

*Nationalism on Stage: Music and Change*  
*in Soviet Ukraine*

Exactly eight days before the failed coup of 1991, which brought down the Soviet regime and unraveled the Soviet Empire, a Ukrainian nationalist song festival opened in a highly Russified region of Ukraine. Through the medium of music and the intercultural connections it provides, the Chervona Ruta<sup>1</sup> Music Festival showcased aspects of the Ukrainian historical experience that had been suppressed, marginalized, or discredited by the Soviet regime. In this Russified area of Ukraine, the festival became a site of transmission of an unofficial past, a past that glorified Ukraine and its suffering under Soviet rule. By portraying an alternative historical interpretation not sanctioned by the Soviet state, organizers of the festival hoped to raise Ukrainian national consciousness among a primarily Russian-speaking population and challenge Soviet power by recruiting converts to the nationalist cause.

In 1989 the first Chervona Ruta Music Festival was held in Chernivtsi in western Ukraine.<sup>2</sup> Because the western provinces were annexed to Soviet Ukraine by Stalin's Red Army only during World War II, Soviet culture was imported much later. Therefore, Ukrainians in western Ukraine managed to keep alive national histories and to continue using the Ukrainian language to a greater degree than in eastern Ukraine in spite of the Russification policies implemented by the Soviet regime following annexation. Chervona Ruta was the name of an immensely popular love song written by Volodymyr Ivasiuk, a pop culture icon. The song was a top hit played throughout the former Soviet Union and was widely known by Russians and Ukrainians alike. Ivasiuk was frequently persecuted by Soviet authorities, and in 1973 he was found hung in Chernivtsi. The authorities claimed that he committed

suicide, but it was widely believed that he was murdered by the KGB. Holding the festival in Chernivtsi, the town where Ivasiuk was born and died, and naming the festival after his most renowned song created much emotionally charged symbolic capital.

A rendition of the song "Chervona Ruta" opened the festival, with many in the audience singing along. Featuring traditional folk balladeers and Ukrainian rock, this initial festival was a celebration of Ukrainian culture and aimed to promote the Ukrainian national revival that was already underway. Kobza, a Ukrainian-Canadian joint-venture company and one of the festival's main sponsors, insisted that all songs be sung in Ukrainian. The festival was considered a raging success and generated considerable momentum and support for Rukh, the Ukrainian Popular Movement for Restructuring. The festival followed on the heels of Rukh's inaugural congress, which was held 8–10 September 1989 in Kiev. Within a year of the festival, Rukh emerged as a burgeoning umbrella opposition movement that effectively united a variety of national, ecological, gender-, and religion-based anti-Soviet groups under the banner of Ukrainian independence.

Technology has given the first Chervona Ruta Music Festival a multiple and long-lasting life. The 1989 festival was videotaped and recorded. In addition to being sold in Ukraine, the audio and video recordings were widely marketed to the Ukrainian community in the West. From the comfort of their living rooms, through the medium of music, diaspora Ukrainians took part in the struggle for Ukrainian independence and thereby reaffirmed their Ukrainian origins and commitment to an independent Ukrainian state.

This initial success coincided with the increasing vulnerability of the Soviet state, as the policy of glasnost unleashed an unforeseen barrage of heated criticism of the Soviet system. This combination of factors influenced the decision to move the next festival to eastern Ukraine, where a Ukrainian music festival would find a less receptive audience. In 1991, Chervona Ruta was held in Zaporizhzhia, a provincial, industrial, highly Russified, Communist Party stronghold. Throughout the Soviet era this region was heralded as the "cradle of the proletariat." Although the political and cultural realities of this region in Ukraine were comparatively inhospitable to a Ukrainian nationalist song festival, Zaporizhzhia is a rich site of historical myth and legend. Choosing Zaporizhzhia, the historic "home-

land” of the Cossacks, as the second location for the festival held out the promise of softening local antagonism to a nationalist agenda by evoking the appeal of historical nostalgia through the medium of music.

Using the intercultural allure of music, the festival provided the possibility of extending membership in the Ukrainian nation to Russians, Jews, and Russified Ukrainians — all of whom knew by heart the words to the famous song “Chervona Ruta.” The term Russified Ukrainian refers to those living in Ukraine who are Ukrainian by nationality but who speak Russian as a first language. Most of the Ukrainian population is bilingual. However many in the large urban centers and in eastern and southern Ukraine have at best a passive knowledge of Ukrainian.<sup>3</sup> Although the atmosphere at the second music festival established sharp boundaries between Ukraine and Moscow in an anti-Soviet tenor, the essentialist “we” that it posited was an inclusivist one, which hinged largely on the intercultural connection of music. Ironically, the festival closed the day before the coup attempt on 19 August 1991, which led to the demise of the Soviet state. This Chervona Ruta Festival was the last event orchestrated by Ukrainian nationalist groups in an oppositional mode to Soviet rule.

### The Beat of the Nation

The opening performance of the 1991 Chervona Ruta festival presented a barrage of symbols, derived from both a reinterpretation of the past and a reassessment of the present, in a highly charged political context. The performers tried to channel the anti-Soviet feelings of anger and disillusionment into hopes for empowerment by advocating Ukrainian independence as a save-all strategy to the ills currently plaguing their society. By presenting symbols of what an independent Ukrainian state would stand for, in contrast to its nemesis the Soviet Union, nationalist supporters hoped to generate enthusiasm for Ukrainian independence among an alienated, Russified population.

Riding the wave of new-found popular interest in the spiritual world and emphasizing the symbiotic relationship between religion and nationalism, Rukh wanted to begin the opening ceremony of the festival with a mass conducted by a priest from one of the two historically national churches,

either the *Ukrainian Greek-rite Catholic Church* or the *Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church*, both of whose clergy were severely persecuted by Soviet authorities. By 1946, both churches had been officially outlawed and driven underground. Paradoxically, Zaporizhzhia has only Russian Orthodox churches. As an enduring sign of the tenacity of Tsar Nicholas I's proclamation of the indissoluble unity of autocracy, orthodoxy, and nationality, local Communist Party officials refused to allow the local Orthodox church to be outcast. With the notable exception that the Greek-rite Catholic Church submits to papal authority, there is great similarity in the rituals, symbols, and architecture of the three churches.<sup>4</sup> The critical distinction is their different political visions. Previously, the decision to practice religion was a political statement, regardless of one's faith. Today the church with which one chooses to affiliate carries strong political overtones.

The dispute proved irresolvable and the plan to launch the music festival with a mass was dropped. The organizers opted instead for clerical participation in the opening ceremonies. Thus, the rock concert began with a religious procession. A stream of priests solemnly entered the soccer stadium walking along the track in long black robes carrying candles and crosses. In this way, twenty chanting priests introduced, so to speak, the first rock band. Subsequent songs were interspersed with priests from both churches saying prayers and giving speeches that emphasized the necessity of a Ukrainian cultural revival as an antidote to Sovietization.

Beginning the music festival on this sacred note challenged the "naturalness" of the historic links between a pan-Slavic identity and Orthodoxy. By undermining the authority of a pan-Slavic organization such as the Russian Orthodox Church, the organizers extended a parallel challenge to the legitimacy of the Soviet Empire in the age of the nation-state. By insisting that the Ukrainian national churches participate, Rukh lent its support to the nationalizing of religious institutions, inverting and at the same time perpetuating the historic link between identity and religious affiliation in this part of the world.

Following the priests, a lineup of rock bands mixed with folk singers was the featured entertainment for the opening night ceremonies of Chervona Ruta. Rock music helped to combat the prevailing stereotype that contemporary Ukrainian culture is marginal, on the brink of extinction, and interminably locked into its peasant origins. Over time, the Soviet acknowledg-

ment of national differences had added up to no more than caricatures of nineteenth-century peasants performing in folkloric dance troupes, theaters, and choral groups around the Soviet Union. By confining Ukrainian culture to the realm of folklore, Ukrainian musical groups were left with little appeal beyond evoking nostalgia for innocent days past.

In contrast, the heavy metal music of long-haired, rebel guitarists was obviously meant to debunk this stereotype and to appeal to eastern Ukrainian youth. Rock groups also showed that Ukrainian pop music had kept pace with the West. The ability to mimic the Western pop music tradition lent some credence to nationalists' claim that Ukraine is an Eastern European country and does not belong in an "Asiatic Empire," as many independence supporters refer to the Soviet Union.

Like Western performers, these rock musicians sported the same long hair, passion for black clothing, and rebel attitude, which permeated their appearance and conduct on stage. Yet even while mimicking the Western rock music tradition, these rock groups emphasized their Ukrainianness. Indigenous characteristics were made to overlay a Western musical style that could be embraced by a broad audience, including ethnic Ukrainians, Russified Ukrainians, Russians, diaspora Ukrainians, and other Westerners. Every step of the way, through their critical lyrics and irreverent comments about Soviet life, the musicians were testing the limits of official tolerance before a multitude of uniformed police officers, who stood around the track lining the bleachers.

During the third song of the opening ceremony of the festival, as the feeling of solidarity and euphoria accelerated, most of the audience poured down from the bleachers onto the soccer field to dance. They broke the traditional segregation of performer and audience and joined hands or elbows in a human chain, encircling the singers on stage and each other. Some formed spinning circles of twenty or more people all holding hands. Others formed swirling chains connected by interlocking hands and traveled up and down the length of the soccer field. The musicians were warmly received as children of the nation, proof of their collective talent. The soccer stadium became the central town square as the "imagined community" of Ukrainians, at least for one night, was reified and celebrated in music and dance.

The cosmopolitan appeal of Western-style rock music provided an in-

clusivist mode in which to present the often fiercely nationalistic and exclusivist lyrics of the performers. For example, one of the most well received rock bands, the Snake Brothers, who integrate an anarchy symbol into the written name of the band, sang a song titled "Peace and Order in Ukraine," which criticized both the Russification and Sovietization of Ukrainian people. The lyrics, which incorporated several Russian words to stress the point, told of a people whose spirit had been broken:

The oppressed and the hungry have gone to sleep  
Whoever was no one has become nothing  
That's the way it will be tomorrow and today  
If you don't want to sleep, lie down and be quiet  
Peace and order in Ukraine  
The nightingale is chirping  
The Party and God are with us.<sup>5</sup>

Many audience members who had long feared being accused of espousing nationalist ideals, a crime often punishable by years in prison, began shouting nationalist slogans and denunciations of the Soviet regime as the police stood idly about. The familiar Soviet-imposed taboos on social and political criticism in the public sphere appeared to have been suspended. As the musicians sang, all the while encouraging members of the audience to disassociate themselves from the Soviet regime and from the Soviet experience, more and more blue-and-yellow Ukrainian flags popped up. Some members of the audience began waving them from the bleachers, while others danced around on the playing field with the flags blowing in the wind behind them.

In another of their songs, the Snake Brothers confronted one of the most controversial and inflammatory moments in the history of Ukrainian nationalism by performing their song "We're the Boys from Banderstadt," referring to L'viv, the cultural center of Ukrainian-speaking Ukraine. Reference in public to the legendary nationalist leader, Bandera, who masterminded Ukrainian nationalist collaboration with the Nazis against the Soviet Red Army during World War II, was forbidden for decades. Additionally, the Snake Brothers used the German word "Stadt" for city to underline the links and heighten the connections among Bandera, western Ukrainians, and the

Nazis. Once the singers had cracked this taboo wide open with their song, a half dozen members of the audience began to wave the forbidden black-and-red flags of Bandera's outlawed organization.

The song, which began with soft distant flutes pierced by angry cries of "Hey!," had the following refrain:

We're the boys from Banderstadt  
 We go to church  
 We respect our fathers  
 No one knows how to party like us  
 Till the bugles don't play  
 Till the drum doesn't beat  
 Some say we're bandits, hooligans  
 From this swamp  
 There won't be human beings<sup>6</sup>

The fiercely critical lyrics and the highly vocal reaction they drew from the audience provided a forum in which to reject the Soviet definition of what it means to be Ukrainian. No longer marginalized subjects of a suppressed history, the band's songs tried to reposition Ukrainians as agents participating in their own historical experience.

In sharp contrast to these contemporary rock performers, the folk music that followed catered to an age-old tradition of singing minstrels, immortalized in the work of the national poet Taras Shevchenko, and harked back to an "authentic" and unique Ukrainian cultural tradition. These folk performers, who ironically carried forward—and in doing so, endorsed—the Soviet image of a Ukrainian "peasant" culture, were dressed in traditional folk costumes. They performed a round of peasant ballads using traditional string instruments, such as the *bandura*. But here too, there was evocation of the West. The four groups of folk performers, all dressed in nineteenth-century Ukrainian peasant costumes, were from the diaspora community. With cries of "Slava Ukraini!" ("Glory to Ukraine!"), they brought greetings and signs of solidarity from the Ukrainian communities in Canada, the U.S., France, and Australia. Their performance suggested that the "real" and "authentic" Ukrainian culture, protected from the ravages of the Soviet experience, was viable and thriving in the West. The appearance of Ukrainian-speaking, diaspora folk performers also showcased the breadth

and strength of the Ukrainian nation outside Soviet borders, suggesting the existence of a worldwide network of Ukrainian independence supporters safeguarding the Ukrainian cultural heritage. All except the group from France introduced themselves and addressed the audience in Ukrainian. The French group, a highly accomplished four-piece instrumental band of guitars, *bandura*, and percussion, called themselves Les Banderistes.

The decision to mix folk ballads with rock music is a critical one. It is important for nationalist leaders to keep the peasant motif alive. Among other things, it supports nationalist claims that, since Ukrainians were a peasant people, Stalin's brutal policies of collectivization — which triggered a sustained famine that took the lives of an estimated six million Ukrainians in 1932–33 — amounted to genocide. The famine and the devastation it wrought on Ukrainian peasant culture have become the definitive Ukrainian national myth of the twentieth century. The Famine, like Chernobyl, is submitted as evidence of the victimization of Ukraine at the hands of a Moscow-based government.

Rukh chose the city of Zaporizhzhia in part because it is the historic "homeland" of the Cossacks. Many scholars have noted that nationalists inevitably refer to a glorious past to evoke images of future grandeur via national liberation (see Anderson 1983 and Smith 1986). For Ukrainian nationalists, this glorious past is Cossack. From this warring group, nationalists have created a myth of a fiercely independent people who successfully resisted subjugation and lived autonomously. Except for the three years following the Revolution, after which a fragile Ukrainian state succumbed to Bolshevik pressure during the Civil War, there is no real period of independent statehood to point to in the modern era. Nationalist leaders nonetheless try to illustrate a (frustrated) spirit of independence and self-sufficiency. The resurrection of a particular historical consciousness fueled by a myth of Cossack heroism was also a goal of the festival and a key reason that Zaporizhzhia was chosen as its location. In commemoration of Cossack warriors, many young men in the audience had their heads shaven the way Cossacks supposedly did, leaving only a long tuft of hair on the top of the backs of their heads.

The myth of Cossack bravery burst onto the scene during the festival in the form of crowd-pleaser improvisation. In spite of the fact that Zaporizhzhia produces vast amounts of electricity, twice during the first song and pe-



riodically thereafter the entire sound system collapsed due to power failure. During these moments of technical difficulty, Cossack horsemen, ejected into the arena at a full gallop, performed gravity-defying, life-threatening stunts to the delight of the crowd as they encircled the hordes of Polish technicians desperately trying to jump-start the sound system. (One of the financial backers of the festival brought in technicians from Poland as a hedge against anticipated party sabotage.) One by one the horses galloped around the track at a full speed as the Cossack horsemen dismounted, remounted backwards, dismounted in somersault, and remounted again on their hands. As the horsemen raced around the stadium track for the third time, the crowd began to shout "Ukraine without Moscow!" Little did they know that this would soon become reality.

### The Illusiveness of Belonging

As jubilant as those dancing on the soccer field were, it quickly became apparent that not all in attendance were able to partake of the euphoria. The notion that the vitality and vibrance of Ukrainian music was directly correlated to the vitality of the Ukrainian nation and an independent Ukrainian state failed to carry some members of the audience into the dancing, celebrating crowds. For those who remained in the bleachers and did not dance in unison with others on the playing field, equally intense feelings and forms of consciousness were generated. Made aware of their Russianness at a Ukrainian nationalist festival, they understood themselves to be trapped in an amorphous colonial space. Suddenly, these people were unsure as to whether they were the colonizers or the colonized.

I had gone to the festival with a Ukrainian woman from Kiev who worked as a nurse at the Higher Party School, a training ground for Communist Party elites. At the outset of the festival she was buoyant in spirit, curious, and ever so slightly beaming with pride that she was at a Ukrainian nationalist festival. Although her family speaks Ukrainian at home and she was educated in Ukrainian through high school, she claims that she understands Ukrainian but does not speak it. For others sitting nearby in the audience who did not understand Ukrainian, she translated the speeches and announcements and words of welcome written on the electronic scoreboard, which here doubled

as a message board. The three letters that are unique to Ukrainian and not found in Russian were represented by numerals, adding a sense of displacement and foreignness to finding things Ukrainian in eastern Ukraine. It became undeniably clear at this festival that although Ukrainian by nationality, Natasha was socialized in Russified Kievan society and this is where her allegiances lay. It didn't take long before she felt uncomfortable.

During the third sound system collapse, when the Cossack horsemen raced around the stadium and the crowd chanted "Ukraine without Moscow!" Natasha instantly began explaining that it was unwise for these nationalist hotheads to be advocating such a cavalier policy. She made an emphatic distinction between her unrelenting criticism of the failures of the Soviet system and Russians. She countered that perhaps Ukraine needed economic independence but she was certain that the historic link between Ukraine and Russia would *never be* — in fact, *could never be* — broken by political independence. When asked whether she thought it was feasible to have real economic independence (an end to a centrally planned economy) and still politically remain tied to Moscow, she said, "I hope it is possible, because it would be impossible to completely split from Russia. We've lived so long together. It would be like cutting off one side of my body." Ultimately, she was arguing for independence from the Soviet Union, but not from Russia. Twelve days later Ukraine declared independence.

Also with us was Vitalii and his wife Gala. Vitalii is Ukrainian but was born in Vladivostok in eastern Siberia, where his parents were exiled in the 1930s for no apparent reason. Except for university studies in Latvia, Vitalii has lived his whole life in Russia. Of late, he has become very interested in exploring his Ukrainian roots. He joined a recently formed Ukrainian club in his hometown, developed an interest in Ukrainian folk music, and began studying the Ukrainian language with his wife. His newfound enthusiasm for his ethnic origins is what prompted him and his wife to spend the summer in Ukraine. They were delegates from their hometown club to a Ukrainian-language summer program in Kiev. It was through the auspices of this language program that they had come to the festival.

His wife, an ethnic Russian, never lived in Russia until she married Vitalii. She was born and raised in Riga, Latvia. She was clearly aghast by the anti-Moscow chants that erupted when the sound system broke down. She and Vitalii blamed it on the incompetence of the Polish technicians,

whose inability to master the technical difficulties caused a lull in the entertainment in the first place. In a moment of extreme discomfort, Gala claimed that she had always suspected, but now she was certain, that Rukh was “an instrument of the KGB.” She argued that the KGB staged this festival and was behind the other Rukh events as well. The KGB used Rukh, she explained, to stir up nationalist sentiment so as to have an excuse to send in the army and crush Ukrainian separatism. Vitalii told her that she was very naive and glared at her in such an uncharacteristically aggressive way that she knew not to voice other opinions on Ukrainian politics that night. Each of the three wanted so much to feel the euphoria of celebrating Ukraine, but they just couldn’t. Condemning Russia was too mixed up in the process. This heightened consciousness of being different from the Ukrainians around them, triggered by the performers’ lyrics and use of symbolic imagery that was alien to them, gives insight as to why the abundant pleasure the music was bringing to others failed to carry these three and others like them into the performance space. For most of the concert they sat stone-faced, their empty eyes following the intertwining chains of line dancers circling the performers.

The multiple and fluid qualities of nationality in the Soviet Union begin to explain the ambivalence Natasha, Vitalii, and Gala felt at the Chervona Ruta Festival. Why couldn’t they and the others who remained in the bleachers celebrate Ukraine? In part, their ambivalent attitude toward their own nationality has deep roots in the structure of the Soviet system.

According to the 1989 census, approximately 73 percent of the Ukrainian population is Ukrainian by nationality, 22 percent is Russian, and 5 percent are of various nationalities. Yet, an exclusive look at nationality does not in any way portray the very intricate and difficult task of building national consciousness among Ukrainians on the eve of the breakup of the Soviet Union.<sup>7</sup> The privileging of blood ancestry over actual cultural practices in Soviet bureaucratic national designation served to undermine the experiential meaning of nationality.

Under Stalin, a statewide process of cultural integration — which amounted, in essence, to Russification — was advocated as a means to realize the goals of communism sooner. The methods employed were numerous: Russian language was granted a privileged status, especially in education and state bureaucracies; religion was suppressed; historiography served the political

machine exclusively; and in-migration of Russians to the republics was encouraged. When the process of Russification met with “local nationalist” resistance, state officials swiftly resorted to the KGB and the Gulag to stifle opposition.

However, by recognizing national groups along the Empire’s borders with a republican political structure (in essence, a proto-state), the Bolsheviks allowed an alternative regional identity to develop, supported by regional social institutions, such as schools, the press, academies of sciences, and unions of artists.<sup>8</sup> Such institutions functioned to perpetuate regional cultural practices, including language, and, paradoxically, a non-Soviet source of identity. The efforts of the Soviet leadership to craft a Soviet identity as they simultaneously created nationally based cultural institutions resulted in a bifurcated sense of identity and allegiance among many members of the Soviet populace.

The practice of adopting the nationality of one’s ancestors — regardless of experiential cultural, linguistic, or residential considerations — linked the concept of nationality to blood, cast it with an aura of ahistorical eternity, and perpetuated an ability to “imagine” the Ukrainian nation. This was, I believe, an underlying motivating factor that brought Natasha, Vitalii, and Gala to the festival. At the same time, Russification undermined the meaning of their Ukrainian nationality and erased its tangible relevance in everyday practice. I would argue that even those at the festival who rushed to embrace Ukraine and Ukrainian culture did it in part to replace Soviet values and Soviet practices, which have been discredited (“From this swamp / There won’t be any human beings”) by sharp criticism since the policy of glasnost relaxed the threat of retribution.

The nationalist reinterpretation of the Ukrainian historical experience and its accompanying redefinition of what it means to be Ukrainian provided for some a point of orientation to understand present predicaments and future aspirations in a rapidly changing society. Yet, after decades of Soviet discourse that divided the world into “socialist” and “capitalist,” attempts to form an experiential “we” in terms of “us” (Ukrainians, the colonized and the oppressed) and “them” (Russians, the colonizers and chauvinists) rang hollow to many Ukrainians. Decades of assimilation, coerced and noncoerced, and comparatively little cultural and linguistic difference between Russians and Ukrainians mean that some cannot dislodge the

weight of their past in favor of a new identity quite so easily. The redefinition of the relationship of Ukraine to Russia — and, by extension, of Ukrainians to Russians — for some becomes yet another destabilizing factor.

Why did advocates of Ukrainian independence turn to music to recast the critical relationship between Russia and Ukraine? The demarcations between musical styles, genres, and performances, while nonetheless reflective of a cultural tradition, are infinitely more porous than other avenues of culture that also inform identity. Other cultural elements that were also part of the opening performance of the festival — such as religious affiliation, historical memories and myths, and language — do not command the immediate acceptance and visceral reactions that music has the power to trigger.

Although presented as a music festival, for analytic purposes Chervona Ruta could best be conceived of as a cultural performance, as it united a multitude of cultural elements in a performative setting.<sup>9</sup> The opposition's use of cultural performance was distinguished from that of Soviet authorities by its voluntary, interactive, and improvisational nature. In contrast, the highly predictable and prescribed nature of Soviet rituals was designed to reinforce the established social order.<sup>10</sup>

Victor Turner argues that cultural performances are a form of performative reflexivity: they do not merely “reflect” or “express” a given social order or cultural configuration, rather they are “active agencies of change.” In particular, Turner identifies the dialectical and reflexive qualities embodied in the critiques they deliver of the way society handles history (1988: 22). The public liminality created by the festival provided a forum in which individuals could publicly reject the Soviet definition of what it means to be Ukrainian and articulate an alternate version. The performers accelerated this process by encouraging members of the audience to disassociate themselves from the Soviet regime and from the Soviet experience, prompting for some a change in historical and national consciousness, as they imagined themselves belonging to a different community.

### Identity through History

The significant use of historical representation in popular attempts to galvanize Ukrainian nationalist sentiment and challenge Soviet authority on

Ukrainian soil began in 1988 with the celebration of the Millennium, the 1,000-year anniversary of Christianity in Kievan Rus', which shone a glaring light on the repression suffered by religious institutions. The festivities surrounding the Millennium were followed by a round of fiftieth anniversary commemorations of various Nazi atrocities, most notably the Babii Yar massacre, in which over 200,000 Jews and Ukrainians were executed. On 22 January 1990, the anniversary of Ukraine's declaration of independence in 1918, Rukh organized a human chain from L'viv to Kiev, in which over 400,000 people participated, to highlight how the nascent Ukrainian state was struck down by zealous Bolshevik ideologues following the Revolution. Each commemoration revived memories of suffering and destruction on a colossal scale.

The transformation of an ethnic community into a politically conscious nation occurs as nationalist leaders assess the significance of their historical heritage. This was a complex process in Soviet Ukraine, where historiography had been manipulated to serve the Soviet political machine. According to Anthony Smith, without myths there would be no nations, only populations bound in political space (1986: 15). In the process of myth making, a double dynamic is operating on the manipulation of history: first, selective historical amnesia becomes political capital; and second, political and intellectual leaders give voice to a heretofore disqualified interpretation of historical experience. Historiography at this point becomes the critical ideological battleground for national identity. This is particularly true for a population as fractured and as culturally diverse as that of Ukraine.

Recalling images that hark back to experiences seemingly shared by members of the audience can ignite certain forms of historical and national consciousness. In such situations, the images recalled represent a redemption of the hopes of the past, an attempt at "rescuing" what is past for the present. The images meant to inform collective representations of the past at Chervona Ruta were of two types: either they were historical images from revered myths of national genesis, or they were from the more recent, consciously experienced past and therefore were used to contextualize the past as a steady stream of destruction. National grandeur was brought to life by Cossack mythology in the form of acrobatic horsemen and by the young men in the audience who shaved their heads and dressed in imitation of Cossack warriors. The use of peasant motifs to illustrate the more recent

past, expressed by performers and audience members dressed in national costume, underlined the peasant base of Ukrainian culture and indirectly supported the claims of Ukrainian genocide due to the Famine of 1932–33, which Stalin's policies of rapid industrialization both triggered and sustained.

At Chervona Ruta the Soviet past was represented as an undesirable other, much like Walter Benjamin's Angel of History, who moves away from, yet faces, an ever-growing pile of senseless human tragedy, otherwise known as history (1968: 257). From among the smashed bits and pieces, nationalist advocates scour the past for events that could redeem the popular hopes of the present and legitimate their present political aspirations. Instances of victimization and betrayal are selected and made to represent the Ukrainian-Russian historical experience, so as to argue more cogently for an independent Ukrainian state.

Realigning this relationship and infusing the categories of "us" and "them" with new meaning will not be easy, judging from local reactions to the festival. The audience at the Chervona Ruta Music Festival on the eve of the breakdown of the Soviet Union was made up primarily of diaspora Ukrainians, supporters of Rukh from the western provinces who arrived specially for the festival, and some Ukrainians from the area. But judging by the fact that only a third of the stadium was full on opening night and successive performances were even more sparsely attended, it is safe to conclude that the festival had minimal appeal for Russified eastern Ukrainians. I am quick to note, however, that unexpected concert delays, some of which lasted up to nine hours, last-minute schedule changes, such as performances starting in the evening, breaking for the night, and finishing up the following morning, and overall poor communication about the time and location of events also diminished local interest in the festival.

Attendance at formal events, however, is but one avenue of exposure to nationalist ideas. Such cultural performances derive their power through their ability to communicate multiple messages in a variety of expressive forms. For the residents of Zaporizhzhia, the festival most likely represented the first time in their lives that they had seen their city draped in the Ukrainian national flag. From flag-toting pedestrians, to bumperstickers, to make-shift fliers, to buttons (*znachki*), the national symbol of Ukraine, the tryzub, and the Ukrainian blue-and-yellow flag were everywhere apparent.

In addition, a half dozen disgruntled residents decided to capitalize on the attention and influx of foreigners generated by the music festival to launch a group hunger strike in protest of the abominable environmental conditions produced by a sea of Zaporizhzhian smokestacks belching gray air. The pitiful sight of disempowered individuals in makeshift tents sleeping and literally starving in the center of Great October Revolution Square underlined the failures of the Soviet system and heightened consciousness of the environmental devastation it has wrought on Ukraine. In a very real sense then, the festival, its very occurrence a voice of opposition, opened the flood gates of protest so long hammered shut.

The former Soviet Union is a land of ironies and paradoxes. One of the greatest ironies surrounding the Chervona Ruta Music Festival is that it provided a rare public forum in which to express spontaneous support for Ukrainian culture in the modest hope of advancing the struggle for an independent Ukrainian state. As I stated earlier, the festival achieved mixed results, alienating some Ukrainians and embracing others. Yet, the festival promoted Ukrainian music up until the night before the beginning of the August Events, as the putsch is euphemistically called. On the morning of 19 August 1991, as the news of the coup became public, those who were involved in the staging and promotion of the festival went underground, fearing retroactive punishment and a return to the pre-glasnost policies that forbade public expression of anti-Soviet agitation. Within three days, however, the coup had failed and the irreversible process of dismantling the Soviet Union and its social system had begun. Ironically, the end of this modest Ukrainian music festival coincided with the end of the Soviet era.

### The Past in the Present

Attempts were made to perpetuate the tradition of Chervona Ruta in post-Soviet Ukraine. In 1993 the festival was held in Donetsk, a town similar to Zaporizhzhia in its ethnic and economic make-up. Donetsk, a highly Russified, immense industrial center, is located in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine. The 1993 festival was plagued with problems of all kinds from the start. The festival became quite controversial when the organizers decided to bar Russian-speaking groups from performing. Up until a month before



the festival was scheduled to begin, it was unknown whether local opposition and financial and organizational difficulties would prevent the festival from occurring at all. In its brief, six-year biennial existence, the festival diminished rapidly in its appeal to local and national audiences, which was reflected in declining attendance and vanishing media coverage. At the festival, as in the other anti-Soviet, pro-Ukrainian commemorations and spectacles realized before Ukrainian independence, unofficial histories and alternative remembrances were represented and reexperienced. Such events gave a physicality to alternative historical representations and provided a site of voiced opposition to Soviet rule. Interestingly, these one-time dramatic enactments of alternative histories, designed to generate new forms of historical and national consciousness, have all but ceased in post-Soviet Ukrainian society.

Now that an independent Ukrainian state has been established and the Soviet Union recedes into memory, these unofficial histories and unsanctioned recollections of the Ukrainian experience of Soviet rule are becoming institutionalized. No longer presented as spectacle, the unsanctioned, unofficial perspective of the Soviet period has now become the standard rhetoric of the new Ukrainian state. The historical representations seen at the Chervona Ruta Festival—such as Cossack mastery, religious devotion, and folklore—are essentially mythic images that ignore chronology and historical accuracy. These elements, however, are being integrated into new national historical narratives and national charters. Formerly unsanctioned historical representations now find a home in the post-Soviet curricula in schools, in new state holidays and commemorations and in monuments, to name some of the more visible sites.

However, just as official histories advanced by the Soviet regime never precluded the construction and transmission of alternate interpretations, correspondingly, Ukrainian state-sponsored historical narratives are vulnerable to the challenges of alternative histories by groups that remain or have become excluded. Indeed, a multitude of subnationalisms fueled by diverse regional, ethnic, and religious allegiances have spurred various new histories that challenge the legitimacy of the unofficial-turned-official historical representations in post-Soviet Ukraine. Demarginalizing one group by creating state-sponsored representations of “our past” inevitably disen-

franchises other groups. Constructing historical representations that reflect the Soviet experience and resonate at the individual level is proving to be a difficult task. Oppositional events in the late Soviet period, such as the Chervona Ruta Music Festival, merit our attention because the historical representations showcased in an anti-Soviet mood became the raw material from which new histories are being written and public remembering is being practised in post-Soviet Ukraine.

### Notes

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1. "Chervona Ruta" is the title of an immensely popular love song. It literally means "red rue," a strongly scented, henna-like herb that grows only in the Carpathian Mountains in Ukraine.
2. For an overview of contemporary rock music in Ukraine as well as a discussion of the 1989 Chervona Ruta Festival, see Romana Bahry's essay "Rock Culture and Rock Music in Ukraine" in *Rocking the State: Rock Music and Politics in Eastern Europe and Russia* (Bahry 1994).
3. When the 1926 census instituted categories for nationality and language, the extent of "denationalization" among certain nationalities was recognized. The term "Russified Ukrainian" essentially indicates a linguistic designation, but it also implies a cultural orientation that usually follows closely behind language use. In keeping with the Bolshevik policy of *korenizatsiia* (indigenization) implemented following the Revolution, Russian-speaking Ukrainians were obliged to learn their "mother tongue." However, in spite of this tacit acknowledgement of national differences and the rights of national minorities, Russification, especially in education, continued unabated throughout the Soviet period. According to state censuses, in 1970, 14 percent of the Ukrainians claimed Russian as their first language, compared to 17 percent in 1979 and 19 percent in 1989. In 1970, 36 percent claimed to have proficiency in Russian; in 1979, it was 50 percent; in 1989, 56 percent. In addition, by 1989, 22.1 percent of the population in Ukraine was Russian. The level of Russian in-migration to Ukraine is exceeded only in Estonia and Latvia (*Rahva Haal*, 19 September 1989, citing Naselenie SSSR).
4. The Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox and the Ukrainian Greek-rite Catholic

churches historically have served as institutional bases for the expression and maintenance of nationalist sentiment and political agitation. Such religiously based nationalist ferment bumps up against the large Orthodox community. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church was incorporated into the Moscow patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church in 1686. The Russian Orthodox Church consistently positions itself as a Slavic institution. Metropolitan Filaret, the leader of the Ukrainian eparchies and second in rank to Patriarch Pimen, often represented the Russian Orthodox Church abroad. Filaret has since left the Moscow-based Orthodox church, claiming that a Ukrainian Orthodox Church should be established, in keeping with the Orthodox tradition of organizing along national lines (e.g., the Bulgarian, Greek, Romanian Orthodox churches). Exactly how each of these Orthodox churches will relate to one another and which one, if any, will be able to position itself as the Ukrainian Orthodox church remains unresolved as of this writing.

5. Following is the Ukrainian text as transcribed from the album *My Khloptsi z Bandershtadtu*, recorded in 1991 and distributed by Audio Ukraina: “Zasnuli hnani i holodni / Khto buv nikym toi stav nichym / Tse bude zavtra a s’ohodni / Ne khochesh spaty to lezhy i movchy / A na Ukraini lad i snokii / Shchebeche soloveiko / Z namy Partii i Boh.”

6. The Ukrainian text, as transcribed from the album *My Khloptsi z Bandershtadtu*: “My khloptsi z Bandershtadtu / Khodiemo do tserkvy / Shanuiemo bat’kiv / Nikhto tak iak my ne vmie hulyaty / Poki curmy ne zahrali / Baraban ne zbyv / Ie khto hovorit’ bandyty, khulyhany / Z toho bolota / Liudei ne bydie.”

7. Maurice Bloch (1989) has argued that an important factor in Western nation-building has been an identification by the elite with a particular territory, as represented by a single name. Ukrainian lands were initially called “Rus’” during the period of Kievan Rus’ from the ninth to the eleventh centuries. In the seventeenth century, however, the Cossacks referred to “Ukraina,” which means borderland. In the eighteenth century, this gave way to “Malorossiiia” (“Little Russia”). Two centuries later with the formation of the Soviet Union, the territory once again became known as Ukraine. When the parameters of the group and the implications of membership consistently shift so widely, its appeal is diminished.

8. For decades, Stalin’s definition of a nation, written before the Revolution in 1912, was a critical determinant of nationality policy in the Soviet Union. Stalin wrote that a nation is “an historically formed and stable community of people which has emerged on the basis of common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up, the latter being manifest in a common shared culture” (cited in Hobsbawm 1990: 5; Stalin 1972 [1936]: 8). In spite of the fact that nations are constantly emerging, evolving entities, this list of static, ahistorical criteria was rigidly applied to determine whether a cultural group was a nationality or not, and if so, to establish ethnoterritories.

9. The term cultural performance was first used by Milton Singer (1955), who expanded the concept of performance to include social drama as well. Singer argues that performative genres (concerts, plays, rites, ceremonies, festivals, etc.) are often orchestrations of

various nonlinguistic modes of communication and as such provide a window on how “cultural themes and values were communicated as well as on the processes of social and cultural change” (1972: 77).

Building on Singer’s initial cultural performance concept, Victor Turner (1988) argues that cultural performances create a space of public liminality. Liminality is the “betwixt and between” antistructural stage of the tripartite ritual process and the point at which new forms of consciousness can be created and a change of status can occur. The entire audience, by virtue of its attendance and/or participation in the festival, is thrown into public liminality.

10. Many interesting parallels can be drawn between contemporary nationalist use of mass cultural performance for political purposes and the Bolsheviks’ use of mass spectacles following the Revolution of 1917. See von Geldern (1993), Stites (1989: esp. 70–100, “Festivals of the People”), Deak (1975), and Hedgbeth (1975).

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# RETUNING CULTURE

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