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**False Friends:
The Pereiaslav Agreement of 1654 and Competing Narratives in Russian and Ukrainian
Historiographies**

Jiansheng Zhang¹

Introduction

Both Ukraine and Russia trace their origins to Kyivan Rus', a federation of Orthodox Christian, East Slavic principalities in medieval Europe. Starting in the twelfth century with the weakening of the Kyiv principality, the Galician-Volhynian and Vladimir-Suzdal principalities diverged from the Kyivan Rus'. The Mongol invasion in the thirteenth century solidified the divergence, as the territories corresponding to modern Ukraine and Russia came under different rulers and embarked on divergent historical trajectories.² Their paths would not intersect meaningfully again until the mid-seventeenth century. On 8 January 1654, the Cossack Hetmanate, led by Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky, swore allegiance to Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich of Muscovy at a ceremonial rada, or "council," in the town of Pereiaslav.³ In March, Cossack envoys carried twenty-three "Articles of Petition" to Moscow, which Tsar Alexei approved through an official patent. Over the following months, Muscovite officials traveled to 117 towns under Cossack control, where 127,000 people swore a similar oath of loyalty.⁴

The Pereiaslav Agreement (*Pereiaslavs'ka uhoda*) formalized a union between the Cossacks and Muscovites.⁵ It marked a turning point in the relationship between the two peoples.⁶ Most immediately, it brought Muscovy into the Cossacks' rebellion against the Polish-Lithuanian

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² For a more detailed account of the history of Ukraine from the Middle Ages to the mid-seventeenth century, see Serhii Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (Basic Books, 2021), pp. 23–107. For Russia during the same period, see Gregory Freeze, *Russia: A History* (2nd ed.) (Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 1–86.

³ Plokhy, *Gates of Europe*, pp. 103–4. This essay will date all early modern events using the Old Style (Julian calendar) rather than the New Style (Gregorian calendar). For example, it will cite the date of the Pereiaslav Rada as 8 January 1654, rather than 18 January 1654.

⁴ Subtelny, *Ukraine*, 4th ed. (University of Toronto Press, 2009), p. 135.

⁵ Plokhy, *Gates of Europe*, p. 104. The legal character of the Pereiaslav Agreement remains highly contested. Historians have variously described it as a real union, personal union, vassalage, protectorate, suzerainty, full incorporation, or military alliance. For the sake of simplicity, this essay will refer to the Cossack-Muscovite relationship established by the Pereiaslav Agreement as a "union."

⁶ Subtelny, *Ukraine*, p. 135.

Commonwealth, thus securing the Hetmanate's independence from Polish rule.⁷ More significantly, the agreement laid the foundations for Cossack-Muscovite relations over the next two centuries.⁸ In the decades that followed, the Hetmanate gradually lost its autonomy to the tsarist state, culminating in its full incorporation into the Russian Empire in the eighteenth century. As Orest Subtelny, a leading scholar of Ukrainian history at York University, wrote, "the fate of Ukraine became inextricably linked with that of Russia."⁹

Given its far-reaching consequences, the Pereiaslav Agreement stands as one of the most contested episodes in Eastern European historiography. Scholars in the Russian and Ukrainian traditions offer sharply contrasting interpretations of the motives and positions of both the Cossacks and Muscovites.¹⁰ Russian historiography typically portrays the agreement as the "reunification of Ukraine with Russia." According to this view, the Cossacks and Muscovites of 1654 shared enduring ethnic and religious bonds and had long aspired to be reunited. By casting the union as a historic inevitability, Russian historians use the Pereiaslav Agreement to support the notion of an "all-Russian people," united by Orthodox Slavic solidarity, within the Russian national narrative.¹¹

Ukrainian historiography firmly rejects the "reunification" paradigm. For Ukrainian scholars, the Pereiaslav Agreement is part of Ukraine's own nation-building process—an act of strategic diplomacy by the Cossacks to preserve the autonomy of the Hetmanate. Rather than seeing shared ethnicity or religious unity, they emphasize the emergence of a distinct Ukrainian identity, one that served as the precursor to modern Ukrainian nationhood.¹²

⁷ Plokhy, *Gates of Europe*, pp. 105–6.

⁸ It is worth to admit that the articles of the 1654 treaty were fabricated as early as 1659 during the negotiations between Hetman Yuriy Khmelnytsky and Aleksei Trubetskoi and this treaty is known in history as the Pereiaslav Council-2. There is an extensive number of sources on this fabrication regarding the issues such as the subordination of the Kyivan Metropolia to the Moscow Patriarchate, the extension of Muscovite voievodes to different Ukrainian cities, and so forth. From the mid-17th century until the 1880s, the Russian political and scholarly tradition presented the 1659 articles as the 1654 articles.

⁹ Subtelny, *Ukraine*, p. 135.

¹⁰ As with any dichotomy, the division of historians into Russian and Ukrainian historiographical traditions is somewhat artificial. Not all historians aligned with Russian historiography are ethnically Russian. For instance, Mykola Kostomarov (1817–1885), a Ukrainian historian of the nineteenth century, articulated views that later underpinned the imperial Russian narrative. Conversely, some historians working in Russia align more closely with Ukrainian historiography. One such figure is Tatiana Tairova-Yakovleva (b. 1967), director of the Centre for Ukrainian Research at St. Petersburg State University.

¹¹ Plokhy, "Ghosts of Pereiaslav," p. 494.

¹² Serhii Plokhy, *Unmaking Imperial Russia: Mykhailo Hrushevsky and the Writing of Ukrainian History* (University of Toronto Press, 2005): p. 96, p. 382.

This essay does not aim to reconstruct the events of the Pereiaslav Rada in detail. Instead, it presents Russian and Ukrainian historiographies as two competing narratives and explores their differing interpretations of the agreement. It begins with a brief overview of the historical context and the core perspectives of each historiographical tradition. It then analyzes three key points of contention between them: the ethnic identity, religious affiliations, and political interests of the Cossacks and Muscovites. Through an analysis of selected historical works, the essay critically examines how Russian and Ukrainian scholars use evidence and methodology to reconstruct the Pereiaslav Agreement. It argues that while not without limitations, Ukrainian historiography offers a more accurate account of how the agreement was perceived and received by both parties.

To support this argument, the paper draws on a broad range of primary sources from both Cossack and Muscovite origins. These include Bohdan Khmelnytsky's "Articles of Petition," Tsar Alexei's "Articles of Khmelnytsky," and Vasilii Buturlin's "Diplomatic Report." While earlier researchers have examined these texts, this essay contributes to the scholarship by comparing them with relevant secondary sources and evaluating how Russian and Ukrainian historians have interpreted them. Secondary sources will center on modern scholarship in Ukrainian history. From the Russian tradition, it will examine the works of Boris Floria, Gennadii Sanin, Igor Andreev, Lev Zaborovsky, and Sergei Samuilov. From the Ukrainian tradition, it will focus on Mykhailo Hrushevsky, Orest Subtelny, Paul Magocsi, Serhii Plokyh, and Tatiana Tairova-Yakovleva.¹³ We are not concerned with historians before the twentieth century, as that presupposes a much wider scope of discussion.¹⁴

Kyiv, Pereiaslav, Moscow: Historical Context of the Pereiaslav Agreement

The initial disputes between Ukraine and Russia trace back to the time when the political and religious center of Rus' was moved to the Vladimir-Suzdal principality, during Andrei Bogolubskii's campaign against Kyiv in 1169. When the Kyivan Rus' collapsed in the mid-thirteenth century, its principalities fell under the suzerainty of the Mongol Empire. While Russia remained in Mongol hands for much longer, Mongol rule in Ukraine was relatively short-lived. By the late fourteenth century, the westernmost principalities of the former Kyivan Rus', such as the Galician-Volhynian principality and the Kyiv Land, were incorporated into the

¹³ For an overview of contemporary historiography on the Pereiaslav Agreement written in or translated to the English language, see Frank E. Sysyn, "English-Language Historiography in the Twentieth Century on the Pereiaslav Agreement," *Russian History* 32:3/4 (2005): pp. 513–29.

¹⁴ The concepts of "Ukraine" and "Russia" in their modern sense did not exist in the seventeenth century. This essay will use "Ukraine" to refer to the territories under the Cossack Hetmanate that eventually became part of the contemporary Ukrainian state. "Russia" will denote the Grand Duchy of Muscovy, the predecessor of both the Russian Empire and the modern Russian Federation.

Kingdom of Poland and Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which later united to form the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.¹⁵

In the sixteenth century, Commonwealth peasants migrated en masse to Ukraine, where serfdom was absent and taxes were, for a time, waived. These settlers became known as the Cossacks, a semi-nomadic people renowned for defending the Commonwealth's steppe frontier against Tatar raids. Tensions—both political and religious—with local magnates led the Cossacks to revolt repeatedly in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Although these uprisings were mostly suppressed by force, deep divisions persisted between the Cossacks as a distinct estate and the Commonwealth authorities.¹⁶

The most consequential of these uprisings—"the Great Revolt"—erupted in 1648 under the leadership of Bohdan Khmelnytsky. At fifty-three, Khmelnytsky was a Cossack officer whose estates had been seized by a local Polish magnate. He fled to the Zaporozhian Sich, where he was elected hetman by the rebel Cossacks. With support from his Crimean Tatar allies, Khmelnytsky's forces destroyed the Commonwealth's standing army at the battles of Zhovti Vody and Korsun, sparking widespread peasant revolts across Ukraine. Following the Zboriv Agreement of 1649, Khmelnytsky established the Zaporozhian Army across the palatinates of Kyiv, Bratslav, and Chernihiv, laying the foundations for a semi-autonomous Cossack polity. This entity would later be called the "Hetmanate" by historians.¹⁷

However, the Tatar allies soon proved unreliable, prioritizing captive raids over victory. A reorganized Commonwealth army began reclaiming Cossack-held territories in an effort to reassert control over the Hetmanate. The Cossacks sought new alliances with the Ottoman Empire, Principality of Moldavia, Transylvania, and Sweden. The Ottoman Empire supported Khmelnytsky by not preventing the Crimean khan, a vassal of the Porte, from assisting the Cossacks until 1654. The Moldavian prince became a relative of the hetman after Tymish Khmelnytsky married Rosanda Lupu in 1652. But none of these actors committed troops to the Hetmanate's defense.¹⁸

¹⁵ Plokhy, *Gates of Europe*, pp. 49–72. From the fourteenth to the sixteenth century, the Kingdom of Poland became more closely integrated with its neighboring Grand Duchy of Lithuania, a process culminating in the Union of Lublin of 1569 that created the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The new boundaries between Poland and Lithuania later became the modern borders between Ukraine and Belarus. For Poland's union with Lithuania, see Patrice M. Dabrowski, *Poland: The First Thousand Years* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2014), pp. 41–140.

¹⁶ Plokhy, *Gates of Europe*, pp. 73–84.

¹⁷ For a more detailed account of the Khmelnytsky Uprising, see Plokhy, *Gates of Europe*, pp. 97–108; Magocsi, *History of Ukraine*, pp. 209–30; Subtelny, *Ukraine*, pp. 123–38.

¹⁸ Plokhy, *Gates of Europe*, 97–108; Magocsi, *History of Ukraine*, pp. 209–30; Subtelny, *Ukraine*, pp. 123–38.

The pivotal moment came in 1654, when Bohdan Khmelnytsky swore allegiance to Tsar Alexei of Muscovy at the Pereiaslav *rada*, thus drawing Muscovy into the Cossacks' war with the Commonwealth.¹⁹

Muscovy was a principality of Kyivan Rus' descent that centered around today's Moscow. For much of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, it remained under Mongol suzerainty while the Ukrainian lands slowly detached from Mongol rule. Despite this, it gradually expanded into neighboring principalities and soon established its hegemony over much of the northern Rus' lands. When it broke free from Mongol rule in the mid-fifteenth century, Muscovy immediately embarked on a relentless process of territorial expansion. By the time Khmelnytsky appealed to Tsar Alexei for help, Muscovy had become one of the strongest powers in Eastern Europe.²⁰

In the Pereiaslav Agreement, Tsar Alexei granted the Cossacks a range of rights and privileges they had lacked under Commonwealth rule. This included fixing the registered Cossack host at 60,000 and legal privileges for the Cossack estate. Nevertheless, Muscovite centralized power maintained complete authority which denied either Cossack or any other statehood within its borders. The Hetmanate became part of it in terms of autonomy. It is important to note that contemporaries understood the agreement in varied legal and symbolic ways. Both sides likely held different perceptions of the nature of the alliance, as well be exemplified by the ensuing argumentation.

Within the Pereiaslav Agreement, the tsar pledged military support against the Commonwealth. Cossack and Muscovite forces launched a counteroffensive: Muscovite troops retook Smolensk and occupied Vilnius, while Cossack forces besieged Lviv in western Ukraine.²¹ Although the agreement shielded the Cossacks from immediate military defeat, its long-term consequences proved disastrous for the Hetmanate. Over the next two centuries, Muscovy steadily increased its influence over successive hetmans, eroding Cossack autonomy.²² By the eighteenth century, under Catherine the Great, the Hetmanate was fully absorbed into the Russian Empire. The significance of the Pereiaslav Agreement lies in its establishment of a precedent for Russian involvement in Ukraine—marking the beginning of a long and complex history of Ukraine-Russia relations.²³

¹⁹ Plokhy, *Gates of Europe*, pp. 103–4.

²⁰ For the history of Muscovy's expansion from the fifteenth century to the seventeenth century, see Freeze, *Russia*, pp. 27–86.

²¹ Freeze, *Russia*, pp. 27–86.

²² For the period of Ukrainian history after the Pereiaslav Agreement, known as “the Ruin,” see Plokhy, *Gates of Europe*, pp. 109–18; Magocsi, *History of Ukraine*, pp. 231–42; Subtelny, *Ukraine*, pp. 139–57.

²³ Plokhy, *Gates of Europe*, pp. 103–4.

Different Understandings in Russian and Ukrainian Historiographies

There is a limited corpus of primary sources on the Pereiaslav Agreement, and no official written version of the agreement itself survives. Its content is instead reconstructed through three main elements: the oath sworn by Khmelnytsky and his Cossack officers to the Muscovite delegation at the Pereiaslav Rada; Khmelnytsky's twenty-three *Articles of Petition* to Tsar Alexei (dated February 17, 1654); and Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich's eleven *Articles of Khmelnytsky* (dated March 27, 1654), commonly known as the "March Articles," which confirmed Khmelnytsky's conditions after revision. A description of the Pereiaslav Rada is preserved in the diplomatic report of Vasilii Buturlin, the Muscovite envoy who received the Cossacks' oath on the tsar's behalf.²⁴

Given the fragmentary nature of the sources, the Pereiaslav Agreement has been the subject of considerable historiographical debate. Two broad interpretive camps have emerged: Russian historiography and Ukrainian historiography. While each tradition includes historians of differing periods and viewpoints, their general positions can be meaningfully summarized.

Russian historiography traces its roots to the nineteenth-century imperial tradition, shaped by figures such as Sergei Solovev, Gennadii Karpov, Mykola Kostomarov, and Vasilii Klyuchevsky.²⁵ These historians referred to Ukraine as "Little Russia" and interpreted its history as an extension of a unified "all-Russian" narrative.²⁶ To them, the Cossacks and Muscovites belonged to a single Rus' people, sharing a common nationality and Orthodox faith. The Pereiaslav Agreement thus represented a "reunification" after centuries of separation.²⁷ In his *History of Russia (Kurs Russkoy Istorii, 1904)*, Klyuchevsky (1841–1911) wrote that "the Little Russians were...reunited with the Great Russians."

This interpretation was later adopted and institutionalized by the Soviet state.²⁸ In 1954, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union issued an official thesis describing the Pereiaslav Agreement as the "reunification of Ukraine and Russia" (*vossoyedineniye Ukrainy i Rossii*).²⁹ According to this view, the agreement was the "natural corollary" of the history of "two great kindred Slavic peoples" who shared "fundamental interests and aspirations."³⁰ While discarding the

²⁴ "The Diplomatic Report of Vasilii Buturlin," in *Pereiaslav 1654: A Historiographical Study*, ed. John Basarab (University of Toronto Press, 1982), pp. 250–58.

²⁵ Tairova-Yakovleva, "Teaching Ukrainian History in Russia," p. 486; Basarab, *Pereiaslav 1654*, pp. 96–109; Ploky, "Ghosts of Pereyaslav," p. 493; Sysyn, "English-Language Historiography," pp. 513–14.

²⁶ Ploky, "Ghosts of Pereyaslav," p. 494.

²⁷ Vasili Osipovich Kluchevsky, *A History of Russia*, trans. C. J. Hogarth, Vol. 3 (J. M. Dent & Sons, and E. P. Dutton, 1911–31): pp. 113–29.

²⁸ Basarab, *Pereiaslav 1654*, pp. 172–79.

²⁹ "Theses on the Three-Hundredth Anniversary of the Reunion of the Ukraine with Russia (1654–1954)," in *Pereiaslav 1654: A Historiographical Study*, ed. John Basarab (University of Toronto Press, 1982), pp. 270–88.

³⁰ "Theses on the Three-Hundredth Anniversary," pp. 270–71.

emphasis on religion, Soviet historiography reinforced the idea of ethnic and historical unity between Ukrainians and Russians, framing the agreement as a “fraternal reunion.”³¹

Following the Soviet Union’s collapse, this narrative has remained influential among Russian scholars such as Boris Floria, Lev Zaborovsky, and Igor Andreev.³² These Russian historians have been selected because they are especially influential and representative of broader trends. Contemporary proponents of the “reunification” paradigm continue to argue that the Cossacks sought union with Muscovy from the outset of the Khmelnytsky Uprising.³³ In *Na Puti k Poltave* (“On the Way to Poltava”), Igor Andreev, head of the Department of Russian History at Moscow City University, writes that the Pereiaslav Agreement reunited Ukraine with Russia based on “ethnic kinship, common faith, cultural closeness, [and] a shared historical past... [It] was a national choice.”³⁴

Ukrainian historiography, by contrast, offers a fundamentally different interpretation. Its modern form emerged alongside Ukraine’s national revival in the early twentieth century.³⁵ In his monumental *History of Ukraine-Rus’*, Mykhailo Hrushevsky (1866–1934)—widely regarded as the father of modern Ukrainian historiography—portrayed the Pereiaslav Agreement as a tactical, short-term alliance aimed at preserving the autonomy of the Hetmanate.³⁶ He emphasized that Khmelnytsky sought Muscovy’s aid out of necessity, no differently than previous military alliances with the Ottomans or Tatars.³⁷ Rejecting the idea of “reunification,” Hrushevsky championed an independent Ukrainian identity rooted in distinct historical and cultural developments.³⁸

During the Soviet period, Hrushevsky’s views were denounced as “counterrevolutionary,” and his work was suppressed.³⁹ After the publication of the 1954 thesis, Ukrainian historians within the USSR were compelled to adopt the official Soviet line or risk persecution and demotion.⁴⁰ As a result, Soviet-era Ukrainian historians, including B. F. Porshnev (1905–1972) and Volodymyr Holobutsky (1909–1993), reinforced the “reunification” narrative. B. F. Porshnev (1905–1972) praised Russia for “liberating” the Ukrainian people from Polish and Turkish domination.⁴¹ Volodymyr Holobutsky (1909–1993) emphasized the strengthening of “fraternal

³¹ “Theses on the Three-Hundredth Anniversary”, pp. 270–71.

³² Ploky, “Ghosts of Pereyaslav,” pp. 492–93.

³³ Ploky, “Ghosts of Pereyaslav,” pp. 492–93.

³⁴ Igor Lvovich Andreev, *Na Puti K Poltave* [On the way to Poltava] (Moscow, 2009), pp. 127–28.

³⁵ Ploky, *Unmaking Imperial Russia*, p. 5.

³⁶ Ploky, *Unmaking Imperial Russia*, p. 296.

³⁷ Ploky, *Unmaking Imperial Russia*, p. 296.

³⁸ Ploky, *Unmaking Imperial Russia*, p. 5.

³⁹ Ploky, *Unmaking Imperial Russia*, pp. 264–5.

⁴⁰ Subtelny, *Ukraine*, pp. 135–36.

⁴¹ Basarab, *Pereiaslav 1654*, p. 183.

bonds” between Ukrainians and Russians.⁴² For these historians, Ukraine’s “reunification” with Russia was the *leitmotif* in Ukrainian history.⁴³

The Ukrainian historical tradition of Hrushevsky passed through the works of Ukrainian historians who relocated from Ukraine to Europe, the USA, and Canada after World War II (e.g., Oleksandr Ohloblyn, Andrii Yakovliv, and others). This was revived and expanded upon since Ukraine’s independence in 1991. Contemporary scholars have drawn heavily from the Ukrainian diaspora’s writings, which challenged Soviet interpretations and advanced the case for Ukrainian sovereignty. Historians such as Orest Subtelny, Paul Magocsi, and Serhii Plokhy have decisively abandoned the term “reunification,” instead portraying the Cossacks and Muscovites as fundamentally distinct peoples with divergent identities and aims.⁴⁴ Serhii Plokhy (1957–), professor of Ukrainian history at Harvard University, writes, “A nation-based dialogue was hardly possible between the Ruthenian and Muscovite elites . . . neither side in the Pereiaslav negotiations fully understood what it was getting into.”⁴⁵ It is worth noting that Ukrainian historiography also operates within national frameworks, though often with the goal of recovering suppressed histories and articulating sovereignty.

This essay engages with both Russian and Ukrainian historiographical traditions through close analysis of major works on the Pereiaslav Agreement. By evaluating how each side uses historical evidence and methodology, it critically examines their respective approaches. Incorporating primary sources alongside secondary scholarship, this essay aims to present a more balanced and historically grounded account of Cossack-Muscovite relations in the seventeenth century. It concludes that, while not without its own limitations, Ukrainian historiography offers a more source-grounded interpretation of how the Pereiaslav Agreement was conceived and received by the actors involved.

The “Fraternal Reunion”: Ethnic Identities of Cossacks and Muscovites in Russian and Ukrainian Historiographies

We begin by examining the ethnic dimension of the Russian and Ukrainian narratives. Historians within the Russian historiographical tradition argue that in the seventeenth century, the Cossacks and Muscovites retained a shared sense of ethnic identity, which inspired a desire to “reunify” through the Pereiaslav Agreement. According to this view, the agreement was a “fraternal reunion” of two ethnically kindred peoples, restoring the unity of Kyivan Rus’.⁴⁶ Ukrainian historiography, by contrast, rejects the notion of enduring Rus’ unity between Cossacks and Muscovites. While acknowledging that both Russia and Ukraine trace their origins to Kyivan Rus’, Ukrainian

⁴² Basarab, *Pereiaslav 1654*, p. 184.

⁴³ Basarab, *Pereiaslav 1654*, p. 184.

⁴⁴ Plokhy, *Gates of Europe*, pp. 104–5.

⁴⁵ Serhii Plokhy, *The Origins of Slavic Nations: Premodern Identities in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus*. (Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 248–49.

⁴⁶ Plokhy, *The Origins of Slavic Nations*, pp. 208–9.

historians assert that Ukraine developed as a separate nation and thus had no need to be “reunified” with anyone.⁴⁷

A particularly valuable source for understanding the Russian perspective on the ethnic question is Boris Floria’s essay, *On Some Features of the Development of Ethnic Self-awareness of the Eastern Slavs in the Middle Ages–Early Modern Times*. Floria, a prominent Russian historian affiliated with Moscow State University and the Russian Academy of Sciences, offers detailed source analysis on the ethnic consciousness of Eastern Slavic peoples in the early modern period.⁴⁸ He argues that a common Rus’ identity “continued to occupy a prominent place in the public consciousness” of both Cossacks and Muscovites. Accordingly, Floria maintains that the Pereiaslav Agreement was seen by both sides as the “reunification of individual parts of Rus’,” motivated by a desire to “restore former unity.”⁴⁹

To support this claim, Floria retraces the origins and usage of the term “Little Rus’,” which he argues was accepted by Ukrainians in the early modern period. He notes that the term first appeared in “Byzantine documents of the early sixteenth century,” where it referred to the Galician ecclesiastical metropolis, distinguished from the all-Russian metropolis of Kyiv.⁵⁰ In this context, “Little Rus’” or “Little Russia” functioned as a geographical term describing what is now western Ukraine.

Floria then attempts to show that the term’s usage expanded in the seventeenth century, particularly among Ukrainian Orthodox clergy. For example, Bishop Isaiah Kopinsky of Przemyśl referred to himself in a 1622 letter to Patriarch Filaret as the “exarch of Little Russia,” while Patriarch Theophan of Jerusalem sent blessings “to all the pious Christians in Little Russia” upon his departure from Kyiv in 1621.⁵¹ On this basis, Floria argues that Ukrainians identified themselves as “Little Russians” in the seventeenth century.

He also notes that the counterpart term, “Great Russia,” was widely used by Muscovites. Consequently, he concludes that both Cossacks and Muscovites considered themselves parts of a

⁴⁷ Plokhy, *The Origins of Slavic Nations*, p. 209.

⁴⁸ Tairova-Yakovleva, p. 485, pp. 88–89.

⁴⁹ Boris Floria, “*O nekotorykh osobennostyakh razvitiya etnicheskogo samosoznaniya vostochnykh slavyan v epokhu Srednevekov’ya – rannego Novogo vremeni*” [On some features of the development of ethnic self-awareness of the Eastern Slavs in the Middle Ages –Early Modern times], accessed May 1, 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130117233500/http://www.ukrhistory.narod.ru/texts/floria-2.htm>.

⁵⁰ Floria, “*O nekotorykh osobennostyakh*.” The word “Byzantine” here most likely refers to the Christian Orthodox Church, rather than the Byzantine Empire which ended in 1453.

⁵¹ Floria, “*O nekotorykh osobennostyakh*.”

shared “Russian people.”⁵² As he puts it: “The two peoples living in ‘Little’ and ‘Great’ Russia were perceived as two closely related parts of some common whole.”⁵³

However, Floria’s argument suffers from two critical flaws. First, most of his evidence comes from religious texts—a bias he himself acknowledges (“This is especially strong and noticeable in the works of Orthodox authors”).⁵⁴ These documents reflect the views of the Ukrainian Orthodox clergy, not necessarily those of other social strata. It is unclear whether broader segments of Ukrainian society, particularly the Cossacks who signed the Pereiaslav Agreement, accepted the term “Little Russia.”

Second, Floria fails to demonstrate that “Little Russia” evolved from a purely geographic term into an ethnonym identifying its inhabitants. While he suggests such a development, he offers no concrete evidence. Even in the documents he cites, “Little Russia” is consistently used as a territorial designation—typically in titles such as “Exarch of Little Russia” or “Metropolitan of Kyiv, Galicia, and All Little Russia.” None of these texts refer explicitly to the *inhabitants* as “Little Russians.”⁵⁵ Thus, Floria does not substantiate his claim that the usage of “Little Russia” signified a shared ethnic identity between Ukrainians and Russians in the seventeenth century.

In response to these weaknesses, Ukrainian historians have challenged the ethnic assumptions of Russian historiography. Serhii Plokhy, a leading scholar in the field, argues in *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* that the Pereiaslav Agreement reveals little about ethnic commonality. He states unequivocally that “[no] one in Pereiaslav or Moscow was thinking or speaking in ethnic terms in 1654.”⁵⁶

Plokhy first points to linguistic evidence. The Cossacks and Muscovites spoke mutually unintelligible dialects and required interpreters to communicate. Even their literary languages diverged significantly—Khmelnitsky’s letters to Tsar Alexei had to be translated into Russian and survive in Muscovite archives only in translation. This linguistic divide, Plokhy argues, undermines the notion of a shared ethnic identity.⁵⁷

Second, Plokhy questions whether Cossacks and Muscovites retained any meaningful memory of their common medieval past. He concedes that some documents mentioned a shared heritage, but contends that this idea “was embodied only in a few handwritten chronicles.”⁵⁸ In this regard, Plokhy may overstate his case. Floria’s evidence does suggest a somewhat broader usage of terms like “Little Russia” and “Great Russia” in ecclesiastical discourse.⁵⁹ While not necessarily reflective of popular sentiment, this terminology at least points to some conceptual continuity.

⁵² Floria, “*O nekotorykh osobennostyakh*.”

⁵³ Floria, “*O nekotorykh osobennostyakh*.”

⁵⁴ Floria, “*O nekotorykh osobennostyakh*.”

⁵⁵ Floria, “*O nekotorykh osobennostyakh*.”

⁵⁶ Floria, “*O nekotorykh osobennostyakh*.”

⁵⁷ Floria, “*O nekotorykh osobennostyakh*.”

⁵⁸ Floria, “*O nekotorykh osobennostyakh*,” pp. 104-5.

⁵⁹ Floria, “*O nekotorykh osobennostyakh razvitiya etnicheskogo samosoznaniya*.”

Therefore, a direct analysis of the historical documents is needed to prove that Cossacks and Muscovites did not see each other as members of the same Rus' nation.

This essay seeks to supplement the analysis offered by Ukrainian historians by engaging directly with seventeenth-century documents. These sources suggest that the Muscovites lacked a coherent ethnic rationale for the Pereiaslav Agreement. In Vasilii Buturlin's diplomatic report—the official Muscovite account of the Rada—there is no reference to Kyivan Rus' or its legacy.⁶⁰ The only phrase that might suggest ethnic affinity is his mention of “Kyiv and all Little Russia,” yet even here the term functions geographically rather than ethnically.⁶¹ The Cossacks in these territories were not referred to as the “Little Russians” or “Russians.” Instead, Buturlin consistently referred to them as the “Zaporozhian Army,” an ethnically neutral designation tied to their base at the Zaporozhian Sich.⁶²

This absence of ethnic language is echoed in other Muscovite documents. The 1653 resolution of the Zemsky Sobor (Assembly of the Land) referred to the Ukrainian population as “Cherkasians,” a name derived from a Dnieper River town, with no mention of Rus' or “Little Russia.”⁶³ The same holds for Tsar Alexei's *March Articles* and the revised 1659 agreement. While “Little Russia” appears sporadically, the Cossacks are primarily described as the “Zaporozhian Army” or simply “the Cossacks.”⁶⁴ The Muscovites at no point justified the Pereiaslav agreement on the basis of the shared ethnic unity of the two Kyivan Rus' successors.

Distinct people under his sovereignty, Khmelnytsky and his fellow Cossacks did not view themselves as kin to the Muscovites. This is reflected in Khmelnytsky's *Articles of Petition* to the tsar in 1654—a crucial source for understanding the Cossack vision of the Pereiaslav Agreement.⁶⁵ Written just two months after the Pereiaslav Rada, the petition makes no reference to Kyivan Rus' or to any notion of ethnic unity between the two peoples. The only term resembling “Rus” is “Ruthenian Christian,” a phrase Khmelnytsky used to describe the Ukrainian population.⁶⁶ Here, “Ruthenian”—a cognate of “Rus”—was clearly geographical in meaning, while the emphasis lay on “Christian,” underscoring religious rather than ethnic solidarity. Had the idea of Rus' unity held significant weight in Cossack political culture, it would likely have figured more prominently in a document aimed at legitimizing a new political alliance.

⁶⁰ “Diplomatic Reports of Vasilii Buturlin,” in *Pereiaslav 1654: A Historiographical Study*, ed. John Basarab (University of Toronto Press, 1982), pp. 250–58.

⁶¹ “Diplomatic Reports of Vasilii Buturlin,” p. 251.

⁶² “Diplomatic Reports of Vasilii Buturlin,” p. 250.

⁶³ Tatyana Tairova-Yakovleva, “The Role of the Religious Factor and Patriarch Nikon in the Unification of Ukraine and Muscovy,” *Acta Poloniae Historica* 110 (January 2014): pp. 9–10.

⁶⁴ “Articles Drafted in Moscow,” 240–44; “The 1659 Version of the 1654 Agreement with Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky,” in *Pereiaslav 1654: A Historiographical Study*, ed. John Basarab (University of Toronto Press, 1982), pp. 245–49.

⁶⁵ “Articles of Petition,” pp. 230–36.

⁶⁶ “Articles of Petition,” p. 230.

To be historically objective, it must be acknowledged that Khmelnytsky had previously used the term “Rus” in other contexts. After seizing Kyiv in 1648, and under the influence of Kyivan elites, he expanded his ambitions beyond narrow Cossack interests to include the broader Ukrainian cause.⁶⁷ In one conversation recorded by a Polish commissioner, he declared: “I shall free the entire people of Rus’ from the Poles... I am a small and insignificant man, but by the will of God I have become the independent ruler of Rus’.”⁶⁸

Nevertheless, Khmelnytsky referred to the Ukrainian people as “the Rus” primarily to distinguish them from “the Poles,” whose oppressive rule he sought to overturn. He did not associate the “Russianness” of the Cossacks with that of the Muscovites, nor did he express any intention to unite with Muscovy on the basis of a shared *Rus’* identity.⁶⁹ In the same message, Khmelnytsky described himself as the “independent ruler of Rus’.”⁷⁰ Here, the emphasis falls on the word “independent” rather than “Rus’,” underscoring his aspiration to establish a sovereign Ukrainian state free from foreign domination.

In conclusion, neither the Cossacks nor the Muscovites had developed an awareness of *Rus’* unity at the time of the Pereiaslav Agreement. Boris Floria attempts to show that seventeenth-century Ukrainians identified as “Rus” through the use of various religious sources. While these sources reflect the Ukrainian clergy’s use of the term “Little Russian” and their perceived affinity with the “Great Russians,” they do not demonstrate a widespread belief in *Rus’* unity across broader Ukrainian society. Serhii Plokhyy presents a generally convincing argument that the Cossacks and Muscovites did not share a consensus on ethnic identity. In the few instances where the terms “Little” and “Great Russia” were used, they referred solely to geographic regions rather than to the peoples inhabiting them. Therefore, the absence of a shared ethnic identity between the Cossacks and Muscovites suggests that neither side could have regarded the Pereiaslav Agreement as a “reunification of Rus’.”

The Two-Headed Eagle: Religious Considerations of Cossacks and Muscovites in Russian and Ukrainian Historiographies

Russian and Ukrainian historians not only disagree on the ethnic identities of the Cossacks and Muscovites, but they also diverge on the religious considerations of the two parties, though the difference here is more subtle. In Russian historiography, the Pereiaslav Agreement is portrayed as the reunion of two Orthodox Christian churches that had been divided since Mongol times. Russian historians argue that a shared belief in Orthodox Christianity not only inspired the Cossacks to choose Muscovy as their sovereign but also compelled the Muscovite tsar to protect

⁶⁷ Plokhyy, *Gates of Europe*, p. 100.

⁶⁸ Magocsi, *History of Ukraine*, p. 218.

⁶⁹ Magocsi, *History of Ukraine*, p. 218.

⁷⁰ Magocsi, *History of Ukraine*, p. 218.

Ukraine's Orthodox population from the oppression of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.⁷¹ Ukrainian historians similarly emphasize the role of religion in the conclusion of the Pereiaslav Agreement, but they reject the notion that religious zeal prompted either party to act out of altruism. Instead, they argue that both Cossacks and Muscovites used religion as a practical tool in the negotiation process to advance the interests of their respective churches.⁷²

Russian historiography's treatment of religion in the Pereiaslav Agreement is best exemplified in the work of Igor Andreev, professor of history at Moscow City University. In his book *Na Puti k Poltave*, Andreev makes two claims about the role of religion in the conclusion of the Pereiaslav Agreement. First, he argues that "religious motives persuaded the Cossacks to unite with Moscow," meaning that the Cossacks chose to align with Muscovy because they shared the same faith. However, he offers little analysis to support this assertion, citing only a single quote from Metropolitan Joseph Boretsky of Kyiv: "We have one faith and worship" ("У нас одна вера и богослужение").⁷³

Secondly, he states that Muscovy was also motivated by "the desire to defend the Orthodox faith" in Cossack Ukraine, as the Muscovite tsar sympathized with the Orthodox Ukrainians suffering religious oppression under Commonwealth rule. Thus, he argues that the tsar entered the Pereiaslav Agreement out of a selfless desire to protect Orthodox believers in Cossack Ukraine. By portraying the Cossacks and Muscovites as drawn together by religious affinity, Andreev reaffirms his support for framing the Pereiaslav Agreement as "the reunification of Russia and Ukraine."⁷⁴

Unfortunately, Andreev offers little detailed analysis of primary sources to support his claim, making it difficult to fully assess the validity of his argument. Nevertheless, the religious justification for the Pereiaslav Agreement in Russian historiography is more fully developed in the work of Boris Floria. In the same essay referenced in the previous chapter, Floria offers compelling observations on the religious motives of both Cossacks and Muscovites, arguing that these were key drivers of the two peoples' supposed "reunification."⁷⁵ He cites several primary sources, including speeches delivered at the Pereiaslav Rada. For example, he notes that "the Russian ambassador [Buturlin] spoke of the providence of God," illustrating the significance of Orthodoxy in the worldview of high-ranking Muscovite officials.⁷⁶ Floria also contends that religious unity played a central role in the negotiation process. This is corroborated by a recorded conversation between Khmelnytsky, his officer Ivan Vyhovsky, and Buturlin, in which all parties spoke of "the return of

⁷¹ Andreev, *Na Puti K Poltave*, pp. 127–28.

⁷² Serhii Plokhyy, *The Cossacks and Religion in Early Modern Ukraine* (Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 306–33.

⁷³ Andreev, *Na Puti K Poltave*, p. 127.

⁷⁴ Andreev, *Na Puti K Poltave*, p. 128.

⁷⁵ Floria, "О некоторых особенностях развития этнического самосознания."

⁷⁶ Floria, "О некоторых особенностях развития этнического самосознания."

the times of Vladimir”—a reference to the hoped-for restoration of Orthodox unity between the two lands since their medieval origins.⁷⁷

Above all, Floria employs the eagle allegory to support the notion of a shared religious identity between the Cossacks and Muscovites. The “two-headed eagle” symbol—depicting an eagle spreading its wings to protect its nestlings—was a popular motif in Ukrainian religious tradition.⁷⁸ In his essay, Floria notes that both sides of the Pereiaslav Agreement invoked this imagery, reinforcing the idea of the Muscovite tsar as a benevolent protector of the Ukrainian Cossacks.⁷⁹ For example, at the Pereiaslav Rada, Buturlin declared that “the tsar was taking Kyiv under his rule, ‘the imperial eagle’s nest that once existed.’”⁸⁰ Religious figures on the Cossack side also drew upon the eagle motif. “Even such an opponent of the Pereiaslav decisions as Metropolitan Sylvestr Kosiv declared,” writes Floria, “[T]he youth of the inheritance of the pious great princes of Russia will be renewed, like that of the eagle.”⁸¹

Floria’s interpretation of the religious fervor at the Pereiaslav Rada is corroborated by Vasilii Buturlin’s primary account. A close examination of Buturlin’s diplomatic report reveals a strong emphasis on the theme of religious unity between the Cossacks and Muscovites as a justification for the Pereiaslav Agreement.⁸² According to Buturlin, Khmelnytsky persuaded his followers to align with Muscovy by portraying Tsar Alexei as an “Orthodox Christian Great Sovereign.”⁸³ Buturlin further emphasized that it was the Cossacks’ devotion to the Orthodox faith that inspired their vocal support for the tsar. His description of the Rada consistently highlights religious elements, employing phrases such as “Christian blood,” “Greek dispensation,” and “true faith.”⁸⁴

Floria’s analysis of sources produced at the Pereiaslav Rada is generally accurate, but he does not account for the political context preceding the conclusion of the Pereiaslav Agreement. While Orthodox Christianity played a significant role in Ukrainian culture, it is difficult to believe that religion was the Cossacks’ primary consideration in choosing an ally. Bohdan Khmelnytsky began his uprising in 1648 with the assistance of the Crimean Tatars, a group of Sunni Muslims. Three years later, in 1651, the Cossacks signed a document recognizing the suzerainty of the Ottoman sultan—another Muslim ruler and hardly an “Orthodox Christian Great Sovereign.”⁸⁵ These earlier alliances with Muslim powers—the Tatars and the Ottomans—indicate that the Cossacks were far from pursuing a strictly religiously motivated foreign policy.

⁷⁷ Floria, “*O nekotorykh osobennostyakh razvitiya etnicheskogo samosoznaniya.*”

⁷⁸ Plokhy, *Cossacks and Religion*, p. 319.

⁷⁹ Floria, “*O nekotorykh osobennostyakh razvitiya etnicheskogo samosoznaniya.*”

⁸⁰ Floria, “*O nekotorykh osobennostyakh razvitiya etnicheskogo samosoznaniya.*”

⁸¹ Floria, “*O nekotorykh osobennostyakh razvitiya etnicheskogo samosoznaniya.*”

⁸² “Diplomatic Report of Vasilii Buturlin,” pp. 251–2.

⁸³ “Diplomatic Report of Vasilii Buturlin,” pp. 251–2.

⁸⁴ “Diplomatic Report of Vasilii Buturlin,” pp. 251–2.

⁸⁵ Plokhy, *Gates of Europe*, p. 104.

A careful reading of Khmelnytsky's "Articles of Petition" reveals that, in their negotiations with Muscovy, the Cossacks were primarily concerned with the security benefits the tsar could provide. This was because the advancing Commonwealth forces posed an existential threat to the independent Hetmanate.⁸⁶ In his petition to the tsar, Khmelnytsky made the defense of the Hetmanate the central focus of his message.⁸⁷ For example, Articles 8–12 requested military equipment and supplies, while Articles 19 and 20 urged Muscovy to launch an immediate offensive against the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Religion, however, was scarcely—if ever—mentioned in these articles as a basis for alliance.⁸⁸ Contrary to Buturlin's depiction, the Cossacks themselves did not appear particularly outspoken about their religious convictions.

In *The Cossacks and Religion in Early Modern Ukraine*, Ukrainian historian Serhii Plokhy offers a nuanced analysis of the role of Orthodox Christianity in the Pereiaslav Agreement. Plokhy does not deny the importance of religion in the Cossack-Muscovite dialogue, but he argues that the Cossacks were not driven by blind religious fervor. Instead, they saw religion as a strategic tool for preserving their regime.⁸⁹ He cites Khmelnytsky's first letter to Tsar Alexei in June 1648, in which Khmelnytsky invoked religion to elicit the tsar's sympathy: "We have occasion to inform Your Tsarist Majesty of the condition of our ancient Greek faith, as we have long been dying for it."⁹⁰ Khmelnytsky then made clear what he expected of the tsar: "We would wish for ourselves . . . [an] Orthodox Christian tsar, if only the eternal prophecy of Christ our Lord would be fulfilled." By "eternal prophecy," Khmelnytsky meant a union between Orthodox forces in a joint attack on the Catholic Commonwealth.⁹¹ This same idea appears in other sources from the Pereiaslav negotiations, including Khmelnytsky's letter to voevoda Semen Bolkhovsky of Khotmyzhsk and his conversations with Patriarch Paisios of Jerusalem.⁹² Plokhy thus argues that although the Cossacks emphasized religious unity, they did so primarily to "involve the tsarist forces in the theatre of military operations."⁹³

Interpreting the "two-headed eagle" allegory used by the Cossacks, Plokhy agrees with Floria that the image reflected the religious nature of the Pereiaslav Agreement.⁹⁴ The Cossacks' real motive, however, was to draw an analogy between the eagle and Muscovy's role as protector. "At the level of imagery," Plokhy explains, the way "the eagle spreads its wing to protect its eaglets" symbolized how Muscovite forces safeguarded the population of Cossack Ukraine.⁹⁵ By deploying

⁸⁶ Plokhy, *Gates of Europe*, p. 103.

⁸⁷ "Articles of Petition," pp. 230–36.

⁸⁸ "Articles of Petition," pp. 232–5.

⁸⁹ Plokhy, *Cossacks and Religion*, pp. 306–333.

⁹⁰ Plokhy, *Cossacks and Religion*, p. 306.

⁹¹ Plokhy, *Cossacks and Religion*, p. 306.

⁹² Plokhy, *Cossacks and Religion*, pp. 306–9.

⁹³ Plokhy, *Cossacks and Religion*, p. 310.

⁹⁴ Plokhy, *Cossacks and Religion*, p. 319.

⁹⁵ Plokhy, *Cossacks and Religion*, pp. 319–20.

this imagery strategically, Khmelnytsky sought to persuade the Muscovite tsar to extend his protection to Orthodox Ukrainians—just as the eagle shields its young.⁹⁶ Thus, Plokhy argues that the Cossacks employed their shared religious identity with Muscovy in the most pragmatic terms through the Pereiaslav Agreement. Whereas Buturlin viewed religious unity as the reason the Cossacks aligned with Muscovy, for the Cossacks themselves, it was primarily a justification for why Muscovy should defend them against the Catholic Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

Not only the Cossacks, but the Muscovites also had their own considerations in mind when invoking religion. In “The Role of the Religious Factor and Patriarch Nikon in the Unification of Ukraine and Muscovy,” Tatiana Tairova-Yakovleva—former director of the Centre for Ukrainian Research at St Petersburg State University and a sympathizer of Ukrainian historiography—offers an effective analysis of Muscovy’s religious motivations for entering the Pereiaslav Agreement.⁹⁷

When Khmelnytsky initially appealed to Muscovy in 1648, Tsar Alexei rejected the request, as he did not yet feel strong enough to confront the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.⁹⁸ He only began to reconsider after coming under the influence of Patriarch Nikon and several prominent Orthodox clerics.⁹⁹

Elected in 1652, Patriarch Nikon of the Muscovite metropolitanate was eager to expand his religious influence into the Ukrainian territories under Cossack control.¹⁰⁰ For Nikon, securing the Cossacks’ allegiance to the tsar would open the possibility of bringing the Kyivan Church under his jurisdiction, thereby making him “the head of the whole Orthodox world.”¹⁰¹ By highlighting Nikon’s role in the negotiation process, Tairova-Yakovleva argues that Muscovy offered protection to the Cossacks in part because its religious elites saw an opportunity to extend their authority.¹⁰² These Muscovite clerics ultimately persuaded Tsar Alexei to take the Cossacks “under his high hand,” leading to Muscovy’s entry into the Pereiaslav Agreement.¹⁰³

Tairova-Yakovleva argues that the Cossacks were equally concerned about preserving the religious independence of the Kyivan Church. Although still devoted to Orthodox Christianity, they quickly perceived the Muscovites’ intent to subordinate the Ukrainian clergy. Despite their respect for Patriarch Nikon’s theological authority, the Ukrainian clergy strongly resisted his efforts to bring the Kyivan metropolitanate under Muscovite jurisdiction.¹⁰⁴ In July 1654, a Cossack delegation led by Inokentii Gizel traveled to Tsar Alexei’s court to seek confirmation of Ukraine’s

⁹⁶ Plokhy, *Cossacks and Religion*, pp. 319-20.

⁹⁷ Tairova-Yakovleva, “Religious Factor and Patriarch Nikon,” pp. 15–22.

⁹⁸ Freeze, *Russia*, 72–73.

⁹⁹ Tairova-Yakovleva, “Religious Factor and Patriarch Nikon,” p. 19.

¹⁰⁰ Tairova-Yakovleva, “Religious Factor and Patriarch Nikon,” pp. 17-19.

¹⁰¹ Tairova-Yakovleva, “Religious Factor and Patriarch Nikon,” p. 19.

¹⁰² Tairova-Yakovleva, “Religious Factor and Patriarch Nikon,” p. 19.

¹⁰³ Tairova-Yakovleva, “Religious Factor and Patriarch Nikon,” p. 19.

¹⁰⁴ Tairova-Yakovleva, “Religious Factor and Patriarch Nikon,” p. 20.

ecclesiastical autonomy. In his petition, Gizel demanded that the Kyivan metropolitanate remain independent of the Muscovite patriarch and requested that the tsar refrain from appointing clergy in Ukraine. Although Tsar Alexei deferred most of these demands, he was also reluctant to provoke open conflict with the Kyivan clergy.¹⁰⁵ As Tairova-Yakovleva notes, the jurisdictional question remained unresolved even by the time of Nikon's disgrace in 1658.¹⁰⁶

It is undeniable that religion was a prominent theme in the conclusion of the Pereiaslav Agreement. Russian historians have used this religious commonality to justify the "reunification" paradigm, arguing that both sides were motivated by a desire to reunite with their Orthodox Christian brethren. While this interpretation aligns with the impression conveyed in Buturlin's diplomatic report, it overlooks the complexities of the negotiation process. By focusing on the pragmatic considerations of Cossack and Muscovite elites, Ukrainian historiography offers a more nuanced account of how religion factored into their decision-making. For Khmelnytsky, religious appeals served to elicit military aid without compromising ecclesiastical autonomy. For Muscovy, Orthodox solidarity provided a justification for political and ecclesiastical expansion. The two sides invoked similar symbols—such as the "two-headed eagle"—but from different perspectives: one as a defense of independence, the other as an instrument of unification.

The Unreciprocated Oath: Political Aims of Cossacks and Muscovites in Russian and Ukrainian Historiographies

Above all, Russian and Ukrainian historiographies are divided in their interpretations of the political aims of the Cossacks and Muscovites in the Pereiaslav Agreement. Russian historiography contends that the Cossacks' objective since the beginning of the Khmelnytsky Uprising had been reunification with Muscovy.¹⁰⁷ Ukrainian historiography, by contrast, views the Pereiaslav Agreement as a temporary military alliance intended to advance the immediate interests of both sides.¹⁰⁸ This disagreement is partly fueled by differing interpretations of Vasilii Buturlin's diplomatic report. Depending on which aspects are emphasized, the report can be used to support either the Russian or Ukrainian historiographical position.

Historians within the Russian historiographical tradition emphasize the elements of Buturlin's account that highlight popular Cossack support for the Pereiaslav Rada. According to Buturlin, "a large multitude of people of all ranks" gathered around the Hetman and his colonels to "listen to advice regarding the matter that was desired to be realized."¹⁰⁹ Khmelnytsky then addressed the crowd, presenting four potential candidates the Cossacks could choose as sovereign, while clearly expressing his preference for the Muscovite tsar.¹¹⁰ Buturlin reported that the audience

¹⁰⁵ Plokhy, *Cossacks and Religion*, p. 330.

¹⁰⁶ Tairova-Yakovleva, "Religious Factor and Patriarch Nikon," pp. 21–22.

¹⁰⁷ Plokhy, "Ghosts of Pereyaslav," pp. 493–94.

¹⁰⁸ Plokhy, *Gates of Europe*, pp. 106–7.

¹⁰⁹ "Diplomatic Report of Vasilii Buturlin," p. 251.

¹¹⁰ "Diplomatic Report of Vasilii Buturlin," pp. 251–2.

responded fervently to Khmelnytsky's speech, shouting their support for the tsar "all in one voice."¹¹¹ In doing so, Buturlin sought to portray the Cossacks' decision to align with Muscovy not merely as a result of Khmelnytsky's personal diplomacy, but as a popular and uncontested consensus among the Ukrainian population. Many Russian historians have drawn on this depiction to argue that Khmelnytsky's choice of Muscovy constituted Ukraine's "national choice."

Conversely, Ukrainian historians focus on the parts of Buturlin's report that emphasize the conflicts between the Cossacks and Muscovites. According to Buturlin, after Khmelnytsky had taken his oath of allegiance to the tsar at the Pereiaslav Rada, he requested that Buturlin reciprocate the oath, assuring that "the Sovereign... would protect them and would not violate their freedoms."¹¹² Buturlin refused to swear on behalf of the tsar, insisting that this "was never practised in the past and will not be countenanced in the future." When the Cossacks noted that such reciprocal oaths were standard under the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Buturlin responded that the tsar, unlike the Commonwealth king, was an "autocrat" and could not make pledges to his subjects.¹¹³ After some negotiation, the Cossacks reluctantly agreed to a unilateral oath, fearing the loss of Muscovite protection.¹¹⁴ This impasse features prominently in Ukrainian historiography, where it is cited as evidence of the fundamentally divergent interests between the two parties.

To examine the argument in Russian historiography, this essay analyzes the work of Russian historian Lev Zaborovsky (1930–1998), a specialist in seventeenth-century Russian foreign policy and a staunch advocate of the "reunification" paradigm. In his article "Pereiaslav Council and Moscow Agreements of 1654: Research Problems," Zaborovsky argues that the Cossacks and Muscovites had always aspired to reunite as one people.¹¹⁵ He emphasizes two key pieces of evidence. First, he claims that the Pereiaslav Rada "was attended by almost all colonels who represented not only themselves and the Cossacks subordinate to them, but also certain territories and their inhabitants."¹¹⁶ Zaborovsky's point here is that the decision made at the Rada was sufficiently representative of Ukrainian opinion, as the Cossack officers were acting on behalf of the regions under their control. Second, he refers to "the oath of the Hetmanate population"—a series of ceremonial oaths sworn by Ukrainian townspeople to Muscovite envoys after the conclusion of the agreement.¹¹⁷ Zaborovsky contends that these oaths occurred on such a large

¹¹¹ "Diplomatic Report of Vasilii Buturlin," pp. 251-2.

¹¹² "Diplomatic Report of Vasilii Buturlin," p. 255.

¹¹³ "Diplomatic Report of Vasilii Buturlin," p. 256.

¹¹⁴ "Diplomatic Report of Vasilii Buturlin," p. 257.

¹¹⁵ Lev Zaborovsky, "*Pereiaslavskaya rada i Moskovskiye soglasheniya 1654 goda: problemy issledovaniya*" [Pereiaslav council and Moscow agreements of 1654: research problems], accessed May 1, 2023, <http://litopys.org.ua/vzaimo/vz04.htm>.

¹¹⁶ Zaborovsky, "*Pereiaslavskaya rada i Moskovskiye soglasheniya 1654 goda.*"

¹¹⁷ Zaborovsky, "*Pereiaslavskaya rada i Moskovskiye soglasheniya 1654 goda.*"

scale that “not so many events in all of Europe at that time were on a par with it,” concluding that they reflect widespread Ukrainian support for union with Muscovy.¹¹⁸

While Zaborovsky acknowledges that the inhabitants of Ukraine had their own considerations in the Pereiaslav Agreement, he does not believe these reflected fundamentally different interests between the Cossacks and Muscovites. Rather, he interprets the disagreement over the oath as a procedural issue. According to Zaborovsky, Buturlin was merely a diplomat and lacked the authority to swear an oath on behalf of Tsar Alexei. To obtain formal confirmation of their rights and privileges, the Cossacks needed to “contact the tsar directly.” Zaborovsky thus argues that the Cossacks ultimately secured this confirmation through the tsar’s official patent, issued after they dispatched a delegation to Muscovy.¹¹⁹

Zaborovsky’s justificatory process is generally reasonable, as it aligns with the impressions conveyed in Buturlin’s account. However, when one considers the broader context surrounding the Pereiaslav Agreement, several potential flaws in Zaborovsky’s argument emerge. First, it is unclear whether Khmelnytsky and his colonels were truly capable of “representing [Ukrainian] territories and their inhabitants.”¹²⁰ Soviet-era historians such as Mikhail Pokrovsky and Matvii Iavorsky have highlighted the conflicting class interests between the Cossack elite and the Ukrainian lower classes.¹²¹ Although the Pereiaslav Rada may have included Cossack officers from various regions, this does not necessarily mean that the decision represented a “national choice” made by the Ukrainian people as a whole.

Secondly, it is difficult to determine whether “the oath of the Hetmanate population” truly reflected widespread Ukrainian support for union with Muscovy.¹²² Earlier historians, including Mykhailo Hrushevsky, have pointed to notable instances of non-compliance among Orthodox religious leaders, such as Metropolitan Sylvester Kosiv of Kyiv.¹²³ When Buturlin’s delegation visited the Kyiv Metropolitanate to obtain an oath, Kosiv “in a stubborn manner” replied that he and his courtiers had “no reason to swear an oath to the tsar.”¹²⁴ Although the Metropolitan eventually relented—likely under pressure from Cossack officers—the initial refusal by one of Ukraine’s highest-ranking church officials suggests that the Pereiaslav Agreement was not unanimously supported among Ukrainians.¹²⁵

¹¹⁸ Zaborovsky, “*Pereiaslavskaya rada i Moskovskiye soglasheniya 1654 goda.*”

¹¹⁹ Zaborovsky, “*Pereiaslavskaya rada i Moskovskiye soglasheniya 1654 goda.*”

¹²⁰ Zaborovsky, “*Pereiaslavskaya rada i Moskovskiye soglasheniya 1654 goda.*”

¹²¹ Basarab, *Pereiaslav 1954*, pp. 165–67.

¹²² Zaborovsky, “*Pereiaslavskaya rada i Moskovskiye soglasheniya 1654 goda.*”

¹²³ Mykhailo Hrushevsky, *History of Ukraine-Rus’*, ed. Serhii Plokhyy, Frank E. Sysyn et al, vol. 9, book 2, part 1 (Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 2008), p. 149.

¹²⁴ Mykhailo Hrushevsky, *History of Ukraine-Rus’*, ed. Serhii Plokhyy, Frank E. Sysyn et al, vol. 9, book 2, part 1 (Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 2008), p. 149.

¹²⁵ Mykhailo Hrushevsky, *History of Ukraine-Rus’*, ed. Serhii Plokhyy, Frank E. Sysyn et al, vol. 9, book 2, part 1 (Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 2008), p. 150.

Moreover, Zaborovsky overlooks the events that followed the Pereiaslav Rada—particularly the negotiations between the Cossacks and Muscovites and the conflicts that emerged during the process. In his *History of Ukraine-Rus*, Mykhailo Hrushevsky—often regarded as the founder of modern Ukrainian historiography—offers a compelling analysis of the primary sources related to the signing of the Pereiaslav Agreement.¹²⁶ By comparing Khmelnytsky's *Articles of Petition* with Tsar Alexei's final confirmation in the *March Articles*, Hrushevsky concludes that the Muscovites made significant revisions to Khmelnytsky's original demands before granting their approval. The discrepancies between these two documents, along with the tensions that surfaced during negotiations, reveal deep-seated differences in the interests of the Cossacks and Muscovites.¹²⁷ As a result, Hrushevsky interprets the Pereiaslav Agreement not as the foundation of a lasting partnership, but as a temporary arrangement tailored to the immediate needs of the Hetmanate—one that ultimately lacked long-term alignment between the two sides.¹²⁸

This essay cannot encapsulate the entirety of Hrushevsky's argument, but it will apply his methodology to analyze primary sources and uncover the key conflicts between the Cossacks and Muscovites. It will begin by examining the Cossacks' vision for the Pereiaslav Agreement. When the Cossacks entered into negotiations with Muscovy, their primary objective was the preservation of the rights and privileges of the Cossack estate and the broader Ukrainian population. This is evident in Khmelnytsky's twenty-three *Articles of Petition* to Tsar Alexei on 14 March 1654, which outlined a wide range of demands intended to safeguard Cossack autonomy.¹²⁹

Starting with Article 1, Khmelnytsky demanded the preservation of an independent court that would allow the Cossacks to be "governed by its own laws."¹³⁰ This clause, reinforced by Article 16, explicitly stated that the Cossacks did not want Muscovite officials to "interfere" in their internal judicial affairs.¹³¹ Articles 3, 7, and 13 called on the tsar to "retain the class privileges of [the Cossack] estate," including the Cossacks' inviolable ownership of their lands and properties ("That no one take away Cossack properties").¹³² Articles 4 and 6 granted the Cossacks the right to elect their own leaders in both urban administration and the military—including the Hetman—who would be "made known" to the tsar only after the decision had been made.¹³³

Moreover, Muscovy's taxation of the Cossacks was to be lenient—Article 15 exempted them from paying regular taxes to the tsar's voevodas, requiring only "the tribute paid in one sum

¹²⁶ Hrushevsky, *History of Ukraine-Rus*, 9.2.1, pp. 215–20.

¹²⁷ Hrushevsky, *History of Ukraine-Rus*, 9.2.1, pp. 215–20.

¹²⁸ Mykhailo Hrushevsky, *History of Ukraine-Rus*, ed. Yaroslav Fedoruk, Frank E. Sysyn et al, vol. 9, book 2, part 2 (Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 2010), pp. 423–24.

¹²⁹ "Articles of Petition," pp. 230–36.

¹³⁰ "Articles of Petition," p. 230.

¹³¹ "Articles of Petition," p. 234.

¹³² "Articles of Petition," pp. 231–33.

¹³³ "Articles of Petition," pp. 231–32.

as in other countries.”¹³⁴ These taxes were to be collected exclusively by the Cossacks’ own elected officials.¹³⁵ It is notable how often the same ideas were reiterated throughout the petition, with only minor variations between clauses. Terms such as “rights,” “freedoms,” and “property” appear repeatedly across the articles, underscoring the Cossacks’ deep concern for protecting their privileges as a distinct estate.¹³⁶

In principle, Tsar Alexei accepted all the points Khmelnytsky raised in his petition, promising to “honour [the Cossacks’] previous rights and the liberties of the Army.”¹³⁷ The Muscovite side’s official “March Articles,” however, revealed significant deviations from the Cossacks’ original demands. According to Hrushevsky, points of contention arose early in the negotiation process when a Cossack embassy arrived in Moscow to deliver Khmelnytsky’s petition.¹³⁸ The Muscovite delegates raised objections to several clauses, particularly those concerning tax collection and military funding. As a result, some parts of the petition were redacted, while others were omitted entirely.¹³⁹

Following these negotiations, Muscovy prepared its own version of the agreement, issued two weeks later on March 27. The Muscovite “March Articles” did not directly correspond to Khmelnytsky’s original petition but instead reinterpreted the Cossacks’ demands on Muscovy’s terms.¹⁴⁰ While Khmelnytsky’s articles emphasized the inviolability of the Cossacks’ rights as free men, the Muscovite articles referred to them only in passing, stating merely that the tsar’s commanders “are not to violate their rights so that great dissatisfaction might be avoided.”¹⁴¹ The Cossacks’ right to elect their own hetman was omitted, with the Muscovite version granting electoral rights only for urban officials. Individual privileges of the Cossack army, along with other points deemed inconvenient to Muscovy, were likewise excluded.¹⁴² Whereas the Cossacks viewed the Pereiaslav Agreement as a binding contract that safeguarded their autonomy in exchange for loyalty to the tsar, the Muscovites showed little interest in honoring reciprocal obligations.¹⁴³

¹³⁴ “Articles of Petition,” p. 233.

¹³⁵ “Articles of Petition,” p. 233.

¹³⁶ For a detailed analysis of the demands made by Khmelnytsky in the “Articles of Petition,” see Hrushevsky, *History of Ukraine-Rus’*, 9.2.1, pp. 188–97.

¹³⁷ “The Tsar’s Official Patent to Bohdan Khmelnytsky and the Zaporozhian Army Transmitted through the Envoys Samiilo Bohdanovych and Pavlo Teteria in Moscow 27 March 1654, Old Style (6 April 1654, New Style),” in *Pereiaslav 1654: A Historiographical Study*, ed. John Basarab (University of Toronto Press, 1982), p. 237.

¹³⁸ For a detailed analysis of the negotiations that took place between the Cossack and Muscovite delegations in Moscow, see Hrushevsky, *History of Ukraine-Rus’*, 9.2.1, pp. 203–15.

¹³⁹ Hrushevsky, *History of Ukraine-Rus’*, 9.2.1, pp. 203–15.

¹⁴⁰ Hrushevsky, *History of Ukraine-Rus’*, 9.2.1, pp. 215–16.

¹⁴¹ “Articles Drafted in Moscow,” pp. 240–44.

¹⁴² “Articles Drafted in Moscow,” pp. 240–44.

¹⁴³ For a detailed analysis of the terms and conditions in Tsar Alexei’s “March Articles,” see Hrushevsky, *History of Ukraine-Rus’*, 9.2.1, pp. 215–20.

By highlighting the divergent aims of the Cossacks and Muscovites, Hrushevsky argues that Muscovy deliberately imposed a unilateral oath on the Cossacks to extract greater benefits for itself.¹⁴⁴ While the unilateral oath reflected Muscovy's autocratic traditions, it also served a practical purpose: to increase control over Ukrainian territories. By refusing to offer a reciprocal oath, the Muscovites could "weaken or even sever the preceding tradition of Polish statehood," thereby dismantling the remnants of Polish influence on the Cossacks' political structure.¹⁴⁵ In its place, Muscovy sought to impose a model of governance better aligned with its own imperial system. Hrushevsky writes that the unilateral oath enabled the tsar to establish himself as an "autocratic" ruler unaccountable to his subjects, making "everything dependent on [his] will and favour."¹⁴⁶ This allowed the tsar to have "as free a hand as possible in the establishment of the new order."¹⁴⁷ The oath sworn at Pereiaslav—along with the Muscovites' redacted version of Khmelnytsky's petition—granted the tsar significant leverage over his new Cossack subjects, effectively paving the way for Muscovy's future territorial expansion into Ukraine.

The Cossacks and Muscovites pursued divergent political aims when they entered the Pereiaslav Agreement. Russian historiography emphasizes Ukrainian popular support for union with Muscovy as the primary rationale for the agreement—an interpretation that aligns with Buturlin's diplomatic report but overlooks the broader context of the signing. Ukrainian historiography, by contrast, centers on the controversy surrounding the unilateral oath to demonstrate the fundamental divide in the parties' objectives. The differences between the Cossacks' and Muscovites' versions of the agreement reflect Muscovy's unwillingness to fully commit to the rights and privileges the Cossacks had long sought. By contrasting these documents, Hrushevsky's methodology offers a comprehensive view of the many points of conflict between the two sides, ultimately challenging the "reunification" narrative advanced by Russian historiography.

Conclusion

Ukrainian historiography offers a more authentic representation of how the Pereiaslav Agreement was perceived and received by both Cossacks and Muscovites. Firstly, there was no meaningful sense of Rus' unity in the seventeenth century, as reflected in the absence of ethnic awareness within documents from both Cossack and Muscovite origins. Even in the rare instances where terms like "Little" and "Great Russian" appeared, they referred to geographic regions rather than cohesive ethnic identities. Neither side sought to establish a shared national narrative, underscoring the localized and fragmented nature of identity at the time.

Secondly, although both Cossacks and Muscovites adhered to Orthodox Christianity, religion functioned less as a unifying principle and more as a political instrument. The Cossacks

¹⁴⁴ Hrushevsky, *History of Ukraine-Rus'*, 9.2.1, p. 154.

¹⁴⁵ Hrushevsky, *History of Ukraine-Rus'*, 9.2.1, p. 154.

¹⁴⁶ Hrushevsky, *History of Ukraine-Rus'*, 9.2.1, p. 154.

¹⁴⁷ Hrushevsky, *History of Ukraine-Rus'*, 9.2.1, p. 154.

invoked religious language to persuade the Muscovites to support their struggle against the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The Muscovites, for their part, echoed this rhetoric not out of genuine solidarity but as a calculated move to secure Cossack allegiance and gain greater control over the Kyivan church.

Finally, the political aims of the two sides were fundamentally at odds. The Cossacks prioritized the defense of their freedoms and regarded the Pereiaslav Agreement as a provisional alliance necessary for their survival. Conversely, the Muscovites harbored significant reservations about recognizing Cossack privileges, seeking instead to lay the groundwork for expanding their authority over Ukrainian territory. Through careful analysis of various forms of evidence, this essay has shown that both parties viewed the arrangement as temporary and opportunistic rather than a stable or lasting union.

Ukrainian historiography's emphasis on division rather than unity provides a more nuanced lens through which to understand seventeenth-century Ukraine-Russia relations. In contrast to the idealized image of peaceful integration projected by Russian historians, the reality was marked by turbulence, resistance, and coercion. As Muscovite ambitions to consolidate control intensified, and as the Cossacks remained determined to preserve their autonomy, repeated conflicts over the Hetmanate's status ensued. Drawn into regional power struggles—fighting alongside or against the Commonwealth, the Ottomans, and Sweden—the Cossacks found their position increasingly unstable.

Ultimately, each shift in allegiance left the Cossacks more vulnerable. Their autonomy was systematically eroded. The crushing defeat at the Battle of Poltava in 1709 and the failure of Ivan Mazepa's final rebellion extinguished the last hopes for an independent Ukrainian state. Over the course of the eighteenth century, Ukraine was absorbed into the Russian Empire as "Little Russia," where imperial policy worked to suppress any distinct Ukrainian identity. The Pereiaslav Agreement, far from heralding a fraternal reunion, marked the beginning of a long and tragic process of domination, resistance, and loss.