning that Khvyľovyi was not rehabilitated in the course of the “Thaw” liberalisation of the 1950s. At the end of the 1980s, during the so-called *glasnost*, Ukrainian party card-carrying intellectuals started to call for the returning Khvyľovyi to his readers.<sup>89</sup> This was also the time when the autobiographical notes, discussed earlier in the article, were first published. Their initial purpose, however, acquired a new meaning: in the 1920s those autobiographies were used to trace the development of a revolutionary personality, whereas at the end of the 1980s, those texts were used to support a newly emerging narrative of the national communist Khvyľovyi. Not surprisingly, it was the excerpt about Khvyľovyi attending a congress of soldiers in Romania in October 1917 with two ribbons pinned to his collar: a red and a yellow-and-blue one as well as his justification (“I wanted to be, so to say, a Ukrainian Bolshevik”<sup>90</sup>), which was eagerly picked up and used thereafter. Thus, the image of Khvyľovyi as a romantic who became ideologically confused in his pursuit of a better social order was created and became dominant in the discourse.

After Ukraine gained independence in 1991, the “executed renaissance” paradigm, along with the national communist perspective, merged with another approach – to nationalize early Soviet Ukrainian intellectuals, and present them as part of a national opposition to the Communist regime. This contributed to the utopian view that the whole history of Ukraine should be seen as a struggle to build an independent and united country. According to Mark von Hagen,<sup>91</sup> the narrative of history in independent Ukraine replaced the familiar dogmatic approach of Marxism-Leninism and dialectical materialism with a national teleology. Accordingly, the intellectual and political history of Ukraine has been rewritten in a way to make nationalists and separatists out of nearly all prominent Ukrainians. Among modern Ukrainian historians and literary scholars, Khvyľovyi has become one of the most researched Ukrainian writers, whose life and writings have been adjusted to the “new dogma of an eternal and unchained nation, whose history was defined by the struggle against a ‘national oppressor’ for Ukrainian independence and unity”.<sup>92</sup>

This nationalistic approach attempts to rehabilitate and excuse Khvyľovyi for being a communist by finding reasons for his decision to join the party and to remain a party member. In order to cope with the obvious dilemma of him being a talented writer in spite of his party membership, an attempt was made to push the concept of Khvyľovyi’s “fatal ambivalence”<sup>93</sup> which originates partly from his romantic nature and partly from his idealistic belief in Bolshevik populism. In addition, an attempt is made to underplay contradictory examples which show Khvyľovyi’s ‘true’ communist nature, as it happened

89 See, e.g., ZHULYNS’KYI Talant nezvychainyi i superechlyvyi.

90 KHVYL’OVYI Uryvok z avtobiohrafiii, p. 107.

91 VON HAGEN Does Ukraine have a history?

92 GILLEY The “Change of Signposts”, p. 23.

93 SHAPOVAL Fatal’na ambivalentnist’; PANCHENKO Khvyľovyi. Istoriia iliuzii i prozrin’. Their analysis in FOWLER [Review on:] Shapoval, Iurii / Panchenko, Volodymyr (eds.): Poliuvannia na “Val’dshnepa”.

in the highly debated monograph of the Kharkiv poet, editor and literary critic Ihor Bondar-Tereshchenko.<sup>94</sup>

### Conclusion: The Soviet Ukrainian Communist Mykola Khvyľovyĭ

There are only certain assertions that cannot be contested about Khvyľovyĭ. Firstly, he was a prominent writer, whose creative manner was defined by his revolutionary experience. Moreover, he was a proletarian writer, and this was an artistic identity which Khvyľovyĭ was trying to preserve, not because of the prevailing ideological expectations, but because of his personal convictions and beliefs in the potential of the working class to begin world history anew. Secondly, he was a member of the Communist Party of the Bolsheviks since 1919 and even during the most severe persecution remained faithful to his membership card. Indeed, in a perlustrated letter dated from 1927 Khvyľovyĭ affirmed: "I not only was not thinking of giving back my party card, but I will appeal to Stalin himself if anyone should think to take it from me."<sup>95</sup>

Yet, Khvyľovyĭ also adhered to an idea of a nationally defined socialist republic, an equal partner in a loose federation with other socialist republics. In the 1920s, with all its inconsistencies and social experiments, this form of statehood could be seen as realistic and feasible. Therefore, Khvyľovyĭ was not the only one who was ambivalent in his personal values, views, and ideology. This ambivalence was characteristic for an entire generation in the Ukraine of the 1920s, caused by the very nature of the relationship between the Moscow centre and the border republics at that time.

Khvyľovyĭ can represent an entire generation of disillusioned intellectuals, who witnessed the discrepancy between the ideals of the revolution and their implementation in the Soviet Ukraine. Although a member of the Bolshevik party since 1919, Khvyľovyĭ sympathised with the Ukrainian communists, a number of whom, for example, Ellan-Blakytnyi or Oleksandr Shums'kyi, were his close friends, colleagues and defenders in the time of incipient party criticism in 1926. The attempts of the Ukrainian communists to reorganize the power relationship in Soviet Ukraine along with the cultural flourishing of the 1920s was crushed by the forcible tendencies aimed at consolidating the Bolshevik Party and Stalin's Great turn of 1928/29.

Thereby, the inherent contradictions in Khvyľovyĭ's views and his milieu were not entirely ones between national and communist aspirations. More accurately, the contradiction originated from them being Ukrainian Communists within a Russian-dominated Bolshevik Party. Thus, it was not an inner ideological ambivalence of every single sympathiser of an independent Ukrainian Socialist Republic, but a political struggle for authority, power and influence between two Soviet Republics and two distinct Communist Parties of the Bolsheviks, which was quelled only through well-elaborated tactics, terror and violence on Moscow's part.

The figure of Khvyľovyĭ returned to Ukrainian literature and culture layered with contradictory interpretations. The question is: how much do we know about Khvyľovyĭ besides those misinterpretations and manipulations with the writer's biography and per-

94 BONDAR-TERESHCHENKO U *Zadzerkali*.

95 SHAPOVAL/PANCHENKO (eds.): *Poliuvannia na "Val'dshnepa"*, p. 95.

sonality? Yet, Khvylovyi left behind a significant literary contribution, telling about his complex development as a proletarian writer, a Bolshevik and a Soviet Ukrainian.

### Abbreviations:

VUTsVK	Vseukraïns'kyi Tsentral'nyi Vykonavchyi Komitet (All-Ukrainian Central Executive Committee)
KP(b)U	Komunistychna Partiiia Bil'shovykiv Ukraïny (Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Ukraine)
TsK VKP(b)	Tsentral'nyi Komitet Vserossiiskoi Kommunisticheskoi Partii Bol'shevikov (Central Committee of the All-Russian Communist Party of Bolsheviks)
NEP	Novaia Ekonomicheskaia Politika (New Economic Policy)
GPU	Gosudarstvennoe Politicheskoe Upravlenie (State Political Directorate)
SVU	Spilka Vyzvolennia Ukraïny (Union for the Liberation of Ukraine)
VAPLITE	Vil'na akademiia proletars'koïi literatury (Free Academy of Proletarian Literature)

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