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# Taras Shevchenko at the Maidan in Kyiv

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The protests in Kyiv started on 21 November 2013. The first big pro-European demonstration took place on 24 November, and the meeting point was the monument to Taras Shevchenko. Thus, the protests were from the beginning associated with Shevchenko. But by carefully scrutinizing the Maidan, you can find more references to Taras Shevchenko. This article poses the question: how do protesters in Kyiv relate to Shevchenko? Which of his works are quoted at the Maidan, and when did that happen?

## **The role of Taras Shevchenko in Ukrainian Literature**

Taras Shevchenko is, without a doubt, one of the most famous authors in Ukraine. His role for Ukraine and for the Ukrainian language is the topic of countless publications and conferences. Here is just one writer's view of Shevchenko: "Far beyond what is normally given to poets, even major ones, Shevchenko's influence permeated, indeed shaped, virtually every facet of Ukrainian national life since about the middle of the nineteenth century."<sup>1</sup>

Shevchenko's exceptional position in Ukrainian culture can be seen by the following two examples: firstly, at about the beginning of April 2014, a wooden monument of Shevchenko was placed directly opposite the main stage, where his picture hangs draped with a traditional Ukrainian *rushnyk*. This towel is also draped over an icon in homes or in churches. The picture of Shevchenko has been there ever since the erection of the

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1 Oleh Ilnytskyj, *Konkordantsiia poetychnykh tvoriv Tarasa Shevchenka* [A Concordance to the Poetic Works of Taras Shevchenko], vol. 1 (New York; Edmonton; Toronto, 2001), xi.



Shevchenko's picture on the stage  
13 January 2014



Occupied city hall  
28 January 2014

main stage,<sup>2</sup> at about the beginning of December 2013. But, secondly, there was also a picture of Shevchenko at the occupied city hall; later it was replaced by a bronze statue of the poet.

### Shevchenko as “Spiritual Hetman of the Maidan”: Biographical Aspects

Shevchenko was named the “*dukhovny hetman Maidanu*,” the spiritual Hetman of the Maidan (a hetman is a commander of Cossacks; Cossacks fought mostly for freedom, and wanted independence from the Empire). Raisa Molchanova calls Shevchenko “a staunch patriot, an unyielding fighter for the highest human ideals.”<sup>3</sup> The freedom of the people was, according to Molchanova, Shevchenko’s ideal.<sup>4</sup> George Grabowicz calls Shevchenko “the spiritual father of the reborn Ukrainian nation”<sup>5</sup> and

2 All pictures made by the author.

3 “palkoho patriota, nezlamnoho bortsia za naivshchhi lyudski idealy.” Raisa Molchanova, *Liudy i doli, do 190-richchia vid dnia narodzhennia T.H. Shevchenka* [*People and Fates: To the 190th Anniversary of T.H. Shevchenko’s Birth*] (Khmelnitsky: TOV “Evrka,” 2004), 12.

4 Molchanova, *Liudy i doli*, 21.

5 George G. Grabowicz, *The Poet as Mythmaker: A Study of Symbolic Meaning in Taras Shevchenko* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982), 1.



Wooden Shevchenko  
4 March 2014



The bronze statue  
8 March 2014



1 February 2014

Ivan Ohienko claims that Shevchenko “gave everyone a national and political ideology.”<sup>6</sup>

Shevchenko’s biography is very important for an understanding of his writings and of the honour accorded to him within Ukrainian society. He was born in Ukraine as a serf; later his freedom was bought, but he lived only seven years of his life as a free man. He left Ukraine and lived in St. Petersburg and was exiled to Kazakhstan. He made three return visits to Ukraine and wrote about the beautiful Ukrainian landscapes. His yearning for Ukraine and for its inhabitants is characteristic of Shevchenko. In his poetry collection *Kobzar* (*The Minstrel*), he wrote about serfs like himself, about traditional folk motifs, and Ukrainian history. Viktor Petrov calls the *Kobzar* not a book for the nation but the nation’s book and compares the meaning of the *Kobzar* with the Bible.<sup>7</sup> The outstanding position of the *Kobzar* is shown by the following poster:

6 “dav usim natsionalnu politychnu ideolohiiu.” Ivan Ohienko, *Taras Shevchenko* (Kyiv: Nasha kultura i nauka, 2003), 38.

7 Viktor Petrov, “Taras Shevchenko iak poet natsii,” [“Taras Shevchenko as the Poet of the Nation,”] in *Khronika 2000: zarubizhne shevchenkoznavstvo, chastyna 1* (Kyiv: Fond spriannia rozvytku mystetstv, 2011), 44.



1 February 2014

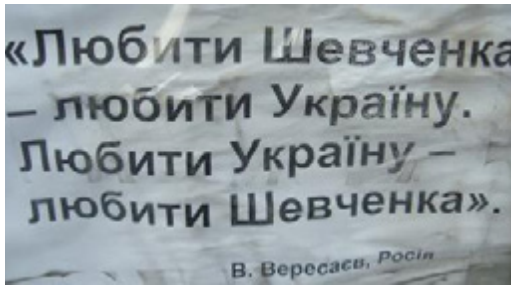
Here, we see the book of the *Kobzar* and an eagle. Yet this is the only time the protesters refer explicitly to a book. The *Kobzar* is also the source of all the poems quoted here. It can be called the “Bible of the Maidan.” The outstanding position of Shevchenko can be explained by the popularity of his main work – the *Kobzar*. W.K. Matthews explains: “Such a poet had not been known in Ukraine before. His vivid, singing, emotional verse, both lyrical and narrative, had a familiar ring and movement, for it was the language of the Ukrainian folk song with its [...]

simple charm of manner.”<sup>8</sup> This is one argument why Shevchenko is so well known in Ukraine, and why he seems to be the national author. Moreover, the patriotic fight, the people’s ideals and freedom were some of the motifs in his works.

### Taras Shevchenko = Ukraine

Shevchenko is the personification of Ukraine and connected to his country like no other Ukrainian author. The tragic fate of the author became a metaphor for the tragic destiny of his country (Ukraine was divided, occupied and the Ukrainian language was forbidden for some time). It is therefore no surprise that a picture of Shevchenko is displayed on the main stage (as shown above). The next lines, written by V. Veresaiev from Russia, summarize succinctly the relation between Shevchenko and Ukraine: “To love Shevchenko [means] to love Ukraine, to love Ukraine [means] to love Shevchenko.”

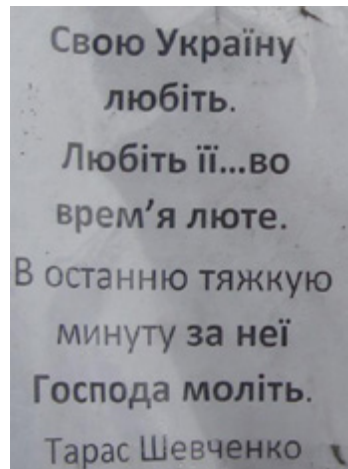
<sup>8</sup> William Kleesmann Matthews, *Taras Shevchenko: The Man and the Symbol*, 2nd ed. (Winnipeg: Ukrainian Free Academy of Sciences, 1961), 8.



“To love Shevchenko [means] to love Ukraine, to love Ukraine [means] to love Shevchenko.”  
3 March 2014

Ukraine and Shevchenko are often bracketed together because of the strong references to Ukraine within Shevchenko’s works. The following lines are from the poem “Kavkaz”:

The protesters at the Maidan are pro-Ukraine, they carry national flags and symbols and sing the national anthem every hour. To refer to their country is important to them, to show that they are Ukrainians and that they stand together against Russia. The process of nation building in Ukraine is accompanied with the honoring of Shevchenko and his love for Ukraine. 2014 is the “year of Shevchenko,” the 200th anniversary of his birth. That may be the main reason why the protesters at the Maidan in Kyiv refer to him. As analysis shows, it is the author in person as well as his works that they honor and refer to. One argument could be that “every time, when we stand up for the choice of our future, we refer to Taras Shevchenko, like to the conscience of the nation.”<sup>9</sup>



“Love your Ukraine.  
Love her ... In the last hard  
minute pray to God for her.”  
16 March 2014

9 “Shchorazu, koly my postaiemo pered vyborom svoieii istorychnoi doli, my zvertaiemo-sia do Shevchenka, iak do sovisti natsii.” Bohdan Sushynsky, *Taras Shevchenko: henyi – v samotnosti* [*Taras Shevchenko: A Genius in his Loneliness*] (Odesa: YAVF, 2006), 6.



“Boritesia, poborete,  
Vam Boh pomahaie.”  
“Fight and you will win,  
[because] God helps you.”  
11 December 2013



1 February 2014

During the protest period, many posters displayed the most often quoted lines of Shevchenko,<sup>10</sup> which are from the poem “Kavkaz”.

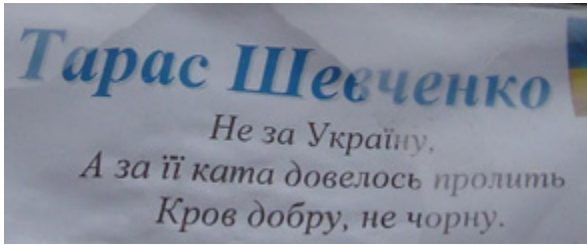
These lines are used very often to describe the fight of the Ukrainians against their own government or against Russian pressure (March 2014). But it would be wrong to think that anti-Russia feelings became topical only when the Crimean Crisis began. Already in November, the first posters against Russia appeared; more precisely, against Russian president Vladimir Putin (for example: “No Putin – no cry”).<sup>11</sup> The poem “Kavkaz” contains “anticolonial motifs”<sup>12</sup> and shows the “colonial politics of the Russian autocracy in the Caucasus” (“kolonialna politika rosiiskoho samodержavtsva na Kavkazi”).<sup>13</sup> It is the most quoted work of Shevchenko at the Maidan. The following lines are also from that poem: “Not for Ukraine, but for its executioner did we spill our good blood, not the black blood.”

10 The political party “Svoboda” (freedom) used these lines for a sticker.

11 This tendency increased in March during the Crimean Crisis, when posters appeared in Kyiv with a comparison between Hitler and Putin, Putin was even named “Putler.”

12 Oleksandr Tkachuk, *Intertekst poemy “Kavkaz” Tarasa Shevchenka* [*Intertextuality of “The Caucasus” by Taras Shevchenko*] (Ternopil: Medobory, 2012), 7.

13 Tkachuk, *Intertekst poemy “Kavkaz,”* 9.



“Not for Ukraine, but for its executioner did we spill our good blood, not the black blood.”

16 March 2014



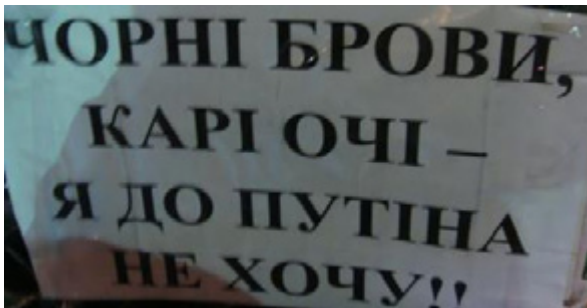
“Ukrainians, unite, but not with the moskals.”

26 November 2013

The poem “Kateryna” refers to the *moskals* and is also very often quoted: “Ukrainians, unite, but not with the moskals.”

The word *moskal* needs an explanation. Originally, it did not mean “Russian,” but rather a soldier or officer of the Tsar’s army. Today *moskal* is also used to call somebody Russian, often to demonstrate disapproval. The line comes from “Kateryna,” a poem about a young woman who is betrayed by a soldier of the Tsar’s army

and left alone, pregnant and shamed. The first lines of this poem are: “Fall in love, oh dark-browed maidens, but not with the *moskals*.”<sup>14</sup> The transformation of poems or motifs can be seen all over the Maidan. One example is the following one:



“Black brows, brown eyes, I don’t want [to belong] to Putin.”

13 December 2013

14 Taras Shevchenko: *Kateryna*, translated by Mark Skrypnyk, 3, accessed April 5, 2014, <http://www.utoronto.ca/elul/English/248/Shevchenko-Kateryna-Skrypnyk-trans.pdf>.



The line “black brows, brown eyes” is a very popular line from Ukrainian folk tradition. Shevchenko, too, uses this line to describe his heroine Kateryna; she is a *chornobrova*, a girl with dark features. Black brows and brown eyes have become symbolic of being Ukrainian.



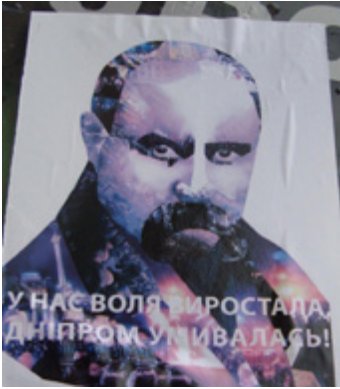
“Slaves and dirt of Moscow!”  
12 December 2013

As described above, the author himself had a very tragic destiny. So it is no surprise that the people at the Maidan make reference to him personally and to his fate. The next poster is an example for the representation of Shevchenko’s fate as an example of the fate of Ukraine: Shevchenko stands with a broom and sweeps the slaves and dirt of Moscow away. Here we see Shevchenko as a representative of Ukraine who “rescues” his country from Russian influence.

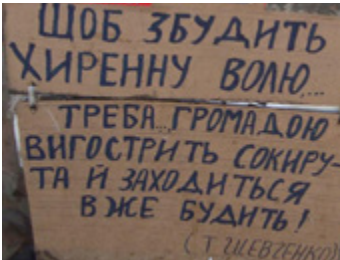
### **“To the Dead, the Living, and to Those yet Unborn, All my Countrymen who Live in Ukraine and Outside of Ukraine”**

A poem with patriotic content is “I mertvym, i zhyvym...” (full title: “To the Dead, the Living, and to Those Yet Unborn, All My Countrymen who Live in Ukraine and Outside of Ukraine”). Valentyn Sylvestrov says that he would like everyone to read the poem. “Every word is in its right place. And it is not only political truth, when Shevchenko speaks it, he predicts some disaster.”<sup>15</sup> “To the dead, the Living” is a very patriotic poem: the narrator asks people why they want to leave Ukraine when there is only one Ukraine in the world. The poem’s intention is to evoke pride in the nation, pride in its language and history. In this poem, Shevchenko writes about a divided Ukraine, whose people are slaves of landowners of Warsaw and Moscow. “Ukraine bleeds with a thousand wounds” is one of the lines

15 Valentyn Sylvestrov: “Read Shevchenko, until it is too late,” accessed April 8, 2014, <http://www.day.kiev.ua/en/article/culture/valentyn-sylvestrov-read-shevchenko-until-it-too-late>.



“In our country freedom emerged, it was cleansed by the Dnipro.”  
13 January 2014



“To wake up this weak freedom, society has to sharpen the axe, and to begin to wake itself up.”  
18 February 2014

in the poem. This line seems to be more contemporary than ever after the tragic deaths in late February. The whole poem is very emotional and belligerent, which may be why it is quoted so often.

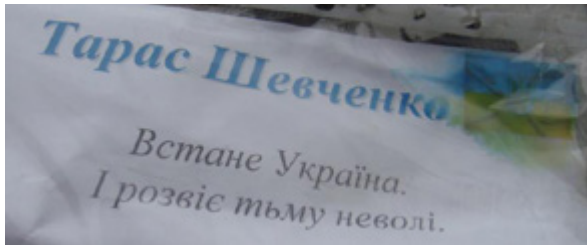
Not quoted are other interesting lines from the poem that fit perfectly into the situation at the Maidan: “Maybe you are waiting? For good, don’t wait, don’t wait hoping for freedom” (“Mabut ty zhdesh? Dobra ne zhdy, ne zhdy spodivanoi voli”). The protesters want to wake up other people to fight for their country. The following poem is related to that (the image on the left, 18 February 2014).

### Wake up, my Ukraine!

This poem fits the Maidan movement to wake up Ukraine and to fight against corruption for a better future. Shevchenko, as a serf, knew how it felt to live in slavery and wrote revolutionary, freedom-loving poems. The words “a weak freedom” seemed more immediate than ever on the 18th–20th February, when people were shot on Instytutska Street in Kyiv.

Shevchenko takes Ukraine as a symbol for freedom<sup>16</sup> and calls on his compatriots to build a better nation and to stand up for their nation. In general, these aims can also be found at the Maidan in Kyiv, although the political circumstances are different.

16 Edward Kasperski, “Ukraine as a Symbol of Freedom in the Poetry of Taras Shevchenko and Juliusz Slowacki,” in *Slovianski obrti* 8 (2013): 66.



"Ukraine will arise.  
And banish the shade  
of slavery."

16 March 2014



13 February 2014



13 February 2014

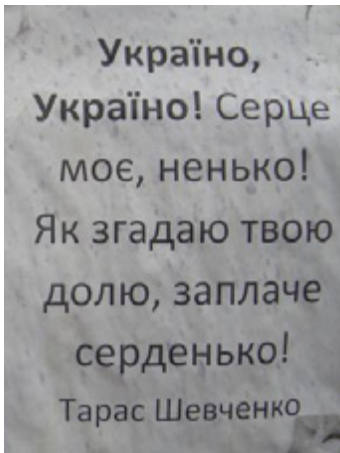
## Shevchenko as a Rebel

The artist #Sociopath painted Shevchenko in a kufia on a wall near Hrushevsky Street, where the protests turned into a mass riot at the end of January. On this wall, next to Shevchenko the same artist painted the famous Ukrainian authors Lesia Ukrainka (with a gas mask) and Ivan Franko (with a helmet). "Fire takes no good people" is written there. Shevchenko as a revolutionary – the painter #Sociopath is not the first to think so. W.K. Matthews wrote in 1961: "Shevchenko's frequent and caustic attacks on the Russian monarchy [...] cause us to regard him as a revolutionary."<sup>17</sup> These attacks were against the Russian Tsar, while the crowd at the Maidan is against Vladimir Putin (as already shown). A poster translates the reference to the Tsar into a reference to Putin: "Oh people, people, poor devils! Why do you need the Tsar? Why do you need the agitators? You are no dogs! Shevchenko reminds us! Why do you need the president? No! No!

17 Matthews, *Taras Shevchenko*, 15.



16 March 2014



"Ukraine, Ukraine! My heart, my mother! How I remember your fate, cries out my heart!" ("Tarasova nich")

### Shevchenko as a Guardian of the Dead

There is a place of mourning near the Central Post Office for those who lost their lives during the protests (as you can see, there are pictures of Serhy Nihorian, the first victim, there). On the left, you can see a picture of Taras Shevchenko.

Shevchenko is quoted at the Maidan in Kyiv because "this man was acutely aware of social and national injustice and was not afraid to indict his people's enemies and to make them feel the sting and lash of his tongue."<sup>18</sup> This is why Taras Shevchenko is not just a man, but also a symbol, as W.K. Matthews writes: "He changed and is still noticeably changing the Ukrainian people in a political and national way." ("Vin pomitno peretvoryv i dali peretvoriuie ukrainy narod na politychno i natsionalno dozrilu natsiu.")<sup>19</sup> Valentyn Sylvestrov summarizes the meaning of Shevchenko: "This is a unique case in history, when a poet became not only a symbol of struggle for independence, but a symbol of Ukraine. All through words."<sup>20</sup> His endless love of Ukraine and his fight against all its enemies make his work particularly immediate today. The poster shows this very well.

18 Matthews, *Taras Shevchenko*, 8.

19 Ibid.

20 Valentyn Sylvestrov: "Read Shevchenko, until it is too late," accessed April 3, 2014, <http://www.day.kiev.ua/en/article/culture/valentyn-sylvestrov-read-shevchenko-until-it-too-late>.

Taras Shevchenko is a symbol of freedom and peace to the protesters at the Maidan. “Fight and you will win, [because] God helps you.” is the motto of the Maidan. Shevchenko seems like a guardian who watches over the people’s movement like someone to whom they can relate. He seems to have fought for his country. Now it’s the turn of the Maidan!

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