

*

May 27, 2009

The Ukrainian-Russian Cultural Conflict

Publication: Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 6 Issue: 87

May 6, 2009 06:12 PM Age: 21 days

Category: Eurasia Daily Monitor, Home Page, Foreign Policy, Russia, Ukraine

By: Taras Kuzio

Scene from the movie "Taras Bulba"

Discussions over the many conflicts between Ukraine and Russia have focused on the more well known: the status of the Russian language, unpaid energy bills and gas pipelines, withdrawal of the Black Sea Fleet, Russia's invasion of Georgia, support for Crimean separatism, and future NATO membership. What is less widely known is the undeclared Ukrainian-Russian cultural war that is as bitter as any other aspect of the poor state of the bilateral relationship between Ukraine and Russia.

The Ukrainian-Russian cultural war has significant ramifications in Ukraine and Russia's domestic politics, national identities and geopolitical orientations. It has long been established that the language spoken by Ukrainians (Ukrainian or Russian) and their attitudes towards Russia shaped by their stance on culture and history, in turn influences the voting patterns of Ukrainians -into pro-Western and pro-Russian orientations. These orientations then influence attitudes towards their support for Ukraine's integration into the CIS, NATO and the EU.

Unlike in the 1990's, Russia under Vladimir Putin has gone on the offensive in seeking to counter what it sees as the "Ukrainian nationalist" view of Ukrainian history and culture which has been propagated by President Viktor Yushchenko since his election in January 2005 . Yushchenko's active and personal involvement in reviving the Ukrainian national memory has added to the deep-seated antagonism that Russia's leaders hold towards him.

The Ukrainian-Russian cultural war has become acute as a consequence of the release in April of a new Russian film about Nikolai Gogol's fictitious Cossack leader Taras Bulba. The film was sponsored by the Russian Ministry of Culture at a cost of \$20 million and took three years to produce.

The new Taras Bulba film has obvious ideological and geopolitical ramifications. Bulba is portrayed as fighting "Western enemies" and dies for "the Orthodox Russian land." The film's director Vladimir Bortko openly admitted that his aim was to increase "pro-Russian" sympathies within Ukraine and to propagate the myth that Ukrainians and Russians belong to one narod. The film unashamedly propagates a pan-Slavic line that has won praise from Russian nationalist politicians such as Vladimir Zhirinovskiy.

Taras Bulba opened on April 3 in Moscow's Kinoteatr Oktyabr to thunderous applause at Bulba's "Russian soul" speech and scenes where Cossacks expel Poles from Ukraine. The film has aroused widespread public interest and criticism and has already grossed \$14 million in Russia and Ukraine (Kyiv Post, April 22). The film has attracted both older viewers, nostalgic for the USSR, and younger people because of its abundance of gratuitous violence (www.life.pravda.com.ua, April 3).

It was released for the 200th anniversary of Gogol's birth who, although born in Ukraine, wrote in the Russian language and has traditionally been viewed as a "Russian" writer. The Ukrainian-Russian cultural war has therefore descended into an historical dispute over Gogol.

On April 1 President Yushchenko visited Gogol's museum in his native Poltava region (www.president.gov.ua, April 1). At a concert in Gogol's honor, Yushchenko said, "Gogol wrote in Russian, was a Ukrainian, and thought and felt himself to be a Ukrainian. I believe it is ridiculous, and to a certain extent the conflicts surrounding which country he belongs to are demeaning" (www.president.gov.ua, April 1). On the same day, Vladimir Putin hailed Gogol as an "outstanding Russian writer."

The Ukrainian-Russian cultural war had earlier become contested over Yushchenko's propagation of the 1933 famine as directed against Ukrainians and as genocide. Russia has gone on the offensive against both of these Ukrainian claims.

On February 25, the Russian Foreign Ministry issued a DVD which will be followed later this year by 3 volumes of 6,000 historical documents to counter the Ukrainian claims. The Head of Russia's Federal Archives Agency Vladimir Kozlov, introduced the DVD at a Moscow press conference, with the claim that the famine was "the result of [Stalin's] criminal policy" against the peasantry, rather than against any specific ethnic group (www.rian.ru, February25).

Ukraine's debunking of Stalinism and its publicizing of the famine, has forced Russia under Putin to digress from its full-blown rehabilitation of Stalinism. While rejecting Ukrainian claims of an ethnic genocide-famine, Kozlov was forced to admit that a crime (famine) had indeed taken place against the peasantry, as a result of Stalin's collectivization policies. Russia's rehabilitation of Stalinism has propagated the myth that it was the elites who had suffered the most from Stalin's purges (www.gulag.ipvnews.org, September16, 2006).

The Ukrainian-Russian cultural war and differences over national identity has become acutely important in Ukraine's presidential elections, which are invariably perceived as deciding the country's geopolitical future as either lying with Russia and the CIS or with the West. This was the case in the 1994, 1999 and especially in the 2004 presidential elections, when Russia heavily intervened to halt the "nationalist" candidate (Yushchenko) and lost. Putin has since taken this as a personal defeat that requires some form of pay back.

With six months remaining until the elections, Yushchenko has described himself as a person who does, "not belong to those people who waver in their patriotism. I am not a little Russian, I am not a khokhol (derogatory term for little Russians). I am a Ukrainian" (Eko Moskv, April3). Yushchenko continued, 'I am a Ukrainian president, I know that this country requires an ideal president' (www.president.gov.ua, April3).

Ukrainian opinion polls suggest the "pro-Russian" Party of Regions leader Viktor Yanukovych and the "treasonous" Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko are the two leading presidential candidates, neither of whom therefore match Yushchenko's requirements for a "patriotic" president. On April24 Ukrayinska Pravda and four days later the pro-Yushchenko Ukrayina Moloda both ran leading articles on negotiations already underway for a new "pro-Russian" coalition between the Party of Regions and the Yulia Tymoshenko bloc (BYuT), facilitated by Vladyslav Surkov, first deputy head of the Russian presidential administration.

The Ukrainian-Russian cultural war is part of a wider on-going undeclared conflict between both countries over their evolving national identities. Ukraine's "quadruple transition" has focused on nation and state building, as well as democratic and market economic transition. Russia, which did not declare independence in August 1991, became a reluctant independent state and under Boris Yeltsin it never settled on what nation and state it was building. Under Putin, the emerging Russian national identity is unwilling to accept a Ukraine in any guise except one populated by "little Russians."