

Oleh S. Ilnytskyj. *Nikolai Gogol. Ukrainian Writer in the Empire. A Study in Identity*, Berlin-Boston, de Gruyter, 2024, 193 pp., € 109,95.

Nikolai Gogol (ukr. Mykola Hohol) has remained a riddle – for his Russian audience, for the scholars in Slavic studies, and ultimately for himself. In the recent years, important books have shed a new light on the much debated problem of Gogol’s national identity. Most prominently, Edyta Bojanowska and Yuliya Illchuk focused on Gogol’s Ukrainian-Russian identity that was in their view either “hyphenated” or “hybrid”. In his new book, Oleh Ilnytskyj challenges both interpretations and states bluntly: Gogol was “a Ukrainian writer who was appropriated from within an Imperial culture by a Russian nationalist discourse” (170). Ilnytskyj goes as far as to contend that Gogol “boldly challenged taboos concerning Ukraine’s potential for independent statehood, refusing to perpetrate the clichés about the fraternal union between Ukraine and Russia” (169).

Before coming to this conclusion, Ilnytskyj carefully examines both literary and biographical texts that support his view of a genuinely Ukrainian Gogol. First, he describes Gogol's biography against the backdrop of Russian national history in the first half 19th century. Ilnytskyj highlights the frail status of the Russian national project at the time. Unlike the largely self-sufficient Ukrainian national project, the Russian national project forced the other East Slavic nations both politically and ideologically into its statehood. Ilnytskyj points to the fact that the Russian national project was only possible in the framework of an "Imperial culture" (15). As a consequence, Gogol who came in 1828 from Ukraine to St. Petersburg produced his works not in the system of a Russian national literature but in a "fluid multiethnic economy of texts" (26). In his discussion of Gogol's most popular works *The Government Inspector* and *Dead Souls* Ilnytskyj maintains that Gogol failed to provide a "sympathetic portrayal of ethnic Russia", not because – as Bojanowska argues – he was incapable of doing so, but based on "a conscious decision informed by Gogol's Ukrainian nationalism" (35).

Ilnytskyj gives an excellent overview over the Russian and the Ukrainian responses to Gogol's early prose that did not indicate the real author's name but heralded the name of the fictional story teller Rudyi Panko. The Russian critics praised the *Dikanka*-stories as a true expression of the Ukrainian people and a stylistic masterpiece, but claimed that this innovative prose was certainly part of Russian literature (41, 51). Ukrainian critics hailed the new author as a forerunner of a coming "Ukrainian Walter Scott" (43).

The heart piece of Ilnytskyj's argument is the rebuttal of two "false narratives": first, that Gogol was a Russian writer, and second, that the late Gogol – especially in the second version of *Taras Bulba* – eventually embraced Russian imperial nationalism. Ilnytskyj reconstructs in great detail how Russian critics such as Vissarion Belinskii and Konstantin Aksakov appropriated Gogol for mainstream Russian literature. One of the main obstacles for Ilnytskyj's interpretation is, however, Gogol's famous self-description in a letter to Anna Smirnova from 1844. The writer candidly states that he does not know "what kind of soul" he has: "a Russian or a Ukrainian (khokhlatskaia)" one (79). Ilnytskyj holds that Gogol's answer to Smirnova was a "delicate balancing act that preserved his integrity while mollifying Russians" (81). Certainly, Ilnytskyj is right to challenge the simplistic notion that Gogol was a Russian writer. However, he completely downplays the important aspect of Gogol's own literary ambitions. Gogol came to St. Petersburg to embark on a career as a writer for the reading public in the Russian empire. His debut, the poem "Ganz Kiukhel'garten", was clearly modelled on the dominant Romantic fashion. However, this work was – quite adequately – perceived as epigonal and received negative reviews. Only after this failure, Gogol turned to Ukrainian topics and a Ukrainianized Russian prose style. In fact, he managed to establish a Ukrainian model, the "kotliarevshchyna", in the Russian literary system of his time. Ivan Kotliarevskyj's *Eneida* was published in 1798 in St. Petersburg but failed to attract the attention of the Russian reading public. Distancing himself from Kotliarevskyj, Gogol changed two elements: he shifted the genre from poetry to prose and he wrote in a Ukrainianized Russian instead of Ukrainian. Gogol's use of the Russian language is the result of a clever marketing strategy. Gogol knew exactly that he eventually would share the bitter literary fate of Ivan Kotliarevskyj if he would not opt for a consequent use of the Russian language or that of Ievhen Hrebinka if he would not introduce the Ukrainian topic into his texts. In a sense, Gogol can be likened to Joseph Conrad: As a prose writer, Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski could have embarked on a Polish language literature career. But Conrad intentionally targeted the English language book market that promised much broader opportunities. However, as Zdzisław Najder has shown in many publications, Joseph Conrad hid the Polish topic in many of his novels, most notably in *Lord Jim*, where the protagonist jumps his ship "Patna" (which can be read with a slight typographical alteration as "Patria"). The Polish prose writer Eliza Orzeszkowa publicly scolded Joseph Conrad for his betrayal of the endangered Polish literature in her article "The Emigration of Talent" (1899).

Ilnytskyj criticizes in great detail the "false narrative" of a "russified" second version of *Taras Bulba*. He directs his argument against traditional interpretations by Simon Karlinsky, Robert Maguire, Michel Aucouturier or Edyta Bojanowska who claim that Gogol "glorified Russian nationalism" in the reworked version of *Taras Bulba*. Gogol produced two versions of *Taras Bulba*, a shorter one in 1835

and an extended one in 1842. Famously, the second version includes Taras Bulba's final speech to his cossack comrades before he dies at the hands of his Polish enemies: "A time will come, when you will learn what the Russian Orthodox faith can do! Even now, nations far and near sense that our own Tsar is rising from the Russian lands, and there will be no power on earth that will not submit to him!" (145) A superficial reading will quickly come to the conclusion that Gogol hails here the Russian autocracy of his own time in a historical allegory. Ilnytzkyj convincingly argues that Gogol's use of the word "russkij" should not be translated as "Russian" but as "Rus'ian", i.e. belonging to the Ukrainian Rus'. From such a viewpoint, Bulba's announcement of an "own Tsar" acquires an entirely different meaning. Ilnytzkyj draws attention to the Ukrainophile *Istoriia Rusov* that addressed the Kievan princes as "Tsars" (151). Gogol knew the *Istoriia Rusov* well and based his historical views of Ukraine on this narrative. "Our own Tsar" would then refer to a future Ukrainian ruler in the tradition of the Kyivan princes.

Ilnytzkyj's innovative and text-based hermeneutical approach yields important and valid results. However, he seems to downplay the most important insight of his own interpretation by insisting overly on Gogol's exclusive Ukrainian identity. Ilnytzkyj comes closest to Gogol's literary strategy in the following sentence: "When it came to Taras Bulba, Gogol could be confident that Russians would understand the novel in accordance with their own self-centered ideas and prejudices – and miss his real message." (156f.) Here, Ilnytzkyj commits a logical error. If Gogol's "real message" was the claim for an independent Ukrainian statehood, why would he disguise his message so thoroughly that it would not be understood anymore by the readership at large? The truth is probably not a question of "identity", but of "strategy": Gogol knew exactly that his Russian audience would perceive the new ending of *Taras Bulba* as a declaration of loyalty to the Russian autocracy and to the existing social order. It is Ilnytzkyj's great merit to detect this subversive undercurrent in the second version of *Taras Bulba*. However, he tends to overstate Gogol's allegiance to the Ukrainian national project and to understate the overwhelming significance of Gogol's religious asceticism that eventually led to his self-inflicted death.

Ulrich Schmid
(St. Gallen)

Ulrich Schmid (ed.), *Ukrainische Literaturgeschichte*, Berlin, Metzler, 2025, 356 pp., € 34,99.

Published in 2025, *Ukrainische Literaturgeschichte*, edited by Ulrich Schmid, represents the first comprehensive literary history of Ukraine to appear in the German language. Though long awaited, the volume is strikingly well-timed: it responds to the surge of international interest in Ukrainian culture following Russia's full-scale invasion, while correcting the widespread misconception that Ukrainian literature is a recent phenomenon tied solely to the post-1991 nation-state.

The book consists of eighteen chapters and is the result of close collaboration among an international team of scholars, with a notable presence of Italian Slavists. From Giovanna Brogi's survey of medieval and early modern texts, to Maria Grazia Bartolini's exploration of the Baroque period, and Schmid's own contributions on the nineteenth century, the volume is guiding the reader through the shifting cultural, linguistic, and political landscapes that have shaped Ukrainian literature over the centuries. Later chapters, including those by Vera Faber, Alois Woldan, Alexander Kratochvil, and Alessandro Achilli, address Soviet literary policy, exile writing, and the recent literature of the Euromaidan and post-2014 period. Despite the absence of Ukrainian-born contributors, the volume engages closely with major Ukrainian scholars and maintains both empathy and scholarly rigor towards both Ukraine and its literature.

What sets this book apart is its methodological self-awareness. Rather than imposing external evaluative standards – as earlier surveys often did – Schmid and his collaborators present Ukrainian literature as a historical phenomenon with its own coherence. The result is a literary history that neither

exoticizes nor marginalizes, but convincingly situates Ukrainian writing within broader European processes, from nation-building to postcolonial reconfigurations

Methodologically, the collection embraces a variety of approaches: some chapters offer close readings, others contextual analysis, and still others combine literary and political history. While this results in some variation in tone and depth, it also lends the volume versatility, making it well-suited for academic instruction (thanks to its clear periodization, detailed author lists, and bibliographies). More importantly, this volume is not a reference work, but a narrative literary history, which, however, still centers author and text as its main categories of analysis.

As with any ambitious and long-spanning work, it is to be expected that certain methodological decisions or interpretive choices may invite critical scrutiny. One such instance is the volume's framing of contemporary figures – such as Vasyl Stus and Serhii Zhadan – as “national poets” in a manner reminiscent of nineteenth-century models. This move risks reinforcing outdated Romantic tropes that seem at odds with the book's otherwise nuanced approach to periodization. One wonders whether this labeling reflects actual literary dynamics or rather stems from external pressures that foreground national function in times of war.

Like any literary history, this one also performs canon-making. Some editorial decisions – such as the inclusion of Ukrainian Russophone literature – may provoke debate or even resistance, yet they are generally well-contextualized and thoughtfully justified within the chapters themselves. Moreover, the volume's structural attention to geopolitical realities – such as the contestation between the Russian and Habsburg empires – enriches its comparative dimension and emphasizes literature's embeddedness in larger political frameworks.

Ukrainische Literaturgeschichte is poised to become a valuable resource for students and scholars of Ukrainian and East European literature. Its accessible structure makes it not only a reference work but also a springboard for further inquiry. Making the volume available as an open-access publication – and translating it into English and Ukrainian – would be vital steps toward expanding its reach and impact.

Oleksandr Zabirko
(University of Regensburg)

Niprò

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EDITORE

New Digital Frontiers S.r.L

Piazza Marina 29/34

90145 – Palermo

Cell. (+39)3349828155

ndfedizioni@gmail.com

newdigitalfrontiers@pec.it

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ARTWORK COPERTINA:

Illia Razdelskyi

ISSN 2974-6531

ISBN 978-88-5509-815-1



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Questo numero è stato finanziato dal

Dipartimento di Scienze Umanistiche dell'Università degli Studi di Palermo