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Cossack Republicanism, Intellectual Resilience, and Epistemic Agency in Ukrainian History

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Abstract

This study presents a critical examination of Ukrainian intellectual traditions, exploring the interplay between democratic governance, post-colonial resistance, and epistemic agency in Eastern Europe. Tracing the evolution from Kyiv-Mohyla Enlightenment and Cossack constitutional thought (Pylyp Orlyk) to the romantic humanism of Taras Shevchenko and twentieth-century intellectual dissent under imperial pressures, this research articulates a modern Ukrainian theoretical model for humanistic inquiry. Furthermore, it analyzes the imperatives of cultural heritage preservation, digital archival resilience, and anti-colonial pedagogy in modern higher education.

Keywords: critical examination ; Ukrainian intellectual traditions , cultural heritage preservation

1. Introduction:

Epistemic Agency and Borderland Resilience in Ukrainian Thought

Ukrainian intellectual history occupies a vital, dynamic nexus at the intersection of Eastern European, Byzantine, and Central European civilizational flows. Throughout centuries of imperial pressures, partitioned statehood, and cultural suppression, Ukrainian scholars and political theorists developed a distinctive tradition of epistemic resilience, anti-imperial resistance, and democratic humanism.

In global humanistic discourse, Eastern European intellectual lineages have historically been viewed through dominant imperial frameworks. Re-centering Ukrainian perspectives allows humanistic scholarship to deconstruct colonial narratives, reconstruct authentic historical memory, and understand how borderland societies cultivate agency under existential challenges.

This article proposes a systematic framework for understanding Ukrainian humanistic contributions. By linking Cossack republicanism, Kyivan Baroque philosophy, nineteenth-century literary humanism, and contemporary digital heritage protection, this study charts a path toward epistemic decolonization in global academia.

2. Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, Baroque Humanism, and Early Constitutionalism

The establishment of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy in the seventeenth century marked a monumental chapter in Eastern European higher education. As a primary center of higher learning, the Academy synthesized Latin scholasticism, Orthodox theology, and Western European Renaissance humanism, producing generations of philosophers, statesmen, and educators.

Thinkers such as Hryhorii Skovoroda—the renowned eighteenth-century wandering philosopher—articulated a unique philosophy of self-knowledge ('know thyself'), inner freedom, and 'congenial labor' (srodna pratsia). Skovoroda's rejection of imperial courtly honors in favor of spiritual liberty established a foundational moral pillar in Ukrainian philosophical thought.

Simultaneously, Cossack statecraft gave birth to pioneering democratic documents, most notably the Constitution of Pylyp Orlyk (1710). Drafted in Bendery, this early constitutional treaty established the separation of powers among legislative, executive, and judicial branches, constrained hetmanic authority, and guaranteed civic rights—anticipating modern European constitutional theory by decades.

3. Romantic Humanism, Linguistic Renaissance, and Anti-Colonial Dissent

In the nineteenth century, amidst stringent imperial bans on the Ukrainian language (such as the Valuev Circular and Ems Ukaz), the Ukrainian romantic revival became a primary vehicle for national emancipation and social justice. Central to this epoch was Taras Shevchenko, whose poetry and art articulated an uncompromising critique of serfdom, autocracy, and imperial oppression.

Shevchenko's humanism connected universal values of human dignity and liberty with national self-determination. The Brotherhood of Saints Cyril and Methodius (1845–1847), co-founded by historian Mykola Kostomarov and writer Panteleimon Kulish, expanded these ideas into a vision of a democratic federation of equal Slavic nations based on Christian ethics and civic freedom.

Later scholars, such as Mykhailo Drahomanov, synthesized Ukrainian political thought with European liberalism and democratic socialism. Drahomanov advocated for decentralization, self-governance, and cultural autonomy, laying the theoretical groundwork for modern Ukrainian civic democracy.

4. Twentieth-Century Intellectual Resistance: From Executed Renaissance to Dissident Thought

The early twentieth century witnessed a flourishing of Ukrainian avant-garde culture and scholarship during the 1920s, known as the Ukrainian Renaissance. However, this artistic and academic surge was brutally suppressed during the 1930s—an era remembered as the 'Executed Renaissance' (Rozstrilyane vidrodzhennya), alongside the tragic devastation of the Holodomor.

Despite severe ideological repression, Ukrainian intellectual resistance persisted through underground networks, Ukrainian diaspora academic centers (such as the Ukrainian Free University in Munich and the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute), and sixties dissidents (Shistdesyatnyky).

Dissident thinkers and poets—including Vasyl Stus, Vyacheslav Chornovil, and Ivan Dziuba (author of 'Internationalism or Russification?')—courageously defended human rights, cultural integrity, and intellectual honesty against totalitarian dogmatism, providing an enduring model of moral fortitude for global human rights scholarship.

5. Cultural Sovereignty, Heritage Protection, and Digital Archival Resilience

In the contemporary era, Ukraine faces the crucial task of protecting its cultural heritage, museum archives, historical monuments, and rare manuscripts against destruction, looting, and systematic erasure.

Ukrainian universities, libraries, and research centers have led groundbreaking international efforts in digital archival resilience. Initiatives incorporating 3D scanning, decentralized cloud backups, and open-access metadata ensure that Ukrainian historical memory remains preserved and accessible to the international scientific community.

Moreover, contemporary Ukrainian academia is pioneering anti-colonial pedagogical models. By revising university curricula, re-evaluating regional historiography, and fostering interdisciplinary research, Ukrainian humanists are actively transforming global understanding of post-Soviet and post-colonial studies.

6. Conclusion: The Universal Value of Ukrainian Epistemic Resilience

Examining humanistic enquiry through a Ukrainian lens provides essential insights for twenty-first-century scholarship facing threats of authoritarianism, disinformation, and cultural hegemony. The Ukrainian intellectual journey demonstrates that true democratic culture relies on deep-seated traditions of civic freedom, moral accountability, and cultural preservation.

From early Cossack constitutionalism to contemporary digital heritage protection, Ukrainian humanities offer a vital paradigm of strength, critical thought, and epistemic sovereignty.

Ultimately, Ukrainian humanism serves as a powerful reminder that academic freedom and human dignity are inextricably bound to the preservation of cultural identity and democratic self-determination.

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