



Ukrainian Society

Contemporary Ukrainian Comics: Dimensions of a Hero

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It is not uncommon to talk about modern comics and comics in general as of visual modern mythology [Bland 2016, Jennings 2014]. Heroes and villains of Marvel and DC have taken this role in the USA back in the 1940-ies and Hollywood followed the paper medium with dozens of films, sequels and remakes, many of which appeared in the past decade.

Despite being a widespread popular culture medium in North America and Western Europe, a genre of comics doesn't have a developed or pronounced history in Ukraine. Although, interestingly enough, starting from 2012 there appear this genre experiences a unique development – there appear series and graphic novels which gradually fill a vacant void in this cultural space. The first ComiCon takes place in Kyiv in 2015 (as a private, partly crowd-funded initiative) gathering unexpectedly wide audience (10.000 visitors) and becoming an annual event.

The processes in Ukrainian artistic and book publishing fields within roughly the last three years could be called a boom in a Ukrainian comic production. Contemporary Ukrainian comics develop characters and stories based on or connected to the Ukrainian history, and moreover – the events, described in several novels have reminiscence to real historical facts, which is quite rare for contemporary European comics that mostly rely on science fiction and fantasy.

Not only did the Ukrainian graphic artists start to create collaborate projects and publish more original Ukrainian-made pieces (instead of publishing translations), but also some of these projects came out to be quite ambitious – like "Maksym Osa" («Максим Оса»), "Daohopak" («Даоґопак») series or "The Will" project («Воля»). All of them position themselves as graphic novels, not simple comics. Following the footsteps of the most famous pieces of this genre – Art Spiegelman's "The Mouse: History of Survival" and "Persepolis" by Marjane Satrapi, Ukrainian graphic novels have great publicity, promotion and successful sales.

In this paper I look at several heroes of Ukrainian comics and attempt to analyze pre-conditions and symptomatic of their appearance as well as their possible development and perception by the audience. I attempt to look at comic books as "public popular culture" in Appadurai's and Breckenridge's sense of this notion - as describing not a type of cultural phenomenon but a zone of cultural debate, controversial in character due to the contradictions between the national and transnational cultural processes they embody.

In addition to reading textualities, the studies of new comics cultures from non-Western parts of the world may be usefully allied with the theoretical expression of a new category, that of public culture as a condition of modernity in the postcolony. It could be suggested that current transnational conics scenes may be contextualized within

“new public modernities” which particularly emphasize cultural registers such as the circulation of images, the political roles of visuality, importance of symbolic actions as opposed to rational speech, and the links between mass media and the emancipatory dimensions of art, display and performance. Appadurai and Breckenridge describe public culture as a “way to enter modernity within particular historical frames”, characterized by a “mainstream quality” and occupying spaces created by new media, nomad technologies and the “current manipulation of signs” in a field of global cultural flows [Appadurai, Breckenridge 1995]

The first printed Ukrainian comics magazine “(Chervony) Perets” (Red Pepper, «Перець») had a long history. “Perets” started out in 1927 as a magazine of Soviet political satire and humor. It was one of the most popular printed editions in entire USSR with the circulation of 3.3 million copies in 1986. Eventually the magazine faced closure in 2013 due to a decrease in sales and public popularity in general. Another comic magazine which made its way on to the Ukrainian print and market was “K9” (2003 – 2009), which was open for contributions and published all – translated and abridged versions of European comics, manga and stories by Ukrainian artists.

It wasn't until mid 1990-ies that Ukrainian comics started to develop distinctive heroes of their own. In 1993 a Kyiv writer and graphics artist Igor Baranko (Ігор Баранько) created a series of comics about Mamay the Cossack (1993 – 1998). Flourishing with all the folk legends and mystical stories, Mamay transformed from the character of 17th century mythology and folk paintings into a pioneer of Ukrainian comic characters. Baranko continued with “Maksym Osa” (2008) which came out as a graphic novel – a story of Zaporizhian Cossack “who came back from *That world*” (it awaits to be produced as a film in late 2016).

The beginning of Ukrainian national revival in the first half of the 19th century brought interest to the history of Ukrainian people and glorification of Cossackhood, which was nostalgically referred to as a heroic past of Ukraine that needed to be revived [Saltovsky 2002]. The admiration of Cossacks was initially expressed among an insignificant number of educated Ukrainian nobility. It received further development with the appearance of Ukrainian literature in the 19th century. This resulted in popularization and further mythologization of Cossacks' images. Some of the most significant literary works that refer to Cossacks and are considered as classics of Ukrainian literature includes poems and novels by Ivan Kotlyarevskiy, Mykola Gogol and Taras Shevchenko [Bureychak 2012]. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cossacks – as national heroes and fighters for independence – were integrated into official national symbols.

Nowadays texts gain visual body within the contemporary popular culture – the graphic images of Cossacks appear as well as other images, used in ads and illustration. It could be suggested that the Cossacks we see in the comics are the product of modern visual

mythology (or global visuality – they have good looking and perfectly trained bodies, they know technical and possess magical tricks, they are well dressed, well connected and well read. These Cossacks have a lot more in common with the Marvel characters than with folk paintings of the 18th century, though keeping some connections to the least.

Shortly it turned out that the Cossack theme offers an incredible variety of interpretations and variations for contemporary comics artists: “Maksym Osa” was followed by a series of Cossack stories, produced by three Kyiv based artists – Maksym Prasolov, Oleksiy Chebykin and Oleg Kolov, their project titled “Daohopak”, Cossacks appeared in many ATO-themed books as the precursors of modern heroes, they flew into space and wrote letters to Dart Vader in “Cossacks in Space” series for children or the “Chub” («Чуб») graphic novel and so on.

The “Daohopak” trilogy was published in 2015-2016 by “Nebeskey” Kyiv publishing house as a series of graphic novels. They had an entire set of characters developed connected by a theme of Zaporizhian Sich. One of the authors, Maksym Prasolov, in an interview for “Oldfashioned Radio”, Kyiv (online radio), says that the aim of the series was to create a hero-warrior (Kharakternyk-Cossack), who would represent the “Ukrainian myth” at the international cultural scene, integrate it there and qualify to stand in one row with a Japanese Samurai (or Ninja), the Viking, the Pirate, Asterix the Gaul, European Knight and the Cowboy of the Wild West. To insert this hero into the “contemporary hero pantheon” is our goal, said the artist. [Prasolov, interview, 6].

After the breakup of a Soviet Union, which had functioned as an imperial structure, postcolonial studies migrate into post-Soviet space. Postcolonial methodology is especially applicable to Ukrainian experience – as Ukraine has been in a semi-colonial condition since the 17-th century and through totalitarian colonization of the 20-th. Within this framework, methodologies regarding alternative thinking and reading of different power strategies seem particularly pertinent for analyzing of post totalitarian consciousness [Hundorova, 2015].

As Stephen Slemon writes, postcolonial textualities enter colonial discourses deconstructively, inhabiting its ambiguities and fissures, initiating persistent questioning of the frame, which at one level, is the space of representation, and at another level, the frame of western modernity itself [Lawson, Tiffin, 2002]. Graphic writing, particularly enabled by complex signifying recourses, may be seen as an effective category of “post-colonial textuality” making visible the colonial legacies and re-writing the missing or misinterpreted identities in their precise contexts. Moreover, it could be proposed that postcolonial comics are uniquely able to perform the characteristic “deconstructive image functions”. Timothy Brennan argues that the established textual visualities encode rules of perception that regulate and determine “usable” ideas of global

peripheries in the present “information” age The political utility of such perceptions to the new systems of imperial power are connected with their formations as “calculated zones of invisibility”, “serviceable abstractions” or “repositories for counter-modernity” [Mehta, Mukerji 2015]. Deconstructive textual strategies of postmodern iconographics lie in the work of decoding and contesting image-objects of everyday ideology within resistant postcolonial visual cultures.

The phenomenon of a post-colonial comic is analyzed by the literary science as a set of texts which intend to make a revision of history and reclaim the national history, tradition and science [2, p.219]. Such tradition is particularly interesting in the Francophone North Africa and Anglophone India. Interestingly enough, many contemporary Ukrainian comics so far show the same tendency – developing the realm of artistic imaginary (steam punk of “The Will” for instance), concentrate on some historical episodes, use the material of documentaries but not encroaching the general historical outline. Ukrainian comics also follow this strategy in the way they portray glorious Ukrainian military past and construct an iconographic history creating images valorous individuals. To an extent what can be seen in these images, is “masculinizing” - creating a network of icons who symbolize ideal of machismo, which again, is tied up with a perception of what constitutes the ideal nation. [Mehta, Mukerji 2015]

One of the “Daohopak” creators, Maksym Prasolov emphasizes in one of the interviews, that “...Ukrainian culture is colonized by and filled with images imposed from the outside. That’s why this graphic novel series are aimed to replace this existing picture with “our own version” of history based on “the real facts” [Prasolov, 6]. This is precisely the subversive work that this kind of artwork does questioning and inhabiting the voids in public culture, left due to the colonial experience of Ukraine, with the heroes and (imaginary) spaces “of our own”. “Daohopak”, for example, highly mythologizes Zaporizhian Sich is and turns it into a liminal space – to which one has to be led by a special guide. The Sich itself in “Daohopak” is constructed with the use of advanced technology; it is a man-made island, concealed from the eyes of strangers, which makes a full turn in a year time.

The “creolization” of contemporary comics forms and their reading publics arising from “the global flux of ideas and images where voices and registers overlap” necessarily creates a “proliferation of genres and cultural exchanges within contemporary visual cultures” and places local texts within an “expanding global public sphere, where the imperatives of the sign – drawing art, photography, images or comics – can now no longer be perceived as cultural symbols which communicate obsolete authenticity [Mehta, Mukerji 2015]

“Daohopak” novels are highly eclectic in using symbolism, history and visuality. The first thing which catches attention – the Dao/Tao component and its seamless combi-

nation with hopak, the most popular (and also controversial) of Ukrainian folk dances is very curious. When asked why Tao appears in the context of Ukrainian history and culture (even its alternative version), Maksym Prasolov enigmatically answers “Such was the Tao of our way”, and adds that working at the series, artists found many similarities between the Taoism philosophy and Gregory Skovoroda’s theory of “the Three worlds” (hence the last name of the main character). The authors find Skovoroda also a quite mysterious character and plan to create a comic book about his life, philosophy and personal history.

The main hero of “Daohopak”, Oles Skorovoda (Олесь Скоровода) is a very gifted Cossack, aspiring Kharakternyk (характерник). He has to fulfill certain complicated assignments to prove his qualification so that eventually he could get the necessary knowledge (from the elders of Sich) and become a Cossack sorcerer. The sorcerers mythology is present throughout the series – kharakternyk of the Sich is the equivalent of the Carpathian molfar (мольфар), except for the fact that kharakternyk is a warrior-sorcerer.

Similarly to other colonized peoples, Ukrainians resort to attempts of rediscovering and highlighting a martial culture in themselves [Dasgupta 2014, 4]. These attempts became evident and apparent in Ukraine since early 1990-ies with the appearance of Combat Hopak phenomenon. This martial art appeared on the Ukrainian sports scene in the late 1980-ies - early Independence years. It was mythologized from the very beginning by the “Great Master” Volodymyr Pylat, who positioned it as a specifically and native, purely Ukrainian martial art, invented and practiced by Kossacks of Zaporizhzhia, but later lost (due to the activities of the “enemies”) and miraculously reborn from the last living bearer of tradition which is Pylat. Pylat himself was a trained gymnast and wrestler, had studied kick boxing, aikido and Kyoshin Kan karate in which he held a black belt. In one of the interviews, Pylat admits that he founded Combat hopak as a reaction to a prejudicial reaction of Japanese masters to Ukrainian participants of a sports event in 1985. As Pylat states, at that time it was common to deny European practitioners the right to take higher level classes as it was widely believed that they can’t condition their bodies and minds to comprehend Eastern martial arts [Moskalenko 2015] Producing quite a controversial impression by projecting far-right ideas, however the Combat hopak movement proved to be quite discreet and apolitical. Nowadays some combat hopak schools provide trainings for Ukrainian military and members of the Right Sector party, but none of the numerous volunteer battalions of ATO directly associated itself with the Combat hopak. The leader of the movement, Volodymyr Pylat wrote several books in which he developed a program of nationalistic school upbringing based on “healthy body and healthy spirit” principle. His system aimed to fix the consequences of Soviet time propaganda and neglect of health (spiritual health in *mens sana in corpora sano* context) within the school system. Curious seems the fact, that in Pylat’s mastery levels description, Kharakternyk is also the highest one (corresponding to Honored master of sports in the parallel, Ukrainian state description) [Pylat, 1994]

Although it is a widely accepted historical fact that Ukrainian Cossacks were Orthodox Christians and accepting Orthodoxy was one of the conditions of being accepted to Sich in general, the Cossack origin myths contain an entire plexus of cultural motives. Most of such myths link Cossackhood to the military administration of Kyivan Rus and earlier Slavic societies (as early as the mythical Aryan civilization), extinguished after the acceptance of Christianity in 988 AD. The myth about Cossacks as esoteric knowledge bearers (hypnosis, healing, fortune telling, martial arts, etc.) is also part of the origin mythology. The most typical and definitive *kharakternyk* is Mamay the Cossack. Being a protagonist of narrative as well as pictorial folklore, he is still a part of a popular culture – Oles Sanin’s movie of 2005 (“Мамай”), “Mamay the Cossack” monument at Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Майдан Незалежності) in Kyiv (Valentyn Znoba, 2001), hired special warriors - *kharakternyks* in “Ogniem I Mieczem” modification of “Rome: Total War” videogame, etc. It worth mentioning, that Mozgovyi, the *kharakternyk* of “Daohopak” doesn’t talk too much and is an excellent engineer and mechanic, able to make any kind of repairs to the existing vehicles and devices, and also design new ones if necessary for the sake of the mission.

As any other martial art Combat hopak is based on a resistance narrative and “folk history” as Anthony Green describes it [Green, Svinth 2003] In case of Combat Hopak, resistance was a crucial part of this martial art in the folk legend, presented by its founder Pylat. According to him, the movements were first invented for the body training and movements that could have been used in fighting. Later, however, when “foreigners and enemies” took away most of the lands, which belonged to proto-Ukrainians and Christianity exterminated the leading class (the priests, or “*volkhvy*”). The remaining Cossacks had no other choice as to practice this technique in a form of dance, which would disguise them and draw attention of “foreigners” away from military potential of the “Ukrainian Warrior Caste”. In this way it was also possible to keep this “knowledge” and pass it to the next generations.

The first novel of the “Daohopak” trilogy is titled “The Antalya Tour” («Анатолійська гастроль») and takes place in Eastern Ottoman Empire. The mood of this book is humorous, which is suggested right away by its name, гастроль – in broken, not literary Ukrainian (or surzhyk) – instead of гастролі. The main characters of the comic – Cossacks Oles Skorovoda (Олесь Сковорода), Taras Peresicivolia (Тарас Пересічиволя) and a sorcerer (*kharakternyk*) Mozgovyy (Мозговий) are on a mission of liberating their fellow Christian Cossacks from the Ottoman captivity. This choice of characters and their activities precisely follows one of the earliest features of the Cossack mythology, as Sergiy Ploky writes: those were the campaigns against Ottomans which related Cossackhood (as an emerging social group in the 17th century) to the state leaders of earlier epochs – the Princes of Kyivan Rus, who also fought against the menace from the South [Ploky 2012]. This became the constitutive and distinguishing trait of Cossack-

hood and was depicted in literature and historical mythology and also had a legitimizing effect for the Cossacks' attacks on the Ottoman Empire.

The second part of the series, titled “Noble Love” («Шляхетна любов») takes the reader for a tour to Zaporizhian Sich fortress and sheds some light onto the Cossacks military and martial schooling. But also, as the title suggests, it contains the love story and a personal conflict. The confrontation – both romantic and heroic takes place between the main protagonist – Oles Skorovoda and a Polish gentryman – Kazimir Zheromski. “Noble Love” implies another Cossack myth – the one of a noble origin. Contesting the attention of Ari-San (a beautiful Japanese girl-ninja warrior) Oles Skorovoda wins a duel with Kazimir Zheromski, a son of a Polish ambassador and noble warrior. Oles shows the level of saber mastery, martial excellence as well as the class of conduct no inferior to his opponent, which makes him look like a real honorable knight. According to Sergiy Plokyh, the social program of making Cossackhood equal to Polish gentry was another part of Cossack mythology.

Third graphic novel of the series revolves around the mythology of the Carpathian sorcerers – the molgars and is based on the reconstructions of ancient Slavic world outlook and idea of the three worlds – the higher – place of the gods, the middle (belonging to humans) and the lower world, guarded and inhabited by the ancestors, chthonic creatures and deities. It also incorporates the Ukrainian mythological view on Carpathian Mountains as a mystical “Place of Force or Knowledge”.

“Daohopak’s” iconography refers to an earlier version of Cossack-related epic – the Ivan Kotliarevsky’s “Eneyida” (1798) illustrated by Anatoliy Bazylevych in 1968. Wide shouldered Trojans and Latinians of Kotlyarevsky-Bazylevych were to a great deal precursors of contemporary muscular warriors of mythical Zaporizhian Sich depicted in these comics. Besides the iconography, also the kind of humor and language, used in the novel refers to the tradition of “kotlyarevshchyna” (котляревщина), Ukrainian literary kitsch.

As literary scholar Tamara Hundorova writes, kotlyarevshchyna as a textual and cultural phenomenon, dates to the end of 18th-beginning of 19th century. It was the time when two important processes took place in the Ukrainian literature and culture. At one hand - vernacular language and “folklore” became a form of national and cultural self-affirmation (which “Eneida” clearly proves). At the other hand - the “Little Russian” folk style acquires traits of certain burlesque subculture, which turned out to be very eagerly copied and gave birth to the phenomenon of “kotlyarevshchyna”. By its very nature, Hundorova suggests, burlesque is not a purely humorous style, but rather a macaronic one – it contains fragments of the high and low cultures mixing together the two, adding the brutal and the sentimental components. During the 19-th century burlesque became popular not only in Ukraine, but also in the Metropole of Russian Empire, be-

coming the signature style of Little Russia. [Hundorova 2008] There was a major difference between travestied “Eneyida” of Ivan Kotliarevsky and the “kotlyarevshchyna” phenomenon. The travestied “Eneyida” legitimized the rights of a popular culture, it was “double-coded” – from both sides the high (classic) and low (folk) cultures. But beginning from 19th century, the imitation of Kotliarevsky’s burlesque literary style becomes a massive graphomania – “kotlyarevshchyna”. This way the style is emulated, reproduced and imitated mostly by the Little Russian authors belonging to the “Third Estate” – those are clerks, teachers, small landowners obliged to work as clerks. Most of these authors are born in Ukraine but professionally connected to Russian cities (such as St. Petersburg) [Hundorova 2008].

Kotlyarevshchyna is one of the sources of “Little Russian” colonial kitsch. But in order to become recognizable, the Ukrainian provincials’ style had to be identified, reproduced and used by the Metropole. So to say – it had to be decorated and incorporated into the colony not “from below”, but “from above”. In the beginning of the 19th century mass literature becomes to emerge in Russia as well. Emancipation, urbanization, literacy growth created new possibilities for the growing cultural needs of the lower society classes. And commercial publications were able to satisfy these needs.

Writing about kolyarevshchyna, George Hrabovych notes two important modalities of this “style” – its historical (or ideological) function – separating itself from Russian (omni Russian) literature due to choosing Ukrainian language. It was choosing not only Ukrainian, but “folk” Ukrainian, vernacular language. Because of this fact Ukrainian reader becomes privileged – Ukrainian literary piece becomes illegible, inaccessible for a Russian reader [Hrabovych 1999]. The main aim of this burlesque, as Hrabovych writes, was subversive towards the outer context of the Russian literature – it was a parody. This fact was a taboo in a Soviet literary science, it started to be commented later and very carefully. But this was the main feature of kotlyarevshchyna – to ridicule the arrogant, smug, artificial and cold and eventually inhuman world of an imperial society and normative canonic literature. This is a function of all the kotlyarevshchyna. Main difference between Kotliarevsky himself (and his epigones), writes Hrabovych, and the writers who later emulated their modality and style is that the first group had it implicitly, nonreflective, whereas in the second it is conscious, intentional, even programmed. For example, it is seen in Sehvechenko’s poetic contexts.

The “Daohopak” graphic novel series can be placed into this tradition being a variation of the new kotlyarevshchyna. Intentionally or not, but the piece contains iconographic and textual references to “Eneyida”. Being a part of popular culture, “Daohopak” draws from the Ukrainian tradition of popular culture but in this case, rather nonreflective. This gesture is of a certain similarity to the 19th century one – to make the style recognizable, but this time not in an imperial, but in a globalized context, situation of global visuality. “Daohopak” uses some globally recognizable comic themes (codes) – i.e. man-

ga-like iconography, references to Japan as a Mecca of martial arts, etc. and to make the “Ukrainian component” recognizable, the artists turn to the visual tradition of Kotliarevsky’s “Eneyida” and its humorous part.

Another graphic novel worth mentioning is “The Will” project («Воля»). It is (or rather it is planned to be) an epic steam punk fantasy based on alternative history of Ukraine asking: what could have happened if Ukrainian People’s Republic would have held its positions and changed the course of world history? The reason for beginning this project, according to the author, Viacheslav Bugayov (В’ячеслав Бугайов) was the complete absence of media market interest towards this segment of Ukrainian history.[9] “When my colleagues and myself saw the archival photo materials depicting Ukrainian People’s Republic’s heavy bombers: Shtaken Zeppelin, it’s fleet, aircrafts of Ukrainian construction and production (Anatra DS – two seat reconnaissance aircraft, constructed and built at Odessa factory between 1911 and 1917), armored trains and war forces, hetman Skoropadsky’s luxurious automobiles, Ukrainian delegations’ grandiose banquets in Berlin and Kyiv, the Ukrainian Republic aircraft fleet of 400 air vessels, unknown territories of Ukraine beyond the borders of Asia – we understood that it is extremely important to convey this information – in a catchy, energetic form, - says Bugayov. [9] “The Will” is a work in progress, the production of the book itself, as well as a short film and a video is planned for 2017. For the current moment one can only rely on information provided on their webpage and in several blogs. The set of characters of future graphic novel is not published yet, but on one of the posters we see a man with an iron hand and a mechanical ocular – probably a cyborg? Possibly this group of artists will develop an idea of advancement of bio- and cybernetic technology in “alternative” Ukraine.

The topic and situation of ATO (Anti-Terrorist-Operation) produced a whole variety of comics – educational series for children teaching how to avoid the dangers of explosives (“Once upon a Mine”) or how to act in case one is held hostage, others depicting real events, for example the “Cyborgs. The Story of Three” («Кіборги. Історія трьох») series, which is based on the histories of soldiers defending the Donetsk Airport during eight months of battles. Cossacks appear in “Victory. Savur Mohyla” («Звитяга. Савур-Могила»), a graphic novel composed and published in 2015 of collaborate work of thirteen artists of different Ukrainian cities and issued by “Granit” association. It describes recent events in a Shakhtarsk region of near Donetsk. The drama of these events is the fact that Savur Mohyla is a hill near Russo-Ukrainian border, strategic elevated point which allows control vast territories around. Savur Mohyla was a part of Ukrainian folklore (especially *dumas*) way before the events of 2014, linking this place with Cossacks history. As an elevated platform, Savur Mohyla used to serve as an observation post and in this way divide the “wild steppe” from the territories controlled by Cossackhood. Despite the battles, in 2014 it eventually passed under the control of the separatist (pro-Russian) forces.

The main character of the novel is a corrupt district attorney, who decides to spend “a couple of days” at ATO in order to obtain a legal status and privileges provided for the Ukrainian army soldiers later. He ends up participating in the battles for Savur Mohyla. Not only does he find the real Cossack sword, but also sees in a short sleep’s dream the events of a popular Cossack *duma* (дума, *epic*) – “The Three Brothers’ Escape from Azov” («Втеча трьох братів з Азова»). Meeting the heroic Cossacks in the dream the attorney changes his behavior towards the moral ideals. In this comic, the image of a Cossack is an image of an ethical, valorous character, who not only acts according to a certain code, but can also evoke such qualities and battle vice in a modern day Ukrainian. “Savur Mohyla” is also published in English and distributed through online booksellers to make the story accessible and reach wider readers audience.

Interestingly enough, a Cossack does not appear in “Ukrainian Superheroes” («Українські супергерої») comic series for children, published in 2014 by “Bookrek” publishing house in Chernivtsi. The hero-protagonist group instead consists of Vira (Faith, Віра) – a college student and a volunteer, Kobza musician (Кобзар) – a blind man with a superpower to read minds and see with the help of a touch, Cyborg (Кіборг) – a warrior who defended Donetsk airport and Krip, (Dill, Кріп- reference to a plant homonymic to the beginning of the word Ukraine in Russian language – укроп (укроп) – a Carpathian mountains herbalist. Their villains are the two-headed eagles (Dvorly, referring to Russian Federation Coat of Arms) and Kolorady (refers to stripes on the Ribbon of St. George, which became a symbol of invasion of Ukraine by Russian troops during the ongoing hybrid war (ATO).

Vira is an explicit example of a female comic character: a “typical Ukrainian woman” who becomes a volunteer helper to the soldiers in the hybrid war, powerful and ready to fly into action. Just as Ari-San of “Daohopak” (although she is Japanese, but it turns out that her master was a Ukrainian Cossack), whose martial art technique is more polished than that of most male characters around her and her main task is to be a bodyguard to the members of a royal family.

Another curious character who recently made his way to the pages of a Ukrainian graphic novel is Stepan Kalynovych (Степан Калинович) – a typical bookkeeper, who has dedicatedly spent twenty years of his life at work at the office in Austrian Lemberg City council until the events of 1848, Spring of Nations pulled him into revolutionary street action. Two émigré artists based in Lviv – French Kyrylo Horishniy (Кирило Горішній) and Romanian Mihay Tymoshenko (Міхай Тимошенко) created the comic version of a Ivan Franko novel the “Involuntary Hero” («Герой поневолі»), published in 2014 by Leopold Publishing house. Ivan Franko, without doubt belongs to the literary titans of Ukrainian literature and his works constitute a great deal of its canon. Presenting Ukrainian literary classics in this way happens for the first time. This graphic novel is interesting also in its visual part. Being a collaboration between a graphic artist (Ty-

moshenko) and a historian (Horishnyi), it provides very curious and accurate insights into everyday life of Lviv city life of the 19th century. Old city maps and photographs were used in order to create a credible image of Austrian Lemberg streets and events in them. Presenting the actual historical events, “Involuntary hero” could be compared to “Persepolis” of Marjane Satrapi, which mostly speaks of Tehran and how the events of Islamic revolution change the face of the city. Street actions, barricades, shootings, confrontation and destruction scenes unfortunately became very familiar to Ukrainians in 2013-2014, that’s why the events of the “Spring of Nations”, pictured in “Involuntary Hero” are quite easily relatable for the readers.

The “Involuntary Hero” dilogy very interestingly introduces a different kind of hero – a quiet personality, peaceful white collar worker forced to act in the time of social and political turmoil, a person who suddenly has to make tough choices while he is hardly used to making any at all and simply wants to diligently do his work and earn a pension from Austrian government. Stepan Kalynovych possesses an appearance very different from the muscular crew of brave hearted warriors presented in most of the 2010-s comics: he is quite skinny and pale from sitting in his bureau for twenty years, has no fighting skills and doesn’t often speak up. And, what is important, Stepan Kalynovych is a Ukrainian. To my mind, it could be suggested that Kalynovych represents the other side of “contemporary Ukrainian hero” – an intellectual side. During the populist era in the second half of the 19-th century the concept of intelligentsia emerged in Ukraine. Intellectuals, of course, existed here prior to this time period, their development mirrored that of their neighboring counterparts and their ideas used to drive Ukrainian literature – from early Romantics to the activities of the Cyril and Methodius Brotherhood, etc. [Andrychuk 2012]. What is interesting about Kalynovych - he is not the “socially engaged intellectual with a decidedly rural orientation and strong dedication to serving the Ukrainian people”, which forms the prevailing stereotype of the Ukrainian intellectual in the prose of Ivan Nechui-Levyts’kyi and Franko himself in late 19-th century [Andrychuk 2012]. But he is also not the distanced from the masses and politics art-for-art’s-sake decadent urban modernist intellectual of the early 20th century. Kalynovych problematizes this image and position showing the process of becoming “Ukrainian intellectual”, challenges and doubts which accompany such identity formation.

Mykola Riabchuk (Микола Рябчук) argues that socially engaged intelligentsia is a typical phenomenon of all dependent societies, including Ukrainian one, as Ukraine has been and still remains a colonial society. That’s why Ukrainian intelligentsia (or the intelligentsia of Ukraine) is very diverse not only in the level of its intelligence and intellectuality or political views, but also in its relation to the “Ukrainian business” – towards the problems of national liberation, political and cultural emancipation. In other words, intelligentsia of Ukraine has been always divided into an active pro-Ukrainian minority and much more numerous passive pro-imperial majority [Riabchuk 2011]. Writing about “post imperial” condition of Ukrainian intelligentsia, Riabchuk keenly

notices one typical detail – the confusion caused by a necessity to reformulate one’s own identity especially in the aspect towards the “Ukrainian business”. In a way Kalynovych is a symptomatic character, who makes such experience articulated and explicit.

In “Empire as Discourse” chapter of his “Postcolonial Syndrome” monograph, Mykola Riabchuk notices, that the curious peculiarity of the Ukrainian situation lies in fact, that whatever the topic of Ukrainian intellectual writing – there will inevitably be a “national” problematic in it. The outside spectator/reader not engaged in this problematic will naturally see it as “nationalistic”. The Ukrainians’ obsession with their identity, language, history, culture, their national existence per se can be explained by the highly unfavorable historical circumstances. Moreover, the condition of nowadays Ukraine in no way facilitate the healing of historical neuroses, as formally independent Ukraine has rather conserved the colonial status quo than opened a concise and comprehensive decolonization program [Riabchuk 2011].

Contemporary Ukrainian comics are not writings of intellectuals per se, but they are in the same way symptomatically imbued with similar ideas. The interest to book production in Ukrainian language increases and the popular culture transmits a general necessity of positive identification with a strong distinctive (native) image and a search for such. These visual projects are to an extend future oriented (many of them are for children) asking “who will we become?”

Historical circumstances are traditionally unfavorable to Ukraine, the topic of nationalism becomes more and more problematic, and the necessity of a “new definition of nationalism” is voiced in University rooms as well in the whole Ukrainian public sphere. Ukraine has to fight in a hybrid war and the need for a heroic national figure is apprehensible. It could be suggested, that all the mentioned artists, overwhelming majority of which are very young, are trying to “dust” the notion of patriotism the meaning of which got somewhat “worn out” from overuse by the state rhetoric during the past twenty five years, and to ask “what does it mean for us in these circumstances?” As Anne Applebaum writes, the typified image of a Ukrainian nationalist leaves out the historical figures who, given luckier geography would have become great statesman and politicians. Now there is a tiny group of nationalists in Ukraine, whom perhaps we can now agree to call patriots, represent the country’s only hope of escaping apathy, rapacious corruption, and, eventually, dismemberment. If one believes in nationalism and inculcates it, it can in turn give inspiration so that one tries to improve the country, to help it live up to the image one wants it to have [Applebaum 2014].

ANALYZED COMIC BOOKS

Герой поневолі, Леополь, 2014, Львів

Даогопак. Анатолійська гастроль, Nebeskey, 2014, Київ

Даогопак. Таємниця карпатського мольфара, Nebeskey, 2015, Київ

Даогопак. Шляхетна любов, Nebeskey, 2014, Київ

Звитяга. Савур-Могила, Asgardian comics, 2015, Київ

Кіборги. Історія трьох, Вірні традиціям, 2016, Львів

Козаки на орбіті, Кассіопея, 2016, Львів

Максим Оса, Asgardian comics, 2010 та 2016, Київ

Українські супергерої, Букрек, 2015, Чернівці

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