

## Who Made Ukraine's Independence?

As the world holds its breath while the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, rallies his country in its valiant defence against the Russian onslaught, now is an interesting point in time to revisit the historical leaders in Ukraine's struggle for independence. The most important figure in the Ukrainian history of nation-building was arguably Bohdan Khmelnytsky (1595–1657). Founder of the Cossack Hetmanate, Khmelnytsky led his fellow compatriots of the Zaporizhian Sich in a successful uprising against the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth from 1648 to 1657.<sup>1</sup> With the help of his Crimean allies, Khmelnytsky annihilated the entire Polish standing army in the battles of Zhovti Vody and Korsun, while inspiring peasant revolts that swept over the whole of Ukraine.<sup>2</sup> Crucially, the Khmelnytsky Uprising led to the creation of an independent Cossack state, the Hetmanate, which not only became the foundation of modern-day Ukraine but also left long-lasting legacies in the history of all of Eastern Europe.<sup>3</sup> Today, Khmelnytsky is revered by the Ukrainians as a liberator, founding father and national hero.<sup>4</sup>

Given the significance of both Khmelnytsky and his namesake uprising, one may pose the question: Did Khmelnytsky make the uprising, or did the uprising make Khmelnytsky? The

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<sup>1</sup> Serhii Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (New York: Basic Books, 2021), 97. The Cossacks were a group of semi-nomadic people who settled in the frontier of the steppes bordering the Tatars. During the late 16th and early 17th centuries, they started multiple revolts against their Polish overlords. For the origins of the Cossacks, see Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe*, 76–77; Michael Hrushevsky, *The History of Ukraine* (New Haven: Archon Books, 1970), 144–64.

<sup>2</sup> Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe*, 98–100.

<sup>3</sup> Cossack rebels before Khmelnytsky rose up in the fight for “Golden Liberty,” i.e., equal rights and privileges as the Commonwealth nobility. These included the right to be represented in the Commonwealth Diet, the ability to elect a new king and the increase in the number of “registered Cossacks.” Khmelnytsky was the first to attempt to do away with the Commonwealth rule altogether and establish a separate Cossack polity, located in his occupied territories of the palatinates of Kyiv, Bratslav and Chernihiv. For the influence of the Khmelnytsky Uprising on the national historical narratives in Eastern Europe, see Zenon E. Kohut, “The Khmelnytsky Uprising, the Image of Jews, and the Shaping of Ukrainian Historical Memory,” *Jewish History*, vol. 17, no. 2 (2003): 141. Worthy of particular attention is the uprising's weakening of the power of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which has since entered into a period known historically as the “Deluge.” For the impact of the Khmelnytsky Uprising on Poland, see Nicholas D. Czubatyj, “Ukraine: Between Poland and Russia,” *The Review of Politics*, vol. 8, no. 3 (1946): 331.

<sup>4</sup> Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe*, 107.

distinctive quality of the Khmelnytsky Uprising as the first successful Cossack revolt after a series of failures has led many historians to conclude that Khmelnytsky's role as a leader was the most important factor.<sup>5</sup> Oswald P. Backus III believed that the uprising wouldn't have succeeded without Khmelnytsky's leadership:

At the time, events were much more strongly influenced by certain dominant personalities who emerged in the Ukraine and who, by their dynamism, were able to invigorate the movement toward Ukrainian independence. Bohdan Khmelnytsky was one major figure of this type. He gathered together in his hands the leadership of the forces arising from the dissatisfaction of the Cossacks and from the dissatisfaction of the broad mass of the people of the Ukraine.<sup>6</sup>

While the Khmelnytsky Uprising appears to resemble a strong case of "leaders make events," this essay aims to call to attention the major circumstances of Khmelnytsky's time that determined his motivations, behaviours and subsequent achievements. Three questions will be answered in this essay: Firstly, was Khmelnytsky irreplaceable as a leader? Secondly, did Khmelnytsky respond to the circumstances prevailing at the time? And finally, to what extent was Khmelnytsky influenced by external factors? Through answering these questions, this essay concludes with a more nuanced interpretation: while leaders may exert considerable

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<sup>5</sup> Since the early 18th century, the Cossack elite has begun a glorification campaign of Khmelnytsky in order to legitimise the Khmelnytsky Uprising and elevate the Ukrainians to the same status as other nations of the European World. Cossack historian Hryhorii Hrabianka (1686–1737/8) went as far as to almost creating a cult surrounding the hetman: *A man worthy of the name hetman: boldly he rose from misfortune, he found counsel in the misfortunes themselves. No toils tired his body, a positive mood did not fall away under any difficulties. He endured cold and heat equally. He did not eat or drink to excess, except what nature demanded. When affairs and military matters permitted, he slept a bit, and then not on expensive beds, but on such bedding as a military man ought. And he did not seek to find a place apart to sleep, but he slept calmly amid the military din, in no way concerned. His dress did not stand out at all, only the gear of his horse was somewhat better than the others. He was often seen covered with a military cloak, as he slept among the guards, tired from toil. He went first into battle and was the last to leave it.* For the shaping of a common Ukrainian identity, see Frank E. Sysyn, "Recovering the Ancient and Recent Past: The Shaping of Memory and Identity in Early Modern Ukraine," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 35, no. 1 (2001): 80–82.

<sup>6</sup> Oswald P. Backus III, "The Problem of Unity in the Polish-Lithuanian State," *Slavic Review*, vol. 22, no. 3 (1963): 427–28.

influence over the development of events, their success ultimately depends on their ability to adapt to and evolve with the social changes in the world around them.

We will first contend with the possibility of potential alternatives to Khmelnytsky's leadership. It's worth noting that there have been numerous precedents to the Khmelnytsky Uprising before it broke out in 1648. The first Cossack rebellion occurred as early as 1591 when the chieftain Kryshstof Kosynsky watched as his land was seized by Prince Janusz Ostrozky of Volhynia—the exact same fate that befell Khmelnytsky 60 years later. Kosynsky gathered his supporters to launch an attack on Ostrozky's Bila Tserkva castle before the rebellion was put down by the Prince's private army.<sup>7</sup> For the next half-century, no less than seven Cossack uprisings had taken place.<sup>8</sup> The Khmelnytsky Uprising wasn't an isolated case; rather, it was part of a lineage of conflicts between the Cossacks and the Poles.

In reality, Khmelnytsky could not have foreseen the lasting repercussions of his decisions, especially during the early years of the war. As news of his initial victories spread, Ukrainian peasants and townspeople across the country spontaneously rose up against the Polish magnates and their agents, hunting down entire communities.<sup>9</sup> Much of this violence was either leaderless or led by other popular Cossack leaders like Maksym Kryvonis and Danylo Nechai. The peasant revolts, which by the end of 1648 had spread to as far west as the Vistula River, were certainly beyond Khmelnytsky's control.<sup>10</sup> While Khmelnytsky was personally responsible for the initial military victories, the wider implications of the Khmelnytsky

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<sup>7</sup> Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe*, 78–79.

<sup>8</sup> These uprisings were led by Kryshstof Kosynsky (1591–1593), Severyn Nalyvaiko and Hryhorii Loboda (1594–1596), Marko Zhmailo (1625), Taras Fedorovych (1630), Ivan Sulyma (1635), Pavlo Pavliuk-But (1637) and Iakiv Ostrianyn (1638). See Paul R. Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine: The Land and its Peoples* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 196.

<sup>9</sup> Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe*, 98.

<sup>10</sup> Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine*, 215–18.

Uprising—the mobilisation of the peasantry and the uprooting of the ruling elites—were not direct results of his leadership. In short, Khmelnytsky wasn't a singular and irreplaceable mastermind, but rather one of the actors that steered the course of events.

If the key factors of success didn't lie solely in Khmelnytsky's leadership, what then allowed the Khmelnytsky Uprising to achieve such success that no previous revolts could? This leads us to the second question: whether Khmelnytsky was able to respond to the wider patterns of social changes. There existed two such trajectories that made the Khmelnytsky Uprising possible. The first advantage that Khmelnytsky, or any other Cossack leader in the same position, would have observed, was the Cossacks' growing dissatisfaction against the Commonwealth by the 1640s. As the Ukrainian lands became ever more prosperous, the Polish magnates sought to reimpose serfdom, the *latifundia*, on the local peasants.<sup>11</sup> Even for those who did not fall under the serfdom, their produce from hunting and fishing were heavily taxed.<sup>12</sup> Mykhailo Hrushevsky (1866–1934) wrote in his masterpiece *The History of Ukraine-Rus'*:

[T]he Ukrainian peasants, who had migrated to “the land without a landlord”... had found to their sorrow and horror that the plague of Polish landowners had followed them there.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, the Commonwealth authority enforced a policy of Polonisation by imposing Catholicism and the Polish culture onto the mainly Orthodox and Eastern Slavic-speaking natives, all disguised under the convenient euphemism of the “Polish Catholic Mission in the

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<sup>11</sup> Since the 16th century, the Ukrainian peasants have begun migrating eastwards en masse to flee serfdom. The local Polish magnates sought to encourage *slobody* settlements by promising tax exemptions. See Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe*, 69, 77.

<sup>12</sup> Serhii Plokhy, *The Cossacks and Religion in Early Modern Ukraine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 51.

<sup>13</sup> Hrushevsky, *The History of Ukraine*, 277.

East.”<sup>14</sup> In the *Eyewitness Chronicle*, Cossack historian Roman Rakushka-Romanovsky (1622–1703) argued that the cause of the Khmelnytsky Uprising was “solely the Polish persecution of the Orthodox and oppression of the Cossacks.”<sup>15</sup>

One can draw a stark contrast between the Khmelnytsky Uprising and the first of Cossack uprisings led by Kryshtof Kosynsky. While Kosynsky could only agitate the Cossacks to revolt because of a delay in the payment of wages, Khmelnytsky had a much broader range of arguments at his disposal. He was able to connect his personal misfortune to the general trend that afflicted the Cossack population as a whole, thus turning people’s grievances into a united battle for the Cossack’s rights and freedoms against the Commonwealth’s unceasing oppression.<sup>16</sup> As Frank E. Sysyn suggested, the uprising would not have been possible without the “[n]umerous social, economic, religious, and national conflicts combined.”<sup>17</sup> Khmelnytsky, in his place, accomplished what Peter Burke referred to as the “‘management’ of social change”—not so much moulding the course of history as diverting the events in the direction he preferred.<sup>18</sup>

It’s one thing to start a revolt, and another to win it. By establishing an alliance with the Crimean Khanate, Khmenytsky was able to use their elite cavalymen to turn tides to his side in many of the decisive battles.<sup>19</sup> Some historians attribute this diplomatic play to

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<sup>14</sup> Czubytyj, “Ukraine,” 338.

<sup>15</sup> Roman Rakushka-Romanovsky, *Letopis’ Samovidtsa* (Kyiv, 1878; repr. Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1972), 3–5.

<sup>16</sup> Plokyh, *The Cossacks and Religion in Early Modern Ukraine*, 50. For Khmelnytsky’s transition from complaints of a personal nature to a list of grievances of the Cossacks as a whole, see the letters that he wrote in the spring of 1648. *Dokumenty Bohdana Khmel’nyts’koho*, 2 (=DBKh), ed. Ivan Kryp’iakovych and I. L. Butych (Kyiv, ), nos. 12, 46.

<sup>17</sup> Sysyn, “Recovering the Ancient and Recent Past,” 79.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Burke, *History and Social Theory* (Ithaca & New York: Cornell University Press, 1992), 162.

<sup>19</sup> While today the Cossacks are popularly known for being horseback fighters, this has yet to be the case in the mid-16th century when horses were too expensive to maintain. For the Cossack-Crimean alliance, see Paul R. Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine*, p. 218; Serhii Plokyh, *The Gates of Europe*, p. 98. Khmelnytsky

Khmelnysky's experience with the Islam World, emphasizing the years he once spent in captivity in Constantinople.<sup>20</sup> In reality, however, many other Cossacks were also accustomed to dealing with the Tatars, having frequently encountered them in border skirmishes. Aware of the existing relationship across borders, Khmelnysky delegated to the Crimean court four Tatar-speaking Cossack veterans to arrange for an alliance.<sup>21</sup> He understood that the Khan of Crimea, Islam III Giray, also had strong incentives to ally with him, for doing so would allow the Tatars to take revenge against the Poles as well as raid for captives—the slave trade had been vital in the economy of early modern Eastern Europe.<sup>22</sup> History has made Khmelnysky, precisely because he was able to grasp the decades-long cultural interactions and political dynamics on the steppe frontier and use them to his strategic advantage.

The final way to assess the Khmelnysky Uprising is to examine the external factors affecting Khmelnysky's process of decision-making. The events leading to the Pereiaslav Agreement most clearly exhibited how Khmelnysky has dealt with external influences. In 1654, Khmelnysky, who realised he could no longer rely on his Crimean allies, swore allegiance to Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich of Muscovy in the town of Pereiaslav, thus beginning the 300-year-long history of Russian domination over Ukraine.<sup>23</sup> His opening address at the council of Pereiaslav was made in an especially suspicious manner, indicating his strong preference for an alliance with Tsar Alexei over all other potential options.<sup>24</sup> This evidence has led to the

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also made an alliance with the principality of Moldavia from 1650 to 1653. For the involvement of Moldavia in the Khmelnysky Uprising, see Eduard Baidaus, "War, Diplomacy, and 'Family Affairs' in Seventeenth-Century Eastern Europe: Moldavia in the Danubian Policy of Bohdan Khmelnysky (1648-1653)," *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne Des Slavistes*, vol. 54, no. ½ (2012): 27–59.

<sup>20</sup> Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine*, 210–13.

<sup>21</sup> George Vernadsky, *Bohdan: Hetman of Ukraine* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941), 36.

<sup>22</sup> Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine*, 213; Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe*, 74–75.

<sup>23</sup> For debates surrounding the Pereiaslav Agreement, see Serhii Plokhy, "The Ghosts of Pereyaslav: Russo-Ukrainian Historical Debates in the Post-Soviet Era," *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 53, no. 3 (2001): 489–505.

<sup>24</sup> See Воссоединение Украины с Россией. Документы и материалы в трех тт. Т. 3, М., 1954. С. 373. (Reunification of Ukraine with Russia. Documents and materials in three volumes. T. 3, M., 1954. S. 373.)

theory that the personal bias of Khmelnytsky was the driving force behind the Cossackdom's realignment with Muscovy.<sup>25</sup>

However, a closer examination of Khmelnytsky's justifications suggests that the decision was more of a communal consensus than a personal preference. The first thing to consider is religion. Muscovy was the only Orthodox great power at that time, and swearing allegiance to the Tsar meant that the Cossacks no longer had to fear religious discriminations and persecutions.<sup>26</sup> In fact, Ukrainian monasteries had established connections with the Muscovite Tsar as early as 1620, when Bishop Isaia Kopynsky appealed to the Tsar for religious assistance.<sup>27</sup> It was no coincidence that, before and during the Khmelnytsky Uprising, the Ukrainians have been emigrating in much greater numbers to Orthodox Russia than to the Catholic West.<sup>28</sup> In the decade between 1638 and 1648 alone, as many as 20,000 people fled from the Left Bank to Sloboda Ukraine, which was a Muscovite settlement.<sup>29</sup>

While ethnicity wasn't the most pronounced of cultural identities at the time, it nevertheless contributed to the Cossacks' affinity to the Muscovites. Despite four centuries of political separation, there remained in the minds of Kievans and Muscovites more or less a common

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English Translation: *[W]e have convened a council open to the whole people so that you, together with us, might choose a sovereign for yourselves out of four, whomever you wish: the first is the Turkish tsar...; the second is the Crimean khan; the third is the Polish king...; the fourth is the Orthodox sovereign of Great Rus', the tsar, Grand Prince Aleksei Mikhailovich, the eastern sovereign of all Rus', whom we have now been entreating for ourselves for six years with incessant pleadings... And the Orthodox Christian great tsar of the east is with us of common pieties of the Greek law and common confession. We are one body of Church orthodoxy of Great Russia, subjects of Jesus Christ. This great sovereign, the King of Christ, having had compassion on the intolerable bitterness of the Orthodox Church in our Little Russia, and having not despised our unceasing six years of prayer, now bends his gracious royal heart to us. Now choose the one you wish!*

<sup>25</sup> Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe*, 104.

<sup>26</sup> In contrast, Poland was strongly Catholic while the Ottomans and Crimea were Islam. In Poland, for example, the Orthodox Church has been banned since the Union of Brest of 1595. While it regained legal status in 1632, the situation remained precarious. See Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine*, 225.

<sup>27</sup> Plokhy, *The Cossacks and Religion in Early Modern Ukraine*, 281.

<sup>28</sup> Plokhy, "The Ghosts of Pereyaslav," 493.

<sup>29</sup> Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine*, 225.



belief in the Slavic identity. When Khmelnytsky and his men entered Kyiv in a triumphant ceremony in January 1648, they clearly styled themselves as heirs to the Kievan Rus'.<sup>30</sup>

Likewise, the *Synopsis* written by Inokentii Gizel in 1674 traced the Muscovite lineage to the Kievan Grand Princes, where the first Muscovite tsars were supposedly born and raised.<sup>31</sup> As Soviet historian Pavlo Zahrebelnyi argued, Khmelnytsky's choice of alliance with Muscovy was also "the choice of the whole Ukrainian nation—the only logical act at the time."<sup>32</sup>

Therefore, Khmelnytsky's decisions were only able to engender long-lasting effects on history because he responded to popular demands in ways that furthered his own agenda.

This is especially true when one looks at the military democracy rooted in Cossack political institutions, which played a significant role in the formulation of important decisions.<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, the fact that Khmelnytsky needed to convene a council—consisting of the clergy and local inhabitants as well as his officials—to ratify the decision was indicative of his respect for and reliance on the masses in the conclusion of the Pereiaslav Agreement.<sup>34</sup>

Vasiliy Buturlin, the delegation of Muscovy, documented the Cossacks' fervent reaction to Khmelnytsky's speech:

[A]ll the people cried out: "We will die with a firm hand under the eastern Orthodox king in our pious faith, rather than to the hateful Christ-hater, the pagan!" Then Colonel Teterya of Pereiaslav, walking in a circle, asked us on all sides: "Do you all deign to do this?" All the people said: "All with one voice." Then the Hetman

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<sup>30</sup> Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe*, 100.

<sup>31</sup> Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine*, 271–72.

<sup>32</sup> Victor O. Buyniak, "Review," review of *Ia, Bohdan*, by Pavlo Zahrebelnyi." *World Literature Today*. vol. 59, no. 3 (Summer, 1985): 456–457.

<sup>33</sup> Because of conditions prevailing on the steppe frontier, the Cossacks developed a particular set of social institutions that were characterised by their deeply rooted love of freedom and independence of central government authorities. See Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine*, 243–252; Plokhy, *The Cossacks and Religion in Early Modern Ukraine*, 207–235.

<sup>34</sup> For the structure of the Cossack state, see Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine*, 243–52.

said: “Be it so! May the Lord our God strengthen under his king’s strong hand.” And the people after him, all unanimously, cried out: “God wills it! O God, strengthen us! May we all be one forever and ever!”<sup>35</sup>

To conclude, while Bohdan Khmelnytsky certainly influenced the development of events in pivotal ways, it was ultimately his ability to harness the social and political trends in history that made his endeavour successful. Today, we remember the Khmelnytsky Uprising not as the vigilantism of an individual, but rather a quintessential mid-17th century rebellion demonstrating the “close association of political, social, religious, and national elements” in the watershed moments of history.<sup>36</sup> As we follow the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, it is perhaps also worth taking note of the deeper reasons behind the Ukrainian victories, such as the civilians’ sacrifices, that underlie the brilliant leadership of Zelensky. Leaders can make history, but only to the point where leaders themselves are made by history.

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<sup>35</sup> Воссоединение Украины с Россией. Документы и материалы в трех тт. Т. 3, М., 1954. С. 373. (Reunification of Ukraine with Russia. Documents and materials in three volumes. Т. 3, М., 1954. S. 373.) It is worth noting that Buturlin might have his own personal biases due to being the Muscovite embassy. However, I have had to resort to using this source since it is the only material that survived to this date.

<sup>36</sup> Plokyh, *The Cossacks and Religion in Early Modern Ukraine*, 49.

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## Appendix 2: The Khmelnytsky Uprising<sup>38</sup>



<sup>38</sup> Paul R. Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine*, p. 212.

### Appendix 3: The Cossack Hetmanate, 1651<sup>39</sup>



<sup>39</sup> Paul R. Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine*, p. 246.