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# **SHIFTING BORDERS AND SHIFTING IDENTITIES: ETHNIC CONFLICTS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF OTHERNESS IN POLISH-UKRAINIAN RELATIONS FROM THE 17TH CENTURY TO THE 20TH CENTURY**

## **Summary**

This study examines the shifting borders and identities in Polish-Ukrainian relations from the 17th to the 20th century, focusing on the construction of Otherness. Through an analysis of historical events and literature, particularly Sienkiewicz's *With Fire and Sword* and Gogol's *Taras Bulba*, it explores how national identities were shaped by conflict and territorial changes. The research highlights the role of literature in perpetuating ethnic divisions and constructing cultural boundaries.

**Keywords:** Polish-Ukrainian Relations, Cossack Resistance, Otherness, National Identity, Sienkiewicz, Gogol, Literature and History, Ethnic Conflict

## **I. Introduction: Research Background and Literature Review**

In modern society, changes in borders and ethnic conflicts are not only significant issues in the development of nation-states but also key entry points for understanding historical memory and the construction of cultural identity. Borders symbolize more than mere geographical divisions; they are core markers of power struggles, cultural interactions, and identity formation. Slavic studies

hold crucial value in examining the complex ethnic relations of Eastern Europe, shedding light on the diverse historical trajectories and cultural patterns among Slavic peoples.

The historical relationship between Poland and Ukraine, whether in the context of border redrawing or ethnic conflicts, serves as a representative case that illustrates the dynamics of Slavic interactions and their contemporary implications. The shared history of Poland and Ukraine—from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to the 20th century Volhynia Massacre—offers rich material for studying the evolution of ethnic conflicts. These conflicts are not isolated incidents but pivotal moments that define national consciousness and cultural boundaries. By examining these narratives, we can understand how historical events have shaped the collective memory of both nations. Central to this analysis is the concept of Otherness which helps illuminate how each nation has historically perceived and portrayed the other. Polish and Ukrainian literature and historical narratives often depict each other in oppositional terms, reinforcing distinct national identities. Through analyzing these portrayals, we can trace how cultural and historical narratives construct a sense of belonging and difference.

Scholarship on Polish-Ukrainian relations primarily emphasizes political history, nationalism, and ethnic conflict, yet gaps remain in exploring cultural and literary dimensions, particularly through the lens of Otherness. Existing studies often frame Polish-Ukrainian interactions within nationalist or imperial contexts. Timothy Snyder (2003) provides a comprehensive historical overview of Polish-Ukrainian tensions, highlighting how shifting borders and nationalist movements shaped identities<sup>1</sup>. Serhiy Plokhy (2012) investigates the Cossack uprisings, uncovering their significance in Ukrainian nationhood<sup>2</sup>, while Peter M. Judson (2016) examines broader imperial dynamics, shedding light on interethnic relations within the Habsburg Empire<sup>3</sup>. These works reveal the deeply entangled histories of both nations but often limit their focus to political and territorial issues.

Underexplored areas include the role of literature in shaping perceptions of identity and conflict, as well as the cultural representations of Otherness. Jan

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<sup>1</sup> T. Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999*, New Haven 2003.

<sup>2</sup> S. Plokhy, *The Cossack Myth: History and Nationhood in the Age of Empires*, Cambridge 2012.

<sup>3</sup> P. M. Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History*, Cambridge 2016.

Tomasz Gross (2002)<sup>4</sup> and John-Paul Himka (2021)<sup>5</sup> discuss the Volhynian massacres, emphasizing ethnic violence and memory, but their analyses rarely integrate cultural or literary perspectives. Furthermore, much of the research is rooted in nationalist narratives, often neglecting the broader Slavic context of cultural exchange. Works like S. Plokhy's (2012) and T. Snyder's (2003) acknowledge mutual influences but fall short of addressing how literature and cultural artifacts mediate identities in contested spaces.

This study seeks to bridge these gaps by adopting an interdisciplinary methodology that integrates historical analysis and literary criticism. Specifically, it aims to explore how Polish and Ukrainian literature, alongside historical narratives, construct and reinforce the concept of Otherness. The research focuses on three key questions: (1) How do historical events shape collective memory and cultural identity in Polish-Ukrainian relations? (2) In what ways do literature and cultural representations reflect and influence perceptions of Otherness? (3) How can these insights contribute to a broader understanding of Slavic interactions and contemporary geopolitics?

By situating Polish-Ukrainian relations within the broader Slavic framework, this study highlights the intersection of history, culture, and memory in shaping national and ethnic identities. Through close textual analysis of literary works and historical documents, the research aims to uncover the mechanisms through which cultural representations perpetuate boundaries while also fostering understanding and exchange. Ultimately, it contributes to broader discussions on cultural memory, nationalism, and the potential of interdisciplinary approaches in addressing interethnic conflict.

## II. Theoretical Framework: Othering and Cultural Identity

The concept of Othering is central to postcolonial studies, exploring how identities are constructed through the exclusion and marginalization of those perceived as different. This process involves dominant groups defining themselves in opposition to the Other, often to reinforce power structures and cultural hierarchies. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) provides a foundational insight into this dynamic, illustrating how the West constructed the East as the

<sup>4</sup> J. T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*, Princeton 2002.

<sup>5</sup> J.-P. Himka, *Ukrainian Nationalists and the Holocaust: OUN and UPA's Participation in the Destruction of Ukrainian Jewry, 1941–1944*, Stuttgart 2021.

other through representations that justified colonial dominance<sup>6</sup>. E. Said's theory of Self and Other reveals identity as a relational construct, shaped by the interplay between dominant and marginalized groups. This lens is crucial for understanding ethnic and national identities, particularly in the context of historical conflicts.

Building on E. Said's work, Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity<sup>7</sup> adds further depth. Hall conceptualizes identity as fluid and dynamic, continuously shaped by historical, cultural, and political processes. He argues that identity is never fixed but is constantly redefined through the interaction of the self and the Other. National identity, a key aspect of cultural identity, is often formed through national narratives that weave together shared history, collective memory, and cultural symbols into a unifying story. These narratives, repeated over time, create a powerful sense of belonging and identity. Hall emphasizes that identity is positional, defined by how individuals or groups contrast themselves with others. This fluidity allows identities to evolve in response to changing cultural and political contexts. Hall's framework is particularly useful for understanding how Polish and Ukrainian identities have been constructed in opposition to each other, with each nation defining itself through symbolic boundaries created by the Other. In this way, the Other plays an active role in shaping cultural identities.

The combined insights of E. Said's Othering and S. Hall's cultural identity theory provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing Polish-Ukrainian relations. In this context, Othering has been instrumental in shaping national identities, serving as a tool for cultural and political differentiation while reinforcing power dynamics. For example, Polish identity has often been constructed through representations of Ukrainians as inferior, subjugated, or opposed to Polish ideals of sovereignty and culture. These representations, embedded in both literature and political narratives, have contributed to the construction and maintenance of national identities.

Othering manifests in various forms, including language, imagery, narrative, and policy. Literature, in particular, serves as a key space for representing the Other. Narrative structures often depict the other as exotic, primitive, or threatening, reinforcing stereotypes that strengthen the Self's national identity. Beyond literature, Othering is also evident in political policies that have historically defined and reinforced national borders and identities. Events such as the partitions of Poland, the Ukrainian struggle for independence, and the Polish-Ukrainian

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<sup>6</sup> E. W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York 1978.

<sup>7</sup> S. Hall, *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, [in:] *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. J. Rutherford, London 1990.

wars demonstrate how exclusionary policies have shaped the political landscape. By framing Ukrainians as the Other, these policies deepened the divide between Polish and Ukrainian identities, leading to political conflict and cultural estrangement.

In addition to E. Said and S. Hall, Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983)<sup>8</sup> and Eric Hobsbawm's *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (1990)<sup>9</sup> offer valuable perspectives on nationalism. B. Anderson argues that nationalism relies on shared symbols and rituals to unify people into an imagined community, while E. Hobsbawm examines how nationalism emerged as a tool for political and cultural unity in the modern era. Anthony Smith's *National Identity* (1997)<sup>10</sup> further expands on these ideas, emphasizing the role of shared history, myth, and memory in constructing national identity. A. Smith highlights that national identity is not merely a modern political construct but is deeply rooted in historical narratives and symbolic traditions that provide continuity and belonging over time. These theories collectively illuminate how Othering functions to establish and maintain national borders and identities, particularly in the context of Polish-Ukrainian relations.

By examining the portrayal of the Other in Polish and Ukrainian literature and national narratives, we gain insight into the intertwined processes of identity construction and power dynamics. This framework also highlights how literature, politics, and culture collaborate to define national identities, especially in contested borderlands where ethnic and political conflicts are central to the historical narrative.

### III. Historical Transitions: Key Events and Their Impact on Polish-Ukrainian Relations

The relationship between Poland and Ukraine has been shaped by a series of key historical events that not only defined their political boundaries but also deeply influenced their national identities and mutual perceptions. From the 17th to the 20th century, these events contributed to the construction of Otherness

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<sup>8</sup> B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London 1983.

<sup>9</sup> E. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, Cambridge 1990.

<sup>10</sup> A. D. Smith, *National Identity*, Reno 1997.

between the two nations, creating narratives of resistance, victimhood, and cultural differentiation.

The 17th century marked a turning point in Polish-Ukrainian relations with the Khmelnytsky Uprising (1648–1657), a pivotal event that entrenched mutual distrust. The uprising, led by Bohdan Khmelnytsky, symbolized Ukrainian resistance against Polish oppression, with the Cossacks seeking independence. For Ukrainians, it became a symbol of heroism and defiance, while Poles viewed it as a betrayal, reinforcing their perception of Ukrainians as unruly and disloyal. The Treaty of Pereyaslav (1654), which aligned Ukraine with Tsarist Russia, further complicated the relationship, shifting the balance of power in Eastern Europe and deepening the divide.

In the late 18th century, the partitions of Poland (1772–1795) dismantled the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, redistributing its territories among Russia, Prussia, and Austria. Ukrainian lands were absorbed into the Russian and Austrian empires, altering the political landscape and influencing both nations' identities. For Poles, the loss of sovereignty was a national trauma, while Ukrainians, then under new rulers, began to develop their own national consciousness, distinct from both Polish and Russian influences.

The 19th century saw the rise of national movements in both nations. Polish narratives often portrayed Ukrainians as subordinate and backward, reinforcing the idea of Polish cultural and political superiority. In contrast, Ukrainian intellectuals began framing their identity as separate from Polish and Russian dominance, with Romantic nationalism emphasizing the Cossack past and resistance. This period solidified the construction of Otherness, as both nations defined themselves in opposition to each other.

The 20th century was marked by intense conflict, particularly during the Polish-Ukrainian War (1918–1919) and the Volhynian Massacres (1943–1944). Poles viewed Ukrainians as insurgents, while Ukrainians saw Poles as imperialists. These events deepened the ethnic divide and solidified mutual mistrust. After World War II, Soviet control further entrenched the divide through territorial redefinitions and forced migrations, shaping distinct national identities for both nations. Despite Soviet attempts to suppress nationalist movements, the legacy of ethnic conflict and the narratives of victimhood and resistance persisted, continuing to shape Polish-Ukrainian relations today.

#### IV. Case Study: The Construction of Otherness in *With Fire and Sword* and *Taras Bulba*

The historical events discussed above have deeply influenced the political, social, and cultural landscapes of Poland and Ukraine. Literature, reflecting collective memory and identity, plays a crucial role in shaping and perpetuating narratives of Otherness. Through novels, poetry, and historical accounts, Polish and Ukrainian writers have framed the Other in ways that reinforce national identities. These literary works provide insights into how historical events are reinterpreted, shaping national consciousness and mutual perceptions.

This section analyzes key literary works that exemplify the construction of Otherness in Polish-Ukrainian relations, focusing on the Khmelnytsky Uprising. Henryk Sienkiewicz's *With Fire and Sword*<sup>11</sup> and Nikolai Gogol's *Taras Bulba*<sup>12</sup>, set against this backdrop, highlight the divisive impact of the uprising on Polish and Ukrainian identities. Written during a period of heightened nationalism, both novels serve as vehicles for nationalistic sentiments, presenting opposing visions of heroism, loyalty, and identity. The censorship of these works in the 20th century underscores their contentious role in shaping national narratives. This case study examines how the texts portray Otherness, exploring their depictions of Polish and Ukrainian identities and the enduring legacy of ethnic conflict.

##### A. Historical and Literary Context

The Khmelnytsky Uprising (1648–1654), a pivotal and transformative event in the history of Polish-Ukrainian relations, serves as the historical backdrop for both N. Gogol's *Taras Bulba* and H. Sienkiewicz's *With Fire and Sword*. This rebellion, led by B. Khmelnytsky, symbolized Ukrainian resistance against Polish domination and represented a turning point in the power dynamics of Eastern Europe. Internally, the uprising was fueled by a confluence of social, economic, and religious tensions. The Cossacks—semi-autonomous warrior communities in the borderlands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth—played a central role in this conflict. They were initially valued as a military buffer against external threats like the Ottoman Empire and the Crimean Khanate but became

<sup>11</sup> H. Sienkiewicz, *With Fire and Sword*, Beijing 2011.

<sup>12</sup> N. Gogol, *Taras Bulba and Other Tales*, [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1197/1197-h/1197-h.htm#link2H\\_4\\_0029](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1197/1197-h/1197-h.htm#link2H_4_0029)

increasingly dissatisfied with their marginalization under the Commonwealth's hierarchical and increasingly polonized system.

The Commonwealth's nobility imposed heavy burdens on the local Ukrainian peasantry through serfdom, and their efforts to enforce Catholicism over Orthodox communities heightened cultural and religious animosities. The Cossacks, who saw themselves as defenders of the Orthodox faith and Ukrainian autonomy, found a powerful rallying cry in B. Khmelnytsky's leadership. The uprising, which began as a Cossack revolt, evolved into a broader Ukrainian peasant rebellion and a significant war of independence against the Commonwealth. It also marked the beginning of intensified Polish-Ukrainian ethnic tensions, as both sides engaged in cycles of violence, destruction, and reprisals. These historical fractures profoundly influenced the literary imaginations of N. Gogol and H. Sienkiewicz whose works offer opposing interpretations of the uprising and its participants.

N. Gogol, a Ukrainian-born writer who rose to prominence within the Russian literary tradition, depicts the Khmelnytsky Uprising through a lens of Cossack heroism and resistance to Polish oppression in his novella *Taras Bulba*. The work, written during the early 19th century, a period of Ukrainian national awakening which sought to assert Ukraine's distinct cultural and political identity amidst Russian and Polish dominance, reflects Gogol's desire to celebrate a distinct Ukrainian identity rooted in the traditions of the Zaporozhian Cossacks.

H. Sienkiewicz, writing nearly half a century after Gogol, provides a Polish counter-narrative to *Taras Bulba* in his novel *With Fire and Sword*, the first installment of his celebrated Trilogy. The writing of *Trilogy* was heavily influenced by the political situation in the late 19th century, during a time when Poland was partitioned and under foreign rule. In this context, Sienkiewicz's historical novel sought to glorify Polish history, celebrate its national identity, and foster a sense of unity in the face of foreign oppression. His portrayal of the Cossack uprisings became a way to reflect Poland's long-standing struggles and the perceived threats to its cultural and territorial integrity.

### **B. Portrayal of the "Other" in *With Fire and Sword* and *Taras Bulba***

#### **1. Polish Superiority and Ukrainian Resistance**

In *With Fire and Sword*, H. Sienkiewicz constructs a portrayal of Polish superiority that aligns with the cultural and moral values of the Polish nobility. The Polish nobles are depicted as honorable, chivalrous, and upholding the principles of Western civilization. They are presented as defenders of their traditional way



of life, with a strong connection to their cultural heritage and social order. Their belief in their own superiority blinds them to the suffering of the Ukrainian peasants and the Cossacks whom they view as mere tools for their own gain. In contrast, the Cossacks are often framed as rebellious, uncivilized, and anarchic. Sienkiewicz's narrative highlights the Cossacks' violent resistance, suggesting that their struggle against Polish rule, while rooted in legitimate grievances, is ultimately one of chaos and disorder.

Despite this portrayal, Sienkiewicz does not entirely reduce the Cossacks to mere villains and he masterfully portrays the complex political and social dynamics between the Cossacks and the Polish nobility. Central to this depiction is B. Khmelnytsky, the Cossack leader who represents the struggle for independence against Polish rule. His character is both heroic and tragic, embodying the fierce resistance of the Cossacks while grappling with the difficult realities of leadership and warfare. B. Khmelnytsky is not a simple figure of heroism; his motivations are rooted in personal and collective grievances, and his actions often reflect the tensions between the desire for freedom and the brutalities of war. He is a figure of contradiction—at once a symbol of national resistance and a man who, in seeking justice, contributes to further violence and destruction. This complexity is evident in his interactions with Polish nobles and his own followers where loyalty, betrayal, and the question of who is truly right are central themes. The violence he unleashes upon the Polish nobility and the ensuing bloodshed make him a morally ambiguous figure. His actions reflect the complex reality of the struggle for independence: the ideal of freedom comes with harsh consequences. H. Sienkiewicz does not idealize B. Khmelnytsky; rather, he emphasizes the tragic elements of his leadership, showing the burden of responsibility that comes with waging such a violent war for autonomy. The Cossack rebellion, under B. Khmelnytsky's leadership, reveals the fragility of the concept of freedom when it is achieved through violence, and the high human cost of resisting an entrenched power. H. Sienkiewicz's underlying message remains clear that the Polish nobility is the moral and cultural superior in the face of Cossack rebellion. The Cossacks, despite their power and struggle, remain ultimately as the Other, threatening the unity and civilization that the Polish represent.

In stark contrast, N. Gogol's *Taras Bulba* presents the Cossacks as embodiments of Ukrainian heroism and resistance to Polish oppression. The Cossacks are depicted as brave warriors, champions of their land and faith, standing resolutely against foreign domination. The novel emphasizes the Cossacks' loyalty to their people and their unwavering commitment to defending Ukrainian freedom. In N. Gogol's narrative, the Poles are portrayed almost exclusively as corrupt, deceitful, and oppressive. The Polish nobility is presented as disconnected

from the realities of life in Ukraine, marked by decadence and self-interest. They are exploitative, viewing the Cossacks not as equals but as subjugated soldiers or peasants to be controlled for their own gain. The Polish aristocracy is characterized by superficiality, seeking to impose its values on the Cossacks, whose ideals of freedom, self-governance, and warrior spirit clash with the Polish way of life. They are agents of foreign domination, trying to suppress the Cossack way of life, which N. Gogol portrays as a threat to Ukrainian identity. The tension between the two groups underscores the larger themes of resistance and cultural preservation within *Taras Bulba*. The Poles, as the foreign Other, embody the threat of cultural erasure, and the Cossacks, led by Taras, stand as the final bulwark against this domination, fighting to preserve their heritage, land, and autonomy. This negative portrayal of the Polish aligns with N. Gogol's own Ukrainian nationalism and his desire to present a vision of Ukrainian identity that was distinct from both Russian and Polish cultural influences.

The protagonist, Taras Bulba, becomes the symbol of this Ukrainian resistance. He is an uncompromising figure, defined by his fierce loyalty to his people, his faith, and his land. Taras is portrayed as a warrior who embodies the spirit of the Cossacks—unyielding in the face of Polish oppression. His actions, both heroic and brutal, are motivated by his deep sense of duty to his culture and his people. Through Taras, N. Gogol presents the Cossacks as cultural and political heroes who are willing to sacrifice everything to protect their way of life. This narrative, while emphasizing their heroic qualities, also underscores the inevitable clash between Polish and Ukrainian identities. The tragic betrayal of his son, Andrii, highlights this divide. Andrii's defection to the Polish side reflects the deep cultural and political rift between the two nations. In Gogol's telling, the Poles are the Other—the foreign oppressors, agents of subjugation, and a direct threat to the essence of Ukrainian identity.

## 2. Love and Betrayal between Cossacks and Polish noblewomen

Both *With Fire and Sword* by H. Sienkiewicz and *Taras Bulba* by N. Gogol feature poignant subplots involving Cossacks falling in love with Polish noblewomen. These relationships are not just personal but serve as symbolic reflections of the deep political and cultural divides between Poland and Ukraine, highlighting themes of loyalty, identity, betrayal, and the complexities of cultural interaction. While both relationships involve cross-national love, the ways in which these themes are explored and their ultimate outcomes differ significantly between the two works.

In *With Fire and Sword*, the relationship between Bohun and Helena is tragic and steeped in fear, reflecting the cultural and political tensions between the Cossacks and the Polish nobility. Bohun is deeply in love with Helena but this

affection is unrequited. Helena is never in love with Bohun; she is forced into a relationship with him by her relatives who impose marriage upon her. Her situation becomes even more dire when Bohun kills her relatives in front of her, creating a deep sense of fear and mistrust. Bohun, unable to comprehend why Helena cannot love him, becomes increasingly enraged and violent. His deep anger and frustration stem from the fact that, despite his passionate devotion, he cannot win her love. The more he desires her, the more brutal and threatening he becomes, which only strengthens her desire to escape him. Helena, in contrast, is in love with a Polish nobleman, someone who represents the civilization, order, and stability that Bohun lacks. Her affection for the Polish noble reflects her yearning for a life free from violence and chaos, which she associates with the Cossack world. Despite her fears, Helena ultimately chooses to escape Bohun's control and flees with the Polish nobleman. This escape represents her desire to break free from the oppressive world of the Cossacks and align herself with the Polish side which she perceives as offering safety and a more stable future. Her decision to flee is driven by her desire to preserve her own agency and identity. The tragic aspect of their relationship lies in the fact that both Bohun and Helena are trapped by the larger political and cultural forces that shape their lives. Bohun's love for Helena, while humanizing him, cannot transcend the deep cultural and political divides between the Cossacks and the Poles. His love for her ultimately leads him to a path of self-destruction, as his violence and anger push Helena further away and push him deeper into conflict with the Polish nobility.

In conclusion, the relationship between Bohun and Helena is emblematic of the tragic intersection of personal longing and national identity. It underscores the impossibility of reconciliation between two peoples who are defined by such starkly different cultural and political values. Bohun's obsession with Helena and her rejection of him highlight the inability of love to bridge the chasm between Polish and Cossack identities. Despite the human emotions involved, the relationship ultimately becomes a reflection of the broader cultural and political struggle between these two nations. Bohun's tragic end is a consequence of this irreconcilable divide: his love for Helena is both an emotional and political act, but it cannot overcome the history of conflict, oppression, and cultural difference that defines the Polish-Cossack relationship. Through this doomed love story, Sienkiewicz portrays the deep divisions that underlie the personal and political dynamics between the Polish nobility and the Cossacks, suggesting that, despite individual desires, the larger forces of culture, nation, and history ultimately determine the fate of these characters.

In *Taras Bulba*, the cross-national love story takes a different, even more tragic form. Andrii, the son of the Cossack leader Taras Bulba, falls in love with

a Polish noblewoman, which leads him to abandon his people and ultimately betray the Cossack cause. Unlike Bohun, Andrii's relationship with the Polish woman is not driven by unrequited affection or coercion but by passionate desire and ideological conflict. His love for her, however, becomes the catalyst for his betrayal of his father and his nation, and he joins the Polish forces to fight against the Cossacks. This act of treason leads to his death at the hands of his father, Taras Bulba, who executes him as a traitor.

A deeper layer to Andrii's betrayal is the dual sentiment of admiration and resentment that many Ukrainians and Cossacks feel toward Polish culture. And this feeling plays a significant role in the larger national and cultural dynamics between Poland and Ukraine. The Cossacks and Ukrainians exhibit a complex, often contradictory attitude toward Poland and its aristocracy. On the one hand, there is a cultural admiration for Polish nobility who aspire to certain aspects of Polish culture, such as its chivalric traditions, its sophisticated manners, and its connections to European civilization. This admiration is exemplified in Andrii's initial attraction to the Polish woman, who represents the allure of Polish refinement and social status. On the other hand, this admiration is sharply contrasted by a deep-seated resentment and fear of Polish domination. Cossacks, especially Taras Bulba, view Polish power as an existential threat to their autonomy and freedom. This creates a volatile mix of admiration and resentment. The Cossacks are drawn to the very culture they despise because it represents a world they could never fully belong to—one of privilege and control. This duality is central to Andrii's tragic arc: his love for the Polish woman is not just a personal infatuation but reflects the larger, complicated relationship between the Cossacks and the Poles. In the tense relationship between the Cossacks and Poland in the 17th century, Polish women not only represented the rule and oppression of the Polish aristocratic class. Her appearance also reminded the Cossack world that Poland not only posed a threat to them militarily, but also had great cultural and social appeal. This cultural invasion was something that the Cossacks could not ignore. In the novel, Polish women can be seen as symbols of Polish culture, and Andrii's attraction to her is not only due to her appearance, but also to the symbols of Polish nobility and civilized society she represents. The beauty, softness, and tenderness of Polish women contrasted sharply with the roughness and directness of Cossacks, attracting Andrii and causing him to gradually lose himself. This attraction symbolizes the cultural tension between the Cossacks and Poland, the impact of Poland as a foreign culture on the Cossacks, and the identity crisis that the Cossacks face in cultural collisions.

The tension between admiration and resentment is also evident in the final moments of Andrii's life, when he is executed by his father. Taras Bulba, who

represents the embodiment of Cossack identity and resistance to Polish dominance, kills his own son, embodying the ultimate loyalty to the Cossack cause. Andrii's death symbolizes the tragic consequences of betraying one's culture and identity. His romanticized view of Polish nobility leads him away from his people but it is ultimately this very cultural admiration that becomes the source of his downfall. For Gogol, this complicated relationship reflects the broader Ukrainian struggle to define itself in the face of foreign domination where cultural admiration can never fully overcome the drive for independence.

### C. Conclusion

Both *With Fire and Sword* by H. Sienkiewicz and *Taras Bulba* by N. Gogol offer rich portrayals of the complex and often hostile relationship between Poles and Ukrainians, using the backdrop of the Khmelnytsky Uprising to explore themes of Otherness, identity, and historical memory. Through a careful examination of these works, we see how the construction of Otherness is not merely a literary device but a reflection of the profound social, cultural, and political forces shaping national identities. Sienkiewicz's depiction of Polish heroism and superiority stands in stark contrast to Gogol's portrayal of Ukrainian resistance and heroism, each author shaping the historical narrative in a way that serves the nationalistic sentiments of their respective countries.

The tragic love stories embedded within both novels further illuminate the emotional and cultural divides that define the relationship between the Cossacks and the Polish nobility. While the cross-national romances in both novels symbolize a longing for connection, they are ultimately irreconcilable, mirroring the broader tensions of ethnic conflict and the deep-seated cultural differences that make unity impossible. The characters' personal betrayals—whether it be Bohun's violent obsession with Helena or Andrii's defection to the Polish side—reflect the overwhelming forces of identity, loyalty, and historical memory that shape their fates.

The comparative analysis of these two works reveals a consistent hierarchical dynamic in which the Polish identity is positioned above that of the Cossacks and Ukrainians, regardless of narrative perspective. In Sienkiewicz's portrayal, there is more room to present the Cossacks' virtues, challenges, and Polish moments of introspective historical reflection. This nuanced depiction contrasts with Gogol's emphasis on the Cossacks' harsh treatment of traitors and their unyielding resistance, which underscores an implicit power imbalance. This pattern is not limited to these specific literary examples but is woven throughout the broader historical and cultural narratives of Polish-Ukrainian relations. The persistent

portrayal of Polish superiority and the Cossacks' position as marginalized or subordinate reflects deeper tensions and the roots of identity conflict between the two nations. Such identity recognition has led to deep-rooted contradictions in the history and culture of Poland and Ukraine, and has also become one of the sources of conflict in the historical narratives of both sides.

Ultimately, these works not only offer a window into the historical past but also engage with the ongoing cultural and political narratives that continue to influence Polish-Ukrainian relations today. By examining the construction of Otherness through the lens of historical fiction, we gain insight into the ways in which literature can both reflect and shape national identities, perpetuating or challenging deeply rooted cultural divisions. In this sense, H. Sienkiewicz and N. Gogol's works remain significant not only for their historical content but for their enduring relevance in understanding the complexities of identity and the legacies of ethnic conflict.

## V. Conclusion and Outlook

This study uses H. Sienkiewicz's *With Fire and Sword* and N. Gogol's *Taras Bulba* as case studies to analyze the construction of Otherness and the representation of Polish and Ukrainian identities. By examining these depictions in the context of historical events, this research highlights the complexity of national identity formation and intergroup perceptions within the backdrop of Polish-Ukrainian ethnic conflict. The portrayals of Others in these works not only reflect the tensions between the two nations during the historical period and the authors' own eras, but they also continue to shape contemporary discussions, revealing deep divisions and enduring stereotypes between Poland and Ukraine.

An important aspect of Ukrainian national identity is resistance to external oppression, a theme that is deeply embedded in its literary tradition. However, the process of constructing Ukraine's national identity is fraught with contradictions and dilemmas. Ukrainian literature often relies on victim narratives to express national history and collective memory, which, while powerful, lack the rich diversity of stories necessary to transcend this singular theme at the narrative level. This focus on resistance has created a strong collective identity but it remains limited in its scope. In contrast, Poland's cultural, national, and national identity has been shaped much earlier in history, providing a broader and richer historical and cultural base for literary reconstruction. In Sienkiewicz's works, the Polish-Ukrainian conflict is just one of many historical themes. Poland's historical enemies are not limited to clear-cut, hierarchical oppositions,

but rather include a more complex range of narratives, enabling Poland to reshape its “imagined community” through diverse historical themes. As a key element of Ukraine’s self-identity, Cossack culture has historically symbolized resistance, particularly to Polish rule. This shared history creates ongoing challenges for both nations in reconciling conflicting historical narratives. However, both Poland and Ukraine now face common external threats, offering an opportunity for both sides to re-examine their histories, strengthen cooperation, and develop a more positive direction for future relations.

These literary works continue to resonate today, providing a lens through which we can examine ongoing struggles over national memory, identity, and historical interpretation. By reflecting on their influence on contemporary discussions, we gain insight into how historical narratives shape current political and cultural identities. The mutual feelings embedded in these texts continue to echo in debates about national pride, historical injustices, and the role of cultural diplomacy in fostering understanding between Poland and Ukraine.

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