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LIFE DESPITE DEATH: PALINGENETIC ELEMENT OF THE UKRAINIAN CULTURE

Abstract
The article analyses the concept of palingenesis (regeneration, passage through death) in its European context and the Ukrainian cultural tradition. The author argues that, in the Ukrainian context, especially during the war, palingenesis is more than just a metaphor, designating an existential reality of affirming life despite death and emphasizing the strength and resilience of life in spite of the forces of death and destruction. The author explores this topic through the works of several Ukrainian authors, including Shevchenko, Kostomarov, Lesia Ukrainka, Malanyuk, Shlemkevych, and others. The author emphasizes the importance of examining Ukrainian cultural and existential experiences as a means of overcoming postmodern relativism and virtuality.

Keywords: palingenesis, life, death, regeneration, war, Ukraine, Shevchenko, Kostomarov, Zerov, Khvyliovyi, Lesia Ukrainka, Ukrainian intellectual tradition.

The war is a concrete presence of death. Death ceases to be a metaphor, a sign of something else. It enters our lives with its concrete, material, undeniable presence. Death is the end of everything, not just another "topic for a conversation."

Death as a metaphor has been used and abused throughout the late 19th and 20th centuries. They were full of attempts to think about progress in terms of death. "Death of the author," "Death of the novel," "Death of metaphysics," "Death of the man," "Death of God," were unfortunate formulas to think about the beginning of something new, rather than the end of something old. To make this beginning more provocative, less comfortable, and more confrontational, the authors of these formulas used "death" as a metaphor to portray it as a danger to others.

It was never, however, the real death. It was "death." Something in quotation marks.

War deprives you of the luxuries of metaphors. Words, events, and people cease to be "signs of something else"; they become material and undeniable in their presence, in their reference to themselves; their being becomes much more visible than their meaning – and therefore, their non-being

becomes much more painful than any metaphor.

Yet, when death ceases to be a metaphor but becomes what it has always been, a denial of being, a denial of life, some other forces come into play. These are the forces of life, in its constant, hopeful, and hopeless attempt to diminish the effects of death, to restrict its territory, to narrow down its possessions, to limit its power.

When you use "death" as a metaphor, you imply that life is stronger than death, and you can play with "death" as a meaning of something else. This thinking is wrong. Life is not stronger than death. It will always lose its battle against death. But when it is fighting against this stronger enemy, its stubbornness produces glory.

Life is unable to overcome death, but it is able to limit its power. It is able to make death less powerful.

One of the most obvious ways to limit the power of death is memory. There are two other forms of limiting the power of death, both are more radical. One is glory. The other is regeneration.

Glory stems from the actions of a person or a community who is no longer alive, but whose actions are not only remembered but also inspire the actions of others. Glory is the capacity to challenge someone or something that is stronger than you – and by the act of challenging, even if you lose, to inspire others to restart the fight. Therefore, glory is a capacity to surpass death, to partially deny its powers of oblivion, through maintaining the immaterial trace of action much longer than a material being (like a human body) can endure. Glory is the victory of the non-material, of the ideal, expressed through culture. This is why the major goal of pre-modern culture was to preserve the *glory* of something that is no longer with us. To extend its validity, which can also be seen as a task to extend its life beyond death. This contrasts with modern culture, which is more focused on critique than on apology; on showing the limits of something, rather than demonstrating something's capacity to overcome the limits of time and space.

The other form of limiting the power of death is *regeneration*. Regeneration is always based upon glory and takes glory as its major inspiration source. However, it is not content with the glory; it seeks to repeat and increase it. Regeneration is an attempt to give birth despite death. It is a capacity to return life to a graveyard.

The regeneration idea was key for ancient agrarian cults. From them, it entered the thinking of philosophers, from Heraclitus to the Stoics, and their idea of a universal fire, the *ekpyrosis,* which renews the world in times of crisis – and which was recently reintroduced in the ekpyrotic cyclic universe theory in physics. It penetrated the story of Christianity. It was always present in classical political philosophy, with the idea of *anakyklosis*, the eternal return of political forms. It was revived in the romantic (early 19th century) idea of *palingenesis*. It received a new force with Nietzschean "eternal return of the same," *Ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen*.

I will examine how this idea is reflected within the Ukrainian intellectual and cultural tradition. I will also argue that, as death is no longer a metaphor in tragic times, neither is regeneration or rebirth. It is a very concrete capacity to limit the power of death, to maintain the forces of life, even in a situation when life seems to be impossible. It is a capacity to affirm life against death and despite nothingness.

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The palingenetic myth, developed in 19th-century European romanticism, has had several sources.

The first is Christianity, a religion founded on the idea of the resurrection of God. 19th century romantic philosophies of history, most of which were inspired by the idea that God is

no longer transcendent but immanent to human history, took the palingenetic (resurrectionist) myth as the basis of their ontology and applied it to collective bodies. Monarchism applied it to the idea of the monarchy; nationalism to the idea of the nation; socialism to the idea of a class that moves history forward.

The second source was the conservative philosophy and aesthetics in France (De Maistre, Chateaubriand, Ballanche), which applied this palingenetic myth to the monarchy, killed by the Revolution, but set to be reborn in a new form, and actually reborn in the restoration of 1814 (see Maistre, 1979a; Ballanche, 1827, 1907; Chateaubriand, 1945).

The third source is the romantic democratic nationalisms, especially ones of stateless nations. They began to view history as a story of forgetting the ancient sources of strength, and therefore, formulated the need to give these sources a new life. We can think about the German nationalism and its inspiration in the *Nibelungenlied* and other works of the German medieval literature; the Scottish nationalism and a figure of Ossian, an epic poet invented by James Macpherson; and of a minstrel that shares his knowledge of the past through an oral – and not written – word, sung and not read; the Polish national movement and its searches for the deep past, including that related to Ukraine (see Bénichou, 1977).

The fourth source is the mystical or semi-mystical philosophy of history, which considers history as a cycle of deaths and regenerations. We can see its expression in the French philosopher Pierre-Simon Ballanche, the Scottish philosopher and historian Thomas Carlyle (Carlyle, 1837), the Italian author Vincenzo Gioberti, the Polish philosopher August von Cieszkowski (Cieszkowski, 1842), and even in the German dialectics of Hegel and Schelling. Relics of this historiosophy of palingenetic catastrophes are present in the philosophy of Marx and Engels, particularly in their "Communist Manifesto" (Marx & Engels, 1848). This text proposed a philosophy of revolution as a radical rupture with the past, contradicting the evolutionary approach to history favored by the Enlightenment. For Marxism, the revolutionary future should be the death of the past, which will lead to a regeneration and the birth of a new society. With this worldview, they reproduced the romantic and conservative vision of history as a cycle of palingenesis, without being aware of their dependence on ideas they rejected (see Yermolenko, 2018).

All these contexts (especially the Polish and the Scottish ones) inspire the Ukrainian thinking and poetics. The key role here is played by the 19th-century circle of Saint Cyril and Methodius brotherhood, primarily by poet and painter Shevchenko, historian Kostomarov, theoretician of law and state Andruzkyi, journalist Bilozerskyi, writer Panteleimon Kulish, literary scholar Mykola Gulak, and others.

Importantly, this thinking is a response to three intellectual trends of the day. First, the idea that Ukraine has irreversibly died and can only be presented as a fairytale or fantasy. This vision of Ukraine was presented in the poetics of Gogol, a writer of Ukrainian and Polish descent who adopted a Russian imperial identity and subordinated his vision of Ukraine to it.

Second, an idyllic presentation of the Cossack past and regret about this past as a "paradise lost." Contrary to Gogol's aesthetics, it depicted the Ukrainian past as a story of glory, not a fairytale. This view was present in the Cossack histories of the 18th and early 19th centuries, particularly in the *Istoria Rusov* (History of Ruthenians), as well as in earlier Cossack chronicles (by Samovydets, Samiylo Velychko, and Hryhoriy Hrabyanka), which were popular in the early 19th century.

Third, an intensified ethnographic work, which collected songs presenting this "paradise lost" – precisely that version of the past which was fixed not in the written texts but in the texts orally transmitted and sung. It is here that, similarly to the Scottish minstrel figure, the

Ukrainians develop their *kobzar* figure, most remarkably embodied in Shevchenko's *Kobzar*.

The response to the first trend was the idea that Ukraine has not died, and has a future, not only the past. The response to the second trend was the idea that the glory presented in the Cossack chronicles could and should be revived. The response to the third trend was the idea that the ethnographic approach is not sufficient and should entail a political struggle.

The Ukrainian 19th century was a slow formulation of these responses. Not all of them were given at once; the third one was crystallizing only by the end of the century. However, it is the romantic idea of palingenesis, of a new birth despite death, and the conceptualisation of this idea not as a metaphor but as a task entailing real actions, which gave energy to the long way of Ukrainian national regeneration in the 19th century, which brought Ukrainian independence after World War I.

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Romanticism tends to look at life during moments of its encounter with death, or with the world "beyond the grave," the Chateaubriand's *outre-tombe*.

It goes decisively against the Enlightenment libertine ontology of the 18th century. That latter, from Casanova to Choderlos de Laclos, sees the world as an interplay of eros, with the major intrigue being the question of how one life interacts with another life, through attraction, repulsion, and emotional power (a capacity to rule the life of another person through emotions).

Contrary to this ontology, the key question of 19th-century Romanticism is not life's meeting with another life, but life's meeting with death. It might express itself through religion: Chateaubriand's character says that "if I tear myself from you in time, it is so that I may not be separated from you in eternity" ("si je m'arrache à vous dans le temps, c'est pour n'être pas séparée de vous dans l'éternité") (Chateaubriand, 1945, p. 50).

It can express itself through a "gothic" aesthetic (meeting with daemons, spirits of the dead, ruins, etc.). It can be embodied in an extreme necrophilic or destructive psychology (Emilie Brontē's Wuthering Heights; Hoffmann's Der Sandmann, Gautier's La Morte Amoureuse, etc.) or through the episodes of highly risky fights and liminal situations (like, for example, in Byron's characters).

Yet, in the Ukrainian context, this presence of death is present in even stronger form. The idea that Ukraine's destiny is deeply linked with an effort to overcome death is present in the key authors of Ukrainian romanticism. Mykola Kostomarov (1921), the famous Ukrainian historian, says in his "Books of Genesis of the Ukrainian People" that "Ukraine lies in the grave, but has not died. For her voice, the voice that called all Slavs to freedom and brotherhood, has spread throughout the Slavic world" (p. 21).

And furthermore, Kostomarov (1921) states:

Ukraine will rise from its grave and once again call out to all its brothers Slavs, and they will hear her scream. Slavic lands will rise, and there will be no tzar, no prince, no princess, no duke, no count, no lord, no noble, no excellency, no master, no boyar, no serf, no slave – neither in Muscovy, nor in Poland, nor in Ukraine, nor in Czechia, nor among the Horutans, nor among the Serbs, nor among the Bulgarians.

Ukraine will be an independent Res Publica in the Slavic Union.

Then all languages will say, pointing to the place where Ukraine will be drawn on the map: 'The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone' (p. 22).

Importantly, for Kostomarov, the palingenetic future of Ukraine is intrinsically linked with the concept of freedom and equality. In a specific romantic historiosophic generalization, Kostomarov states that neither Germanic-speaking nor Romance-speaking nations were able to develop a genuinely democratic and non-hierarchical form of government. The destiny of the Slavic peoples

(Kostomarov believed that Ukrainians were going to play a central role in it) is to present an alternative socio-political vision and develop a society without hierarchies. This egalitarian utopia is a reverse Hegelianism, as it attempts to directly oppose the intellectual fashion that originated from Hegel. Hegel believed that only nations with states have a history, i.e., both a past and a future. What Kostomarov attempts to argue, anticipating 20th-century anti-imperialist discourses, is that societies that didn't have hierarchies and therefore didn't develop the oppressive mechanisms of the state have a much more *genuine* future in the times of emerging democracy. What Hegel thought to be a disadvantage, Kostomarov saw as an advantage and the basis to build upon which a new world can be built.

Overcoming death is also widely present in Taras Shevchenko, the major Ukrainian poet of this era, and one of the founding fathers of the Ukrainian nation. In his poem *Stoyit u seli Subotovi* the poet creates an image of a church which has the grave of Hetman Khmelnytskyi, and therefore is the grave of Ukraine itself – but this grave will see the resurrection:

Tserkov-domovyna
Rozvalytsia… i z-pid neyi
Vstane Ukrayina.
I rozviye tmu nevoli,
Svit pravdy zasvityt,
I pomolyatsya na voli
Nevolnychi dity!..

(That church beneath the skies
May crumble down, but from its vaults
A new Ukraine will rise
To end the night of slavery;
Injustice will be gone;
Our serf-born sons' glad orisons
Will greet sweet Freedom's dawn!)
(Shevchenko, 1845a)

In his famous *Zapovit* there is a clear link between the funeral and rebellion ("pokhovayte ta vstavayte": "Oh bury me, then rise ye up" – Shevchenko, 1845b).

Interestingly, several authors in the Ukrainian intellectual tradition opposed Shevchenko and Gogol. This opposition was particularly clear in the words of Yevhen Malanyuk, a 20th-century Ukrainian poet and essayist. According to Malanyuk, Gogol decided to make an existential transfer from one civilization to another, a hostile one, when he agreed to adopt the Russian identity. This Russian civilization demanded "a moral death ('murder (usmertnennia) of the whole self'), because it demanded a rupture with the *organic whole*, and simultaneously self-absorption into the amorphous uncertainty (neokreslenist) of 'Russia' – and therefore, cultural and national suicide" (Malanyuk, 2017, p. 479).

The critical attitude to Gogol – for his alleged defeat in the encounter with death – is also characteristic of other Ukrainian thinkers of the 1930s. Yuriy Lypa, for example, wrote an essay "The Father of the defeatists" in which he argues that Gogol has "decapitated" (obezholovyv) Ukrainian history. He argues that Gogol betrayed Ukraine, rejected its identity, and presented it as a dead fairytale, in order to justify his rejection (Lypa, 1935, p. 134).

On the contrary, Shevchenko is seen by many Ukrainian intellectuals as a person who presents the resurrectionist energy. Mykola Shlemkevych, a Ukrainian émigré philosopher, discusses the "deep stratum" in Shevchenko, which he identifies in the female archetype and Mother figure, embodied in several Shevchenko poems (Kateryna, Naymychka, Vidma, and others), but with the greatest strength in his *Mariya* (Shlemkevych, 1958).

Malanyuk himself had a palingenetic vision of Shevchenko, calling him "Vesuvius of the nation, the spasmodic protest against death, this powerful scream of the will to life (*zhadoby do zhyttia*), to existence, to flourishing (*buyannia*), this storm-like (*hrozovu*) warning to the enemy: no, – the nation has not died" (Malanyuk, 2017, p. 343).

The palingenetic metaphors developed by Shevchenko in poetry and by Kostomarov in the philosophy of history were later adopted as one of the fundamental metaphors of the

Ukrainian political myth. The key role in it was played by a poem written by young Pavlo Chubynskyi in 1862, which later became the Ukrainian national anthem: *Shche ne vmerla Ukrayina* (Ukraine has not yet died; Chubynsky, 1863). There is a clear parallel of this poem with Kostomarov's phrase about Ukraine, which is in grave but has not yet died; there is also a clear parallel with the first verse of the Polish national anthem: "Jeszcze Polska nie zginęła."

These parallels can be explained by a common source: the palingenetic idea, developed in the late 18th to early 19th century throughout Europe, which we discussed earlier. Yet it is remarkable that in these two nations, the Poles and Ukrainians, this palingenetic mythology went as far as to be expressed in the first verses of the major national songs: *Shche ne vmerla Ukraina* became the anthem of the Ukrainian People's Republic in 1917 (it was also sung with the words «Ukraine has already resuscitated» instead of «Ukraine has not yet died»), and *Jeszcze Polska nie zginęła* became the anthem of the Polish Rzecz Pospolita in 1927. This can be explained by the statelessness of both Poles and Ukrainians in the 19th century, and by a capacity to maintain the continuity of national social, political, and cultural traditions, despite the lack of a state.

Chubynskyi was a young, 23-year-old man when he wrote the verse *Shche ne vmerla Ukrayina.* He was immediately sanctioned by the Russian imperial state for such an endeavour and was sent to the Arkhangelsk region, in the extreme north of Russia, near the White Sea. In 1876, the notorious *Ems Ukase*, which banned the Ukrainian language in the Russian Empire, also banned two authors from residing in Ukraine: Mykhaylo Drahomanov, a major Ukrainian political philosopher of that time, and Pavlo Chubynskyi. This shows that the palingenetic idea was recognized by the imperial power as politically dangerous.

It was not surprising. One of the key elements of the imperial myth is the work with time. The Russian imperial discourse employed a specific framework of thinking about time in relation to colonized subjects. This framework implied that the colonized nations might have a past (mostly cruel and "uncivilised"), but they certainly don't have a future. Their future belongs to the empire.

The closest example of this approach is Pushkin's *Poltava* (Pushkin, 1829). This famous poem was a response to Byron's palingenetic poem, "Mazeppa," which portrays young Mazepa, a future Ukrainian hetman, as a person literally going through death and undergoing a palingenetic journey (Byron, 1819). Contrary to these Western European romantic – and palingenetic – depictions of Mazepa, Pushkin applies an approach of "palingenetic denial," i.e., aesthetics portraying Mazepa (and Ukraine with him) as old, unable to act, perverse, treacherous, and having no future, i.e., unable to regenerate (see Babinski, 1974).

To understand Pushkin's motive of "palingenetic denial" applied to the Ukrainian case, let's consider the romantic "Mazeppa myth" closely.

Ivan Mazepa was a famous Ukrainian hetman (national and military leader) of the late 17th and early 18th centuries who challenged the power of the Muscovy tsar, Peter I. Mazepa joined the forces of the Swedish king, Charles XII, in the Great Northern War. However, the Swedish-Ukrainian army lost the key battle to the Muscovite army (to which other Ukrainians joined) in a battle near Poltava in 1709. This marked the beginning of Russian imperial expansionism into Europe, primarily the Baltic-Black Sea axis. This also marked the end of Swedish expansionism into Central and Eastern Europe, the decline of the Ukrainian Cossack state, and the preconditions for future Russian imperial annexations of Poland and the Crimean Khanate.

The Mazepa story acquired a different turn in 19th-century European Romanticism. The big geopolitical aspect was lost; what remained was the focus on individual effort, on erotic and political rebellion. Byron was the first to

tell another story about Mazepa (or Mazeppa, as he called him): a story of a young man who seduced a Polish noblewoman in the Polish court, was caught and punished by being tied naked to a horse, and sent into the Ukrainian steppes. After riding for 3 days without meeting anybody, after crossing the Dnipro river, after having the horse dead beneath him, after almost dying himself, Mazepa is rescued by a Ukrainian woman and gradually recovers to become in the future a famous Ukrainian hetman (see Babinski, 1974).

Byron's version of the story was also palingenetic and resurrectional, but the focus has shifted from a community to an individual. This version of the story was further told by Victor Hugo, Juliusz Słowacki, painted by Gericault and Delacroix, musically told by Ferenc Liszt, and then by other European, Russian, American, South African (see Voss, Yermolenko, 2025) and other writers, playwrights and cinema directors (see Babinski, 1974; see also my essay on Mazepa legend in Yermolenko, 2023).

In Byron's, Hugo's, and Słowacki's versions of the Mazeppa story, the key question is this capacity to go through the territory of death and to overcome it. It is particularly visible in Hugo's version of the story, which says that:

> "Chaque pas que tu fais semble creuser
> sa tombe.
> Enfin le terme arrive… il court, il vole, il
> tombe,
> Et se relève roi!"
> (Hugo, 1829a)
> (As if each stride the nearer bring
> Him to the grave) – when comes *the time*,
> After the fall, he rises – KING!
> *Translated by H. L. Williams* – Hugo, 1829b)
> Hugo and Pushkin both wrote their versions of the story in 1828, Hugo in May, Pushkin in December. They were both published in 1829 (Hugo in his collection *Les Orientales*).

Contrary to Byron's and especially Hugo's palingenetic motif, Pushkin presents an alternative vision of the story, portraying Mazepa as an old man (unable to be reborn), who attempts to seduce a young woman (i.e., applies the forces of death to conquer the forces of life). The conclusion of the poem suggests that the Cossacks were a nation of bloodthirsty brigands: "friends of the bloody past" (*druzya krovavoy stariny*), who leave the "bloody trace" (*krovavyi sled*) after themselves; Mazepa, their hetman, was "ready to pour blood as water" (*krov gotov on lit kak vodu*). Their past should never be returned: it is unresurrectionable.

Similar versions of the "palingenetic denial" can be found in the Russian literature's depiction of the Caucasus, for example, in Lermontov's *Mtsyri.* This work describes the locals as having a past but not a future – and therefore as capable of speaking only about their past, in a mode of a nostalgic elegy. This is completely different, for example, from Shevchenko's approach to this region when he throws his famous palingenetic "*Boritesia – poborete*" ("Fight and you will win") precisely in his poem *Caucasus*.

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The dream of resurrection has characterized a lot of topics in Ukrainian culture. Two generations after Shevchenko and Kostomarov, inside Ukrainian literary modernism, a dream of resurrection found its form in a new approach to the Ukrainian tradition.

The key figures of Ukrainian literary modernism – Lesia Ukrainka, Mykhaylo Kotsiubynskyi, Olha Kobylianska, Vasyl Stefanyk – were seeking simultaneous movement in opposite directions in time: both to the deep past and to the unknown future. They were looking for a modern form but also for pre-modern cultural depth. This double travel in time – both to the past and to the future – was specific to Ukrainian modernism. It was perhaps specific to many other modernist movements that lacked the state and therefore the state-guided modernization, and were

trying to replace it with a deep past and prehistorical depth that escapes time.

Lesia Ukrainka's *Forest Song* is one of the best examples of this aesthetics. In this drama, the human forces of time are opposed to nature's forces of eternity. The nature forces have no origin and even no ancestors, no genealogy: Mavka, the key forest character in the drama, says that she doesn't know who her mother is. These forces are unable even to die – they can be imprisoned in a deep sleep, as Mavka is with He-Who-Dwells-in-Rock. The abolition of time, which m eans the abolition of both birth and death, leads to a situation where no death is final, and therefore leads to another birth, and another spring (Ukrainka, 2021, vol. 3)

Lesia's other dramatic plays follow this example, but in a different way. Many of them address the deep themes of the past: the conflict between the radical early Christianity and pagan Hellenism, as in *Rufin and Priscilla* (Ukrainka, 2021, vol. 2); the conflict between an freedom-seeking endangered individual and freedom-seeking endangered community during the late Antiquity (like in *Martianus, the Advocate* – (Ukrainka, 2021, vol. 4), the controversy between free love (and loving freedom) and the radical freedom turning into a drive for power (as in the *Stone Host* – (Ukrainka, 2021, vol. 4); the controversy between unpleasant and uncontrollable truth and pleasant but controllable lie, as in *Cassandra* (Ukrainka, 2021, vol. 2); the controversy between the sensual beauty and the transcendent eternity, like in *Aysha and Mohammed* (Ukrainka, 2021, vol. 2), etc.

All these plays are consciously located in "there and then," contrary to the "here and now" perspective which a "realist" author would take. Lesia's approach sparked criticism from her contemporaries for avoiding topics that interested people in her surroundings. Yet, by choosing the "distant" topics (both in time and space), Lesia Ukrainka was only proving that the problems she is addressing go beyond time and space. The more "distant" the chronotope of the story is, the more powerful is the energy of the problem, the more it is able to speak to us despite this distance. In a way, Lesia was trying to show us that the problems she addresses in her plays – most often these were the clashes between different value systems – had no origin and no genealogy, i.e., they were always present in human nature, like the nature characters in the *Forest Song*. Denial of the ultimate power of death – that was the consequence of this thinking.

The next generation of Ukrainian writers – those who entered the cultural scene mostly in the 1920s, in the Soviet Union – were thinking differently. They *were* the product of time; they were immersed in time and in history. They were willing to swim with the river of progress, even if that river drives you through the rocky rapids.

The generation of the Ukrainian communist writers – most of them will be exterminated by the Soviet Union's repressive machine – were thinking of themselves as revolutionaries.

The very biography of the word "revolution" is a remarkable story of how meanings not only change but turn into their opposites. Initially, the word "revolution" meant a circular movement, return to the starting point (like the eternal trajectory of the elliptical movement of the planets as observed by Copernicus), i.e., impossibility of a genuine change, of a revolution in *our* sense of the word. Lesia Ukrainka was revolutionary in the old sense of the term, as she argued that major problems of human nature and human society recur, over and over again, in a palingenetic cycle. The next generation of Ukrainian writers was revolutionary in a completely different way. Their thinking was that the art they were going to produce would be something unseen before – a gap, a rupture with the past, a new birth that would not regenerate anything old.

This progressivist thinking intrinsically combined the death drive, in the emancipating forces of destruction, which is responsible for many of the crimes of the Leninist and Stalinist

regimes in the Soviet Union. But even within it, we see how the idea of the denial of death, of resurrection, of the return of some important vital forms of the past, is at play. The key story here is the concept of the Renaissance, particularly the Asian Renaissance by Mykola Khvyliovyi and the Eurasian Renaissance by Mykola Zerov.

The communication between these two authors and the (almost) similar concepts that they proposed is a remarkable fact of the Ukrainian 1920s. Khvyliovyi was a proletarian writer who fought against the Ukrainian independent republic (UNR) in the Bolshevik army from the very beginning. He was the leader of the Ukrainian communist writers in Kharkiv during the 1920s, despite launching several harsh polemics against other groups. Despite his "proletarianismm" he was interested in the broader European culture, thinking that only by embedding in this broader tradition, despite ideological differences, was the way the Ukrainian communist literature should take.

Mykola Zerov was different. He was a neoclassical poet, translator from Latin, a professor in Kyiv, elitist in his style and ideas. For him, the idea that the Ukrainian culture should be based on the European tradition was natural.

And yet, these two authors suggested an (almost) similar idea. Khvyliovyi talked about "Asian Renaissance" (Khvyliovyi, 1983); Zerov talked about "Eurasian Renaissance" (Zerov, 1990).

Both authors viewed Ukraine as a nation that would take the humanist ideas of the Renaissance and further extend them to the East. But what is important here is the very idea of the Renaissance: overcoming death; affirming the value of life, and most importantly, individual life; cherishing the life-affirming values, and the primacy of life over death.

The idea of the Renaissance soon evolved into its opposite. The Stalinist regime organized the artificial famine against the Ukrainian peasants in 1932–1933, killing at least 3,9 million people. It started exterminating the Ukrainian intelligentsia already in the 1920s, made a huge show trial in 1930 against the intellectuals of independent Ukraine, and then started exterminating the communist artists from 1932 onwards. Khvyliovyi killed himself because of this in 1933; Zerov was arrested and executed in Sandarmokh, in Karelia, northern Soviet Union (formerly Finland) in 1937, together with hundreds of other Ukrainian writers, artists, and scientists.

The Renaissance Khvyliovyi and Zerov dreamed about was turned into its opposite. It will later be called an "Executed Renaissance." But it was even more than that. The Renaissance triad "life-death-new life" was replaced with the totalitarian triad "death-life-new death." It was a reverse Renaissance. It was re-dying, re-murdering, re-annihilating. It was not simply evil; it was a recurring evil, returning again and again. It was evil that always escaped justice. It was a crime without punishment and punishment without crime (see Ogarkova & Yermolenko, 2022).

This remurdering, as the empire's response to the new Ukrainian renaissance, began again in 2014 and then again in 2022. This is the war not only against Ukraine, against Ukrainian identity; it is a war against reality and life. It's an attempt at a new palingenetic denial – and of a new demonic palingenesis: palinthanatos, the return of death.

This makes it more understandable why Ukrainians are fighting against this return of death so hard. And how this struggle for life, for life despite death, is deeply rooted in the Ukrainian culture.

Conclusion

In this study, I tried to argue that the "palingenetic element" has played a very important role in Ukrainian intellectual and cultural history. I also argue that this element plays a key role in the Ukrainian resistance today.

By the "palingenetic element," I understand a specific set of philosophical ideas that suggest death is never a final one and can be overcome through a regeneration process that brings an old culture back to life. But I go further by saying that the palingenetic element is rooted in the "philosophy of despite" or the "philosophy of the impossible." By this I mean a theoretical set of ideas, but most importantly a practical set of desires, instincts, and actions, which stress that life should be affirmed despite the nihilistic presence of death, freedom should be affirmed despite the enslaving presence of unfreedom, and beauty should be affirmed despite the discouraging presence of ugliness.

The Ukrainian case is not the only one in the global cultural history. I hypothesize that many communities that have lived for decades or centuries in a situation of existential insecurity and risk of disappearance are able to develop within themselves the capacity to affirm life despite the presence of death. This makes the Ukrainian experience global in its significance.

I argued in this paper that in the Ukrainian case, this assertion of life despite death has most vividly manifested itself in the idea of palingenesis and resurrection. This idea has universal origins, but it did play a key role in Ukrainian cultural history. Moreover, it is *far more* than a metaphor, in the same way that the death encountered by Ukrainian culture was also far more than a metaphor. While metaphors refer to something else and create an imaginary world (obviously playing a key role in culture), metaphors as such are not enough to produce actions. Ukrainian culture had to be *literally* palingenetic to survive, as the death drive it was facing was *literally* destructive to exterminate it.

My final argument would be that we need to move away from postmodern thinking, which places so much emphasis on the imaginary, textual, and metaphorical – i.e., things that always refer to something else, attempting to overcome the gravity of reality. In the world in which the virtual is destroying the real, and in which fantasies produce death, we need to get back to a new sense of the real and understand how we regain access to it.

Why? Because death is real. And therefore, life has to be real too, in spite of it.

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Анотація

Автор аналізує поняття палінгенесії (регенерації, проходження через смерть) у його європейському контексті та в українській культурній традиції. Автор стверджує, що для українського контексту, особливо воєнних часів, палінгенесія стає більше ніж метафорою, позначає екзистенційну реальність утвердження життя попри смерть і наголошує на силі та стійкості життя всупереч силам смерті та руйнування. Автор досліджує цю тему в кількох українських авторів, зокрема Тараса Шевченка, Миколи Костомарова, Лесі Українки, Євгена Маланюка, Миколи Шлемкевича та інших. Автор наголошує на важливості розгляду українського культурного та екзистенційного досвіду як таких, що допомагають подолати постмодерні релятивізм і віртуальність.

Ключові слова: палінгенеза, життя, смерть, відродження, війна, Україна, Шевченко, Костомаров, Зеров, Хвильовий, Леся Українка, українська інтелектуальна традиція.

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