ВЕЧНО ЖИВЕТ ПАМЯТЬ
РАСЕ ШЕВЧЕНКО

tоварища Н. С. ХРУШЕВА

Сегодня наши соратники в РФ, США, Канаде и других странах по всему миру звучит гимн народов.

Вечная память英雄 of the People.

В то же время, в Москве, на Украине, в Белоруссии и других странах, где когда-то жил и работал Тарас Шевченко, его память продолжается.

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Fifty-five years ago—long before social media, “hybrid warfare,” and the internet—the United States and the Soviet Union were engaged in a Cold War across numerous dimensions, from “hard power” confrontations and proxy wars to more covert information campaigns. The sharp ideological clash between communism and capitalism has long ceased to be at the center of international politics, yet the American and Russian goals of spreading influence throughout the world remain. At a time of deep concern over social media manipulation and hacking, it’s worth keeping Cold War history in mind by examining a little-known transnational moment that contains echoes of today’s conflicts.

Influence operations are not new. But the methods have changed: rather than troll farms, this Cold War episode used newspaper articles, symbolic politics, and statues as weapons. And rather than a presidential election, the showdown revolved around the legacy of a poet.

The year 1964 marked the 150th anniversary of the birth of Taras Shevchenko, a 19th-century Romantic poet and artist, “the bard of Ukraine.” Born a serf in 1814, he was bought out of serfdom and received an education in the Imperial Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg. In 1840 he published his most famous collection of poetry, *Kobzar*, named after the blind minstrels who traveled the Ukrainian countryside singing epic songs. Shevchenko’s poetry helped create a historical mythology for Ukrainians through its depiction of their social and national oppression. Even as his poetry became wildly popular, his activism ran afoul of tsarist authorities, and he was exiled from Ukraine and served an enforced term in the military—for the most part in what is now Kazakhstan. He died in 1861, a few years after being allowed to return to Ukraine. After his death, he became a national hero. It was said that a Ukrainian peasant household could be expected to have two books on the shelf: the Bible and Shevchenko’s *Kobzar*.

Shevchenko’s centrality to the Ukrainian national project can hardly be overstated. His importance as a national poet can be compared to that of Alexander Pushkin, Adam Mickiewicz, and Walt Whitman. Historically, he was a figure that transcended political divisions among Ukrainians, uniting populists and nationalists, democrats and monarchists, socialists and communists. Although he remains an obscure figure to many Americans,
his legacy, we gain a fuller picture of how a singular international ideological conflict raised the stakes of what had previously been a conversation mostly of interest to Ukrainians.

American “soft power” during the Cold War was not self-evident nor was it inevitable that its appeal would resonate throughout the world. Rather, the U.S. government actively sought to cultivate, promote, and spread its culture and consumerist way of life, particularly under President Dwight Eisenhower. His strong interest in “winning hearts and minds” provided a broad strategic framework for extending American influence around the world that complemented U.S. military strength.

To achieve this, the U.S. government took advantage of the country’s many immigrant communities—they could reinforce a positive vision of the American way of life to their co-ethnics around the world. For many non-Russian émigré communities with roots in communist countries, the early Cold War years were an especially propitious time when their activism fit most comfortably into U.S. foreign policy. During those years, for example, the government instituted Captive Nations Week, an annual weeklong period declaring American opposition to what it saw as the communist oppression of nations in China, the Soviet Union, and Eastern Europe.

Midway through Eisenhower’s second term, ethnic Ukrainians in the U.S. saw a chance to make a statement about their own community, its values, and its dedication to America’s Cold War ideals. According to proponents, building a memorial to Taras Shevchenko would raise the community’s profile in the U.S. and call attention to events in the homeland, which was then, of course, a union republic within the Soviet Union. The organizers traced the origins of the idea to a 1956 article by Ivan Dubrovsky in the New Jersey-based newspaper Svoboda (Freedom) that proposed building a statue in the U.S. capital. The idea gained the support of Svoboda’s publisher, the Ukrainian National Association, a fraternal benefit society that traced its roots to Ukrainian workers in Pennsylvania coal country in the 19th century. The economist and activist Lev Dobriansky lobbied officials, the campaign gained momentum, and Congress passed a bill in August 1960 allocating land in Washington on which the community could build the statue at its own cost; Eisenhower signed the bill into law a few months before his term ended. Soon afterward, community activists created the Shevchenko Memorial Committee, headquartered in New York City, to coordinate efforts, raise money, and hold a design competition for the statue. Roman Smal-Stocki headed the committee, and former president Harry S. Truman was named honorary chairman.

From the very beginning, the organizers of the initiative explicitly connected their work to an anti-communist agenda. A 1960 editorial in the Ukrainian Weekly called the Shevchenko statue an “instrument of Cold War.” The campaign also expressed a critique of Russian impe-
realism that stood in direct opposition to the official Soviet rhetoric about the “friendship of the peoples.” Finally, the discourse around the monument sought to connect Shevchenko to U.S. history. Organizers emphasized his friendship with African-American actor and playwright Ira Aldridge, and they liberally cited a verse from his poetry in which he asked when Ukraine would find its own George Washington.

The monument would also be distinguished from other Shevchenko statues that had been erected in North America. The Shevchenko Committee rejected the precedent of a statue of Shevchenko put up in Palermo, Ontario, in 1951—a gift from the Soviet Union to Canada’s Ukrainian community that was celebrated in left-wing Ukrainian-Canadian circles. The Washington statue would be built at the initiative of the Ukrainian community in the U.S. and would combine many of the newer emigration’s anti-Soviet sentiments and U.S. anticommunism.

When a group of Soviet Ukrainian intellectuals (at the direction of the KGB) published an open letter in the newspaper Literaturna Ukraina in November 1963, offering to participate in the statue unveiling and to bring earth from Shevchenko’s grave, the Shevchenko Memorial Committee rejected the overture, concerned that it was a Soviet trick. The potential presence of Ukrainian SSR representatives at the dedication clearly concerned them, as it would dilute their anti-Soviet message. The KGB report on this incident described how the letter had successfully caught the attention of the entire diaspora and had become the subject of heated disagreement. The report drew the conclusion that the moment was right to intensify the KGB’s propaganda activities.

Nevertheless, for the Ukrainian community in the U.S., the creation of the Shevchenko statue in Washington, D.C., became a cause célèbre. The statue campaign briefly united the fractious community around a common goal, even if there were sharp disagreements about the precise tactics and, in particular, the involvement of Soviet authorities. The unveiling of the statue on June 27, 1964, was a high point of unity and mobilization, with financial contributions coming from

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across the country. Dozens of buses arrived at the opening with delegations from the northeastern and midwestern United States; Ukrainians from around the world joined their American counterparts. Former President Eisenhower spoke at the unveiling and said he hoped the monument would give other countries “constant encouragement to struggle forever against communist tyranny.” The crowd, estimated to be around 100,000 people, opened and closed the ceremony with prayers; sang the American and non-Soviet Ukrainian national anthems as well as recited Shevchenko’s poem “Testament”; and chanted, “We like Ike.”

Many of the papers left behind by the Shevchenko Memorial Committee can now be found in the archives of the Shevchenko Scientific Society, U.S.A., which are located in New York City. These materials include correspondence, financial records, and photographs, all of which are accessible to researchers. The papers offer insights into the issues relevant to decision-makers fielding criticism of the initiative.

The Shevchenko statue project was initiated at the height of U.S. efforts to appeal to those living under communist rule. When the memorial was built, four years after its approval, the U.S. political environment under President Johnson had shifted to a less confrontational stance toward the Soviet Union. This meant that government officials regarded the statue more ambivalently than the project’s organizers might have hoped; coupled with strong criticism of the project from newspapers like the Washington Post, Ukrainian Americans might have wondered just how committed the United States was to including Shevchenko among those world figures it honored as freedom fighters.

The Soviet Union, on the other hand, was far from ambivalent about Shevchenko. The Soviets could not allow their main geopolitical rival to outflank them and build a statue in their capital without a response. Published sources, as well as my own research in the archives of the Communist Party of Ukraine (CPU) in Kyiv, suggest that the leadership of the Ukrainian SSR was, in fact, deeply invested in the ideological competition over the poet’s legacy for both domestic and international reasons. The Soviet Ukrainian government was keen to preserve its monopoly over Ukraine’s cultural patrimony; legitimacy among Ukrainians rested on its claims to be fostering Ukraine’s culture. Its observance of Shevchenko-related anniversaries and its efforts to build its own Shevchenko cult were an important aspect of this. Moreover, it feared international criticism on the Ukrainian issue from émigrés abroad who, they correctly assessed, were keen to spread their anticommunist ideas and critiques of Soviet Russification to the Soviet Ukrainian population.

In August 1960, at around the same time that Congress adopted the bill authorizing the Shevchenko memorial in Washington, the Soviet Ukrainian government reorganized its structures for engaging the diaspora. The CPU Central Committee ordered the creation of the Association for Cultural Ties with Ukrainians Abroad, to be funded and run by the KGB. Very soon thereafter, they included this body into the broader Ukrainian Association for Cultural Ties in order to obscure the former’s relationship with the KGB.

Most policy toward the émigrés ran through the committee, which sought to develop relationships with sympathetic or persuadable Ukrainians living outside the Soviet Union. The association published a newspaper called Visti z Ukrainy (News from Ukraine) and an English-language counterpart for distribution abroad. At the time, the overall strategy combined carrot-and-stick approaches and was predicated on the assumption that they could drive a wedge between the “working emigrant population,” which they saw as potentially open to their appeals, and the “nationalist ringleaders,” whom they understood to be implacably hostile to the Soviet Union.

In order to achieve their aims, Soviet authorities exploited individual initiatives, sent collective letters, distributed...
promotional materials to friendly
groups, and, once they could not
successfully influence the course of
the statue campaign, denounced the
organizers with vitriol. Through their
representatives at the United Nations,
they also provided Western journalists
with quotes and interviews in which
they expressed the official Soviet point
of view on Shevchenko.

One particularly intriguing gambit
was their use of a Ukrainian American
who visited Soviet Ukraine in the early
1960s. Platon Stasiuk was a prominent
businessman, and the treasurer of the
Shevchenko Memorial Committee,
who went to Ukraine with his wife in
August 1961. During the trip, he had the
idea of bringing back a bit of soil from
Shevchenko's grave to place under the
statue in Washington. According to his
published account, he happened to
recognize a writer on the street who
took him to the offices of the Asso-
ciation for Cultural Relations with
Ukrainians Abroad. While Stasiuk was
there, the association reacted posi-
tively to the idea and arranged for a
chauffeur and photographer to accom-
pany the couple on their way to the
Shevchenko memorial and museum in
Kaniv, where the poet is buried.

Once in Kaniv, his hosts at the
museum ceremonially handed him
the container with the earth, offi-
cial photographs were taken of the
handover, and Stasiuk returned to
New York, expecting to be met with
plaudits by the committee. The earth
would be a physical symbol of the close
connections between the two memo-
rials and the unity of Ukrainians in
commemorating Shevchenko. Instead,
the committee rejected it as an una-
thorized initiative and a Soviet ploy. A

Shevchenko's drawing in pencil of Vydu
betskyi Monastery (not later than October 1943).
disappointed Stasiuk self-published his version of the incident, while the Soviet press printed denunciations of the committee’s leaders as “bourgeois nationalists” hostile to every Soviet initiative. Following the statue’s unveiling in Washington, Stasiuk returned the earth to the Soviet Union and published a second account of the incident, along with letters of support that he had received throughout the saga, in 1965.

The top leadership of the Ukrainian republic paid close attention to the fallout. A January 1964 report from the KGB to the Central Committee of the CPU noted that it would be worth reprinting Stasiuk’s first account in Visti z Ukrainy alongside an editorial explaining its republication. One might be tempted to call this a “repost” or a “signal boost” that would take material generated in the diaspora and send it back into circulation with the Soviet seal of approval. In a report to his superiors about the activities of the association at the end of 1964, the writer Yuri Smolych claimed that the gambit of sending the parcel of earth from Shevchenko’s grave with Stasiuk had succeeded in sowing dissension and “compromising” the nationalist leadership in the eyes of the émigré community.

Beyond this incident, the evidence suggests that the Soviet effort to influence the Shevchenko commemorations was highly organized and coordinated. The CPU Central Committee archives reveal that there was a steady stream of reports tracking the activities of the Shevchenko Committee and other émigré organizations submitted by the Ukrainian SSR’s UN delegation, the Association for Cultural Ties with Ukrainians Abroad, and the KGB. As the 1964 anniversary approached, the KGB sent the Central Committee a “top secret” planning memo in December 1963, outlining the measures it was taking in order to exert what it called “ideological influence” within the emigrant population. These included publishing articles in Visti z Ukrainy and preparing radio broadcasts setting forth the canonical Soviet view of Shevchenko, organizing the previously mentioned open letter from Ukrainian intellectuals concerning the statue, and distributing pictorial exhibitions about Shevchenko to its diplomatic representations and friendly civic organizations abroad.

The imbroglios over the Washington Shevchenko statue concerned Soviet foreign policy during the Cold War. In the Soviet Union, however, the main event was the 150th anniversary celebrations themselves, which included unveiling a new Shevchenko statue in the Soviet Union’s own capital city. Nikita Khrushchev attended its unveiling and gave a speech, in contrast to his counterpart Lyndon Johnson, who preferred to keep his distance from the Washington memorial. The Soviets would not be upstaged, and their ceremony took place seventeen days before the one in Washington, making front-page news in Izvestiya, one of the two most important newspapers in the country.

The superpowers built statues of the same man in their capital cities. The statues were the outgrowth of a contest over the fate of Ukrainian culture in the Soviet Union. It was an unequal struggle, waged as it was on one side by the party-state apparatus of a world superpower and on the other by a relatively small and fractious émigré community spread throughout the world. The latter had its greatest influence only when its interests lined up with those of the United States, and it waned as Western policy toward the Soviet Union shifted toward a more accommodative policy of coexistence. As it happens, the early 1960s was also a time when the Ukrainian party organization was at the height of its internal influence under first secretaries Nikolai Podgorny and Petro Shelest, both of whom benefitted from good relations with Khrushchev. Less than six months after the statues were unveiled, Leonid Brezhnev removed Khrushchev from power and Soviet attention began to shift from attempts to influence the diaspora toward defending itself against criticisms of its record on human rights, particularly after large-scale arrests of Ukrainian intellectuals in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The struggle over the legacy of Shevchenko has a very long history, going all the way back to the poet’s lifetime. It preceded the advent of the Cold War and outlasted it. During the 2013–14 Maidan protests in Kyiv, for
example, Shevchenko’s image became omnipresent as protesters depicted him as being on their side: wearing an orange construction helmet or obscuring his face with a bandana. Yet in 1964, this competition was shaped, perhaps unsurprisingly, most strongly by the Cold War context. The dedication ceremonies of these two dueling Shevchenko statues in Washington, D.C., and Moscow represented a dramatic increase in his international importance, fleeting though the moment may have been. The Soviet Union’s efforts to influence the course of the commemorations in the U.S. were part of a broader campaign to keep up the ideological struggle against their Ukrainian enemies abroad and to win the argument over who represented the correct interpretation of Shevchenko.

Social media may have accelerated the ability of governments to influence public opinion in faraway countries. Yet by looking at the past we realize that pathways have long existed for governments to pursue similar campaigns. Shevchenko seems unlikely to return to the center of ideological struggle between great powers where he was in 1964, but then again, his legacy now belongs primarily to an independent country. The statues remain a testament to another era—that of the pinnacle of the Ukrainian Cold War.

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Portrait of Taras Shevchenko made from photographs taken on the Maidan (Kyiv, June 19, 2014).