

ARTICLES

**Ukrainian *Rushnyky*: Binding Amulets and Magical Talismans
in the Modern Period**

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Abstract

The traditional ritual use of *rushnyky* among the Eastern Slavs continued to flourish throughout the Soviet period, despite the Communist Party's efforts to curtail what was dismissed as superstitious folkloric survivals in village life. The paper briefly examines use of the *rushnyk* in the traditional Ukrainian village setting, followed by close readings of a number of towels from the author's collection. These include careful analysis of a funeral/memorial *rushnyk* from the mid-20th c. that functioned as a mimetic grave for a soldier lost on the front. Attention is paid to the curious politicization of the ritual towel in Ukraine not only in the Soviet period, but subsequently in independent Ukraine, particularly in the recent country-wide creation of a "*Rushnyk* of National Unity"—the stitching of an oversized towel as a means to symbolize the binding of the disparate (and often combative) regions of the newly independent nation. This and other examples cited demonstrate innovation in the use of ritual towels and how they are being employed in new contexts where they can play a symbolic (if no longer fully understood ritual/magic) role.

**The Conception of the Thread of Destiny in the Classical World
and in Early Eastern Christian Thought**

The folkloric and ritual significance of the East Slavic ceremonial towel (*rushnyk* or *polotentse*) is predicated on ancient

conceptions that have not only endured and developed over the course of centuries and millennia, but have proven remarkably resilient survivals into the present. Based on these tenacious conceptions we will attempt close readings of a sampling of complex designs found on Ukrainian towels of the twentieth and twenty first centuries. At the outset it will prove useful to review briefly some of the ancient beliefs relating to spinning and weaving, even though some of this material may be known to many.

The spinning and weaving of raw fiber into fabric is one of the earliest complex technologies developed by human beings. As such, it is a perfect paradigm for the conception of the transmutation of unprocessed, chaotic raw material into processed, ordered artifact. The transformation of a tangle into thread reflects a manipulated transition from non-existence into existence, chaos into civilization, Nature into Culture. It is no wonder that the spindle and the act of spinning have been perceived as sacred since pre-historic times. From the unformed, inchoate mass of fibers, a discrete thread is twisted and pulled. In folk thought the rotating spindle is conceptualized as the axis or spinning center of the world. Spinning and weaving were female skills attributed to the “Great Mother.” Under the sobriquet of the “Goddess of Fate” it is she who was identified as the spinner of “the threads of fate” and weaver of the “web of life.” By analogy woven textiles were regarded with mystical awe and in many circumstances as magical and protective talismans.

Greek mythology offers an instructive expression of this in conceiving of Fate as the spinning of the thread of a life, the creation of a “life-span.” (1) The Fates, since they were Divine Spinners, were identified as female. “Human skill and cunning are personified by Athena, and the central womanly skill is weaving, [thus] weaving can itself become a metaphor for human resourcefulness. One’s life-span was conceived by the Greeks as a thread, formed by the Fates at birth, but the act of weaving the thread symbolized what one did with that life, the choices of the individual. (2)

“This aspect of the [Sacred] Feminine as a spinner of fate can be followed down to the late configuration of the Christian Madonna.” One of the typical occupations for Mary (the “Mother of God” as she is hailed in the Eastern Church) is the spinning of purple and scarlet threads intended for the veil of the Jerusalem Temple (see the *Infancy Gospel of James* 10-11). In the typical iconography of the Annunciation, Mary is depicted holding a spindle and spinning. “The Madonna is still the Great Goddess who spins destiny—though here destiny is the redemption of the world” [Neumann 1974: 227, 233].

It should come as no surprise that some of the most sacred relics associated with Mary are textiles. The Western Church, for example, could boast of the robe of the Virgin venerated in the cathedral of Aix-la-Chapelle, but of greater interest to us here is the Pokrova (in Ukrainian; in Church Slavonic and Russian it takes the masculine form Pokrov) of the Mother of God and the Church Feast that is associated with its miraculous intervention in the affairs of the Byzantine State. “There is no fixed (or adequate) English translation for the “Pokrova” feast. It appears variously as “Holy Protection of the Mother of God,” “the Protectress,” “Festival of the Veil,” “Protecting Veil,” “Intercession,” and the like. As an object, pokrov referred to some type of opaque textile covering. Sreznevskii identified uses in medieval East Slavic texts in a wide variety of related terms: roof, cover, tent, curtain, and veil (but not, apparently, the transparent kind). One can easily surmise how it came to suggest associatively a figurative and abstracted sense of concealment: protection, defense; and ultimately the defender herself. As a proper noun Pokrova also serves metonymically for the act of intercession and the October 1 (Old Style calendar) feast that celebrates the miraculous apparition of the Mother of God to Andrew the Holy Fool in the Church at Blachernai and the subsequent protection of Constantinople from invading troops. In the Life of St. Andrew, the Mother of God removes her “veil” and holds it over the congregation as protection” [Sciacca 2003: 511].

“Both concrete and metaphorical meanings are intended. Tangible reference is to the maphorion (the “veil” or

garment covering for head and shoulders) of the Mother of God preserved as a relic in the Blachernai Church in Constantinople. The application of the term in reference to the Mother of God herself predates the feast. The metaphor appears in a list of epithets in Ikos 6 of the Akathist (the text of which is ascribed to the seventh century): in Slavonic, “Raduisia, Pokrove miru, shirshii oblaka” (rendered in the St. Tikhon’s Press Prayer Book: “Hail, the Veil of the world vaster than the clouds””) [Sciacca 2003: 511-2]. With the acceptance of Orthodox Christianity from the Byzantines at the end of the 10th century, the Eastern Slavs inherited this feast and the conception of Mary as the Divine Feminine Protector and Intercessor. That the feast became so prominent in Russia and Ukraine is evidence that it resonated with earlier pre-Christian traditions related to the perceived sacred quality of ritual ceremonial cloths—*rushnyky*.

Development of the Conception of Sacred Textiles among the Eastern Slavs

The word *rushnyk* (singular form) derives from *ruka*, “hand,” and while it can refer to an ordinary towel for use in bathing, the ceremonial *rushnyk* is distinct in its elaborate ornamentation. These woven or embroidered designs and motifs reinforce the symbolic meaning of the *rushnyk* itself. That they are considered sacred objects can be easily gleaned from their typical placement over icons and on crosses that are raised over graves and at the site of holy wells. “The belief in the protective strength of textiles, especially *rushnyky*,... as a magical symbol, a talisman, is extremely archaic” [Nykorak 2010: 2].



Cross decorated with a *rushnyk* and icons at the mouth of a fresh-water spring regarded as holy

(Bazaliya, Khmel'nyts'ka *oblast'*, 2005)

An instructive example of the primeval and magical attitude among the Eastern Slavs towards ritual cloth (including the acts of spinning and weaving) can be observed in a late nineteenth-century ethnographer's description of ceremonial behavior during time of plague. "On a predetermined day, before sunrise, young girls from the entire village would gather in one home, each bringing a handful of flax. They would spin the flax, set up the loom, and weave in complete silence. When the cloth was woven, they would carry it over their heads and in this way circle the entire village. All the inhabitants of the village would congregate and

make a bonfire from kindling brought from every home. Everyone would pass under the cloth and through the fire, carrying children and the sick, after which the cloth was then and there burned” [Lysenko 1992: n.p.]. What we observe here is a mimetic act—the communal weaving of the cloth imitates the process of creation, an activity that involves the entire community and its territory. At the moment of passing under the sacred cloth the community is protected and born anew, disease is banished. The length of linen fabric functions as a portal to the sacred realm. It marks liminal space, the sacred center, the place of ritual communication at the boundary of the supernatural world. Once the contact has been made and all inhabitants of the village pass through it and are thus protected, this portal or bridge is destroyed.

Some years ago my interest in Ukrainian and Russian ritual towels was kindled by a family legend that was recounted to me in my grandmother’s village of Bazaliya in Ukraine. I am an American because some 100 years ago my grandmother, Olyana Onyshchuk, engaged in a binding ritual with a young man. The betrothal ritual [*zaruchennia*] was a ceremonial step “taken to solidify the promise to marry between the two parties. The hands of the young couple and their parents were bound together with a *rushnyk* by one of the matchmakers, who then pronounced [an incantation], ‘I’m not tying a knot, I’m tying your word.’” (3)

The young couple knelt on a ritual cloth and were blessed by the parents, after which gifts of various textiles were exchanged as a sign of the uniting of the couple and the two families [Wolynetz 2010: 25]. The transaction was the equivalent of a marriage vow and solemnized a formal engagement to be married. My grandmother’s subsequent breaking off the engagement led to a scandal not only for herself, but her entire family—which they remember (with both a laugh and a sigh) to this day. The stigma attached to her refusal could only be remedied by her escaping the village, so she decided to come to America, not for religious freedom or out of desperate economic need, but because of the ritual exchange of *rushnyky*!

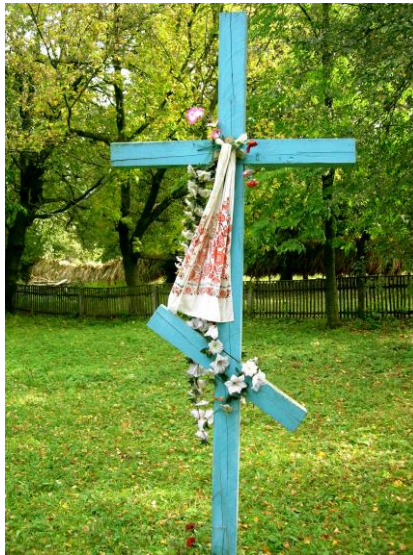
Let us take a look at the construction of a *rushnyk*. First and foremost, it should be an unseamed length of whole cloth. The

length is variable according to use and regional custom, but the width considerably narrower (and usually no wider than about a foot and a half)—typically the width of the loom. The cut ends are hemmed and/or knotted, that is, they are “sealed.” Lysenko makes an instructive argument concerning this knotting in a discussion of thread. When a length of thread is cut (and by extension, a length of woven fabric), it functions outside a cultural /socialized/ritualized context, it is an object of nature because it is “raw” or unfinished. “New transformations would be needed to include a cut thread into cultural space.” The simplest way to “transform and transpose thread... into an object of culture” is to fix and mark it at each end [Lysenko 1992; n. p.]. This is frequently reinforced by a woven or embroidered border design. As Kononenko has observed, the edges of a towel are traditionally marked by what she terms a “dispel.” This can be part of the embroidered design and/or an elaborate web of knotted or crocheted fringe. “[The dispel is] supposed to point down to the ground and take all of the evil out of the household and transfer it into the soil. The earth, it is believed, has the power to absorb evil and dispense it” [Kononenko, <http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/uvp/pages/media/rushnyky/index.htm?menu=4-2:1>].

Since collection of *rushnyky* and other folk artifacts commenced only in the mid-nineteenth century, we have few extant examples from the eighteenth and earlier centuries. But we observe that all evidence indicates that ceremonial towels were made exclusively of homespun and loomed linen. But by the mid-twentieth century, when the tradition of hand spinning and weaving had in most regions disappeared, linen was replaced by manufactured cotton, and more recently by polyester. Even this was, by tradition, never seamed, although all the cut edges were hemmed. In modern Ukraine one can purchase wedding *rushnyky*, many of them factory produced and printed rather than embroidered. There is remarkable variety based on age and region, and all production techniques are mutable. It would seem that a length of whole fabric alone functions as minimal ritual requirement. The embroidery thread was traditionally linen dyed with natural plants and berries [see Shevchenko 1999 for a study of

the plant species that were sourced for the dyes, 333-343], almost exclusively in red and black, but early in the twentieth century, imported manufactured cotton thread was introduced, and by mid-century a vibrant array of colors was employed. In some regions the embroidery thread was wool (notably in Eastern Podillia).

The talismanic properties of the *rushnyk* are most often reinforced by woven or embroidered motifs at each end; these are nearly always identical. There is no top or bottom of a *rushnyk*. *Rushnyky* are intended to be hung around an icon or frame, tied around a cross, wrapped over the shoulder or around the waist, or held in outstretched hands from the usually unadorned center, with the two side flaps hanging downwards towards the earth. The



Standing cross in cemetery (Bazaliya, Ukraine, 2005)

decorated ends drape in parallel. The woven or embroidered symbols thus appear in duplicate, side by side.

The various motifs typically embroidered or woven into the *rushnyky* have been well studied by numerous researchers [Kelly 1989, Labacheuskaia 2002, Kytova 2003, Kononenko 2005, Chumarna 2005, Selivachov 2005, Wolynetz 2005 and 2010, Prychepii 2007, and others]. We will highlight here the *most*

typical motif (actually it is a cluster of interrelated motifs). Broadly speaking it is the *axis mundi*, the spinning spindle of Fate itself, that represents not only the center of community, family and village life, but that also generates the Life Force. The *axis*-pillar is that liminal space where contact between the worlds (upper, lower, and earth) is made possible and where supernatural communication is perceived to be manifest. It is represented on the *rushnyky* variously as the Goddess (in a number of forms: birth goddess, the protectress Berehynia, the goddess of life-giving moisture, the goddess of regeneration) [Gimbutas 1989: *passim*; Wolynetz 2005: 58-60], the Tree of Life (as Eliade summarizes, “Cosmos was imagined in the form of a gigantic tree, the mode of being of the cosmos and first of all its capacity for endless regeneration” [Eliade 1959:148]), in its Christian redaction the Cross of Christ (the “Life-giving Tree”), and in more recent times a vase or bouquet of flowers. The motifs appear to be varied, yet they all share an underlying message of the life-affirming and generative power of the earth and the promise of resurrection and life.

There are several broad uses of *rushnyky*: protection of family, home and village; invocation of fertility; function as conduit/pathway/magical bridge for transport across sacred time and place—or as an opening to the sacred realm; and in binding rituals. In almost any Ukrainian home the family icons, and, more recently, family photographs would be draped in protective *rushnyky*. When honored guests are greeted, bread and salt are presented on outstretched hands that are covered with a *rushnyk*.



A curious late version of an abstracted Goddess, surmounted by a cross, and surrounded by her galloping retinue (Ukraine, mid-20th c.; author's collection)

Ceremonial towels were integrated into all family-rituals. *Rushnyky* were used to welcome new-born infants, who were wrapped in them. A linen cloth was “one of the main ways of marking the transitional state of a new-born... A piece of linen was the necessary ritual object” to be used when baptizing an infant. The cloth symbolizes “the world of culture in which the child entered from the world of nature.” This cloth would be preserved to make a wedding towel, and wedding towels were preserved for funeral rituals, when they were placed in the coffin or tied to a grave cross [Lysenko 1992; n. p.].



An exuberant Tree of Life in a vase, surrounded by birds
(Cherkasy region, Ukraine, mid-20th c.; author's collection)



A cross that blossoms with grapes and wheat
(Central Ukraine, mid-20th c.; author's collection)



Typical display of icons with a draped *rushnyk*, Villiage of Havrylivka school museum (Khmel'nyts'ka *oblast'*, 2007).

Rushnyky as Magic Pathways

In ancient myth, thread and woven cloths function as a means of guiding journeys, in particular in travel that is conceived of as some initiation or transition rite. “Thread and cloth frequently serve as a link between the spirit world and the living [Perkowski 1989:121]. The means by which Theseus is equipped to find his way out of the Minotaur’s labyrinth is by unwinding the thread given to him by Ariadne. Daedalus (of Icarus and Daedalus fame) gave the daughter of King Minos, Ariadne, a “magic ball of thread,” as well as instructions on “how to enter and leave the Labyrinth”—that is, how to successfully navigate the maze, confront the Minotaur in combat, and successfully reemerge. “This ball Ariadne gave to Theseus, and instructed him to follow it until he reached the sleeping monster, whom he must seize by the hair and sacrifice to Poseidon. He could the find his way back [out of the Labyrinth] by rolling up the thread into a ball again” [Graves 1996: 314-5]. In Middle Eastern folktales, the flying carpet figures as a magical means of transport between distant locations. Among the Finno-Ugric *Votiaks*, a shaman wears a ritual towel during

trance states when he guides the lost souls of the dead to their rest. In the Ukrainian funeral ritual, the use of *rushnyky* function in a similar way. They create a magical pathway to the world of the dead and thereby help lead the soul of the dead to repose. In some regions of Ukraine, the coffin was lowered into the grave on long woven *rushnyky*, which, according to folk belief, symbolized the road to the “Other World.” “The *rushnyk* was placed not only on the coffin but also inside [it], since people believed that the angels used the ritual cloth to carry the soul of the deceased to heaven” [Wolynetz 2005: 32].



Funeral *rushnyk* with flying birds, the symbol of transition to the “Other World” (Ukraine, mid-20th c.; author’s collection)

Often the ritual towels used in wedding ceremonies were preserved for the funeral rites, when they were either placed in the coffin with the corpse or tied on the cross erected over the grave. The sense of the cloths as magic talismans is thus reinforced. The typical motif encountered on a towel made for a person who had died a “natural death” (that is, for a person who lived a full life according to his “due portion”) is a closed wreath. The circle of this life is complete.

Yet another example of the use of *rushnyky* to magically facilitate transitions is the ritual observed when a new bride is first introduced to her new home, the home of her husband. “The threshold was covered with a ritual cloth specifically for the bride’s passage. According to belief, the spirits of the family’s ancestors reside under the threshold and a stranger entering the home might be harmed by the ancestral spirits. But if the threshold is covered with a ritual cloth—a symbol of protection—the stranger can enter the home without being harmed. On the day after the wedding, it was customary in certain regions of Ukraine for the bride to remove her mother-in-law’s ritual cloths and to decorate the house with her own, saying ‘let your *rushnyky* take a rest while mine go to work’” [Wolynetz 2010: 29].

To illustrate the functions of the *rushnyky* in the ritual sphere, we will examine in greater depth one particular type of funeral cloth, created for a dead soldier whose body was not returned to his village for burial.

This is a memorial *rushnyk* that seems to function as a mimetic grave for a soldier who has died away from the village of his birth. As Paul Barber notes, “The great majority of things that, if left undone, may cause a body to become a revenant are, not surprisingly, funerary and burial practices.” Those who die far from home, particularly common for soldiers who die in battle and are buried hastily (if at all), without the requisite funerary rites, are the subject of familial concern. Lack of burial is sufficient reason to believe the dead could become vampires or the *unquiet dead*. “Another common explanation for their transformation is that they have not lived out their allotted span of life,” they have died “before their time” [Paul Barber 1988: 37-8]. In order to help the soul of the deceased rest in peace a particular type of funeral towel is created. It is no doubt the anxiety that the deceased was not properly interred that led a close female relative (she is identified in the inscription by her initials, “Ia. O. P.”) to stitch this towel.



Rushnyk made to commemorate a dead soldier.
(Central Ukraine, mid-20th c.; author's collection)

The embroidered design indicates the grave mound itself, over which a cross has been erected and a *kalyna* (mountain ash or rowan) grows. The rowan represents longing and healing, and is often depicted on towels for soldiers killed in battle and other “unquiet dead”; the berries indicate fertility and thus the possibility of regeneration. All the elements possess specific symbolic meaning: the deer are a motif of resurrection (the steppe peoples also regarded the deer as a conductor of souls) and the butterfly—the departure of the soul. Birds are often understood to be agents that can assist the dead in communicating with the living. (4) Here

the sense is that the news concerning the final resting place of the dead soldier will be conveyed to the relatives in Ukraine. As the inscription further indicates, in the absence of kin, it is left for eagles to perform the traditional funeral feast over the grave:

A Cossack ordered that a high funeral mound be raised
and at the head a red rowan planted.
Birds will come to eat the berries
and will bring me news from Ukraine.
He died in a foreign land without sister or brother.
The young steppe eagles have gathered for [his] memorial feast.

The invocation of eagles would seem to reference the broad conception of them as heavenly messengers, and as Kononenko identifies them symbols of “masculine strength and vigor” [Kononenko, <http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/uvp/pages/media/rushnyy/index.htm?menu=4-2:1>]. “[In] Western tradition... eagles were believed to carry the souls of the dead upon their wings and return them to God” [Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1996: 326]. Furthermore, in Kytova’s analysis of the motif of the eagle in Ukrainian embroidery, she concludes with the observation that they function as protective talismans [*oberehy*] of soldiers [Kytova 2003: 118].

Politization of the *Rushnyk*: Russian Imperial and Soviet Motifs

While *rushnyky* normally functioned as ritual and talismanic objects, they could also be used as canvases to express political allegiance and social commentary. The Tsarist double-headed eagle is attested as a motif on some of the earliest extant embroidered textiles from those Ukrainian territories that were for many centuries *gubernii* of the Russian Empire. This is not surprising given the ubiquitous appearance of the Imperial insignia on coins and paper currency, official documents, and elsewhere. The motif likewise merged with the traditionally employed images of birds [Kytova 2003: 114-132] on wedding and funeral *rushnyky*.

Meticulously rendered embroidered double-headed eagles can be found on tablecloths from the family of Hetman Ivan Skoropadsky (probably embroidered by the nuns of the St.

Charlampus Convent in Chernihiv region; preserved in the Tarnovs'sky Chernihiv Historical Museum [Zaichenko 2010: 62-63, 148-151]), which date to 1715-1722. The Imperial Russian heraldic symbol is fully realized—both heads of the eagle are crowned, and it holds in its talons the Imperial regalia, the orb and scepter, clearly marking the Cossack Hetmans loyalty to the Tsar Peter I. Numerous later examples of fully detailed double-headed eagles with Tsarist regalia from central Ukrainian provinces can be found on the website of the Ivan Honchar Museum (Kyiv). (5) The motif was widely employed in simplified form in the woven *rushnyky* produced in large numbers in Kroloverts' (Sumy *oblast'*) artels in the late nineteenth-early twentieth centuries. The crowns are highly stylized, and the orb and scepter are usually omitted. Thus the eagle loses some but certainly not all of its Russian Imperial symbolism. In contemporary Ukrainian studies it is rarely acknowledged as a Tsarist motif, rather something on the order of the “silhouette of two eagles.”



Kroloverts' woven *rushnyk*,
(ca. 1900; author's collection)

The motif can be attested in the Soviet period as late as 1929, in a dated *rushnyk* from Central Ukraine in which two peacocks (a common motif on wedding towels that symbolizes beauty and prosperity [Kononenko, <http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/uvp/pages/media/rushnyky/index.htm?menu=4-2:1>] escort the crowned double-headed eagle in the composition that usually depicts two birds surrounding the Tree of Life.



Rushnyk
(Central Ukraine, 1929; author's collection)

But for the most part, after the October Revolution the Tsarist eagle is replaced by a variety of Soviet symbols, even as the traditional compositions are preserved. Pro-Bolshevik-Leninist

political messaging was used in a curious adaptation of the *rushnyk* as agit-propaganda.



In this curious design, the floral Tree of Life is surmounted by the Red Star, hammer and sickle, and the acronym for the Russian Soviet Republic, with an animal retinue of rabbits and roosters, the former widely symbolic of fertility and rebirth, the latter of “vigor and fertility” [Kononenko, <http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/uvp/pages/media/rushnyky/index.htm?menu=4-2:1>]. The ritual function of such a cloth is unclear, but its propagandistic intent is underlined by the inscriptions, “Glory to Lenin the Liberator” (co-opting the epithet used in reference to Tsar Alexander II, emancipator of the serfs) and “Who Granted Freedom to The People in 1917.” (6) It might well have functioned to commemorate Lenin’s death in 1924.

The Soviet period witnessed extensive use of various textiles for propaganda and organizational purposes, such as flags, banners, and pennants. The weaving factories of Krolevets’ maintained a high-level of productivity in the Soviet period and replaced the typical double-headed eagle with Lenin portraits and other pro-Soviet texts and imagery.



Krolevets' woven *panno*
(1964; author's collection)

In this decorative “*panno*” (the term, no doubt from French *panneau*, preferred in place of “*rushnyk*”; unlike traditional *rushnyky* the design does not repeat at both ends, since this is clearly intended to hang flat on a wall rather than be draped over an icon or photograph) dated 1964, Lenin’s head is superimposed on the red sun (a reference to the epithet “*krasnoe solntse*” introduced in the Soviet *noviny* in reference to the Soviet leader, co-opted from the typical *bylina* epithet for Prince Vladimir) (7), and surrounded by an electric transmitter, the main Kremlin tower, an industrial plant, a rocket ship, the Stalin-period skyscraper built to house Moscow State University, while in the foreground Soviet children play at various games. Other Krolevets’ *rushnyky* depict the seal of the USSR, the Order of Lenin, the head of Lenin hovering above a Tree of Life (with the inscription, “Loyal to the Precepts of Lenin”), and other Party motifs [see Zhuk 1985; plates 48-50].

The linen canvas, on rare occasions, served to promote Ukrainian nationalist or anti-Soviet sentiments. An extremely scarce example of such a *rushnyk*, probably dating to the 1920-30s,

is from northern Chernihiv region (Chernihivske Polissia). I purchased this



Rushnyk with inscription
(Chernihivske Polissia, 1920s-1930s, author's collection)

rushnyk recently from an eBay dealer based in Kyiv, who noted in his auction description, “To make and to keep the *Rushnyk* with anti-Soviet poem was very dangerous during the Communist Epoch, if NKVD could find it, the owner shortly would be in GULAG or executed.”

The composition depicts frequently encountered village scenes: a girl at a well, a girl carrying two buckets of water on a yoke perched on her shoulder, a girl with a pail and jug in her hands, and a cow. Kytova notes that the scene of the girl with the yoke was very common in the Mid-Dnipro region and would have been copied from popular prints. It was the subject of one of Taras

Shevchenko's paintings from 1856, "The Sarmaritan Girl" (Kytova 2003: 196; see also Zaichenko 2010:169-171). Juxtaposed with these traditional and apolitical figural rural renderings is an intriguing verse:

ЇЖ КАРОВУШКА САЛОМЧІК
НЕ НАДІСЕ НА ТРАВУ

Dear cow, eat the straw.
Don't hope for grass.

МАГО МИЛАГО ЗАБРАЛИ НА
САВЕТСЬКУЮ ВІЙНУ

My darling was drafted for
the Soviet war.

This is adapted from common *chastushka* (a humorous song, usually satirical in nature) themes of sundered relationship and vanished love. The loss is likened to a cow's memory of fresh grass. Two Russian variants:

Ешь, коровушка, соломку,
Не надейся на сenco.
Бери, миленький, платочек,
Не надейся на кольцо.
[<http://www.pozdravleniya.biz/chastushki/o-lubvi/48.htm>]

Dear cow, eat the straw,
Don't hope for hay.
My darling, take my kerchief,
Don't hope for a ring.

Ешь, коровушка, сenco,
Забывай-ка травушку.
Отдадут дружка в солдаты,
Забывай сударушку.
[<http://www.pozdravleniya.su/chastooshkas/armeiskie/5.html>]

Dear cow, eat the hay,
Forget about grass.
My boyfriend's being sent into
the army,
Forget about your beloved girl.

The verse clearly reflects the anxiety of a young girl over the loss of her boyfriend or fiance, usually because he had been drafted. The repeated depiction of buckets might well refer to a common superstition among Ukrainians and Russians that encountering someone with empty buckets is a bad omen. The *rushnyk* variant takes on political significance in its reference to the "Soviet War," referred to in Ukrainian historiography as the "Soviet-Ukrainian War." This was the national struggle between Soviet Russia and the Ukrainian People's Republic (*Ukrayins'ka*

Narodnia Respublika) that was waged between 1917 and 1921 for control of the Ukrainian regions of the former Russian Empire, which included Chernihiv. Numerous *chastushki* of the 1920s “offered political commentary... [and expressed] hostil[ity] to the new order.” “Peasant resentment of the conscriptions, and the young women’s anguish over drafted and maimed brothers and sweethearts, endured in the *chastushka* tradition” [Tirado 1993; 37-8]. Here we have evidence of the migration of *chastushka* verse onto a ritual towel. We can only hypothesize concerning the inspiration of the embroiderer (who identifies herself as “T”) for the creation of this *rushnyk*, although it seems likely that it was intended as a commemoration of a lost sweetheart, who may never have returned to this Chernihiv village.

A boldly nationalist expression of Ukrainian independence is to be found on a *rushnyk* from the L’viv region, dated 1937, from the period between the World Wars that witnessed the temporary shift of political control of the region from the Austro-Hungarian Empire to Poland. This was produced in Western Ukraine before it had been annexed by the Soviets, in a pre-war atmosphere in which the creation of a free and independent Ukraine was a much anticipated possibility. The proclamation in defense of Ukrainian nationalism is expressed visually and with inscriptions. At one end is the official Ukrainian coat of arms depicting a gold *tryzub* (trident) on blue background (adopted in 1919 by the Ukrainian People’s Republic), and at the other the coat of arms of the Western Ukrainian People’s Republic (adapted from the symbol of the Principality of Galicia-Volhynia) [Katchanovski 2005: 81].

Both seals are surrounded by hovering angels holding a crown (no doubt a reference to the Galician-Volhynian principality) and bouquets of flowers.



Embroidered *rushnyk*
 (from Sokol' raion, L'viv oblast', dated 1937, author's collection)

The four inscriptions repeat the single theme of independence: “Struggle, and you will overcome” (from Taras Shevchenko’s poem “Kavkaz,” 1845), “Freedom in Ukraine,” “God, save Ukraine!” and “Ukraine has not yet perished” (from the Ukrainian National Anthem).

A recent news item posted on the ZIK [Західна інформаційна корпорація] website reports on a similar *rushnyk* embroidered in the 1930s from the Volyn’ region that had been found by Soviet authorities who sentenced the owner to 25 years of prison in a Siberian Gulag camp. They understood the pro-Ukrainian separatist message to reflect anti-Soviet rather than the intended anti-Polish sentiment. At one end the embroidered scene depicts a girl at a well offering a bucket of water to a horse, on which is seated a Cossack rifleman. Hovering overhead is a banner emblazoned with the Ukrainian nationalist colors, yellow and blue. On the other end of the *rushnyk* are depicted the *tryzub* and a seal with the crowned lion, and the inscription, “We beg you, oh God, we beg you to restore freedom to our Ukraine now” [<http://zik.ua/ua/news/2010/07/21/238032>; see also <http://svitlycyia.com.ua/ukr/page/1277894310/>].

The stridently nationalist sentiments, with quotations from Shevchenko’s verse and the National Anthem, in these ritual cloths of the 1930s from Polish-occupied L’viv and Volyn’ regions suggest origin in the urban educated milieu, rather than among village peasantry whose “Ukrainian” identity was to large degree inchoate [see Brown 2004; 40, 249]. Again, family evidence confirms this premise. I never heard my grandmother identify herself as Ukrainian. If asked where she was from, she’d say “Volyn’” (in a region of shifting political boundaries her town of origin was technically in the Volynskaia *guberniia* of the Russian Empire, although it is within the Podillia ethnographic zone). Not surprisingly she was identified as “Russian” by “race” on the ship manifest when she arrived in New York in 1912, and as an Orthodox Christian attended the Russian Church, which in the pre-Soviet period was still a jurisdiction of the Imperial Synod. She did tacitly acknowledge her regional origin by claiming, always with a smirk, “We speak *po-khokhlatski*” (referring to the sometimes

jocular, sometimes pejorative term “*khokhol*” that referred to Ukrainians/“Little Russians”). She always had a small portrait of Tsar Nicholas II hanging on the wall until her death in 1975. Familiar symbols are resilient, and old habits die hard.

The *Rushnyk* of National Unity: Binding the New Nation

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the establishment of an independent Ukraine that includes virtually all the contiguous territories inhabited by Ukrainians (East and West; Orthodox and Eastern-Rite Catholic; Russian-speaking and Ukrainian-speaking), a number of projects involving innovative creation of *rushnyky* have taken on new dimensions and significance. Some were regional Guinness-style competitions to create the longest *rushnyk* on record. But others sought to apply the most archaic conceptions of *rushnyky* as binding amulets to help forge a unified polity among disparate regions that were in conflict with each other over religious, linguistic, and political allegiances. On the heels of the turmoil of the “Orange Revolution” (2004-5) a number of private enterprises and committees (official governmental input was deliberately excluded) “took joint initiative on conducting, within the period of May through August, 2007, an exclusive Ukrainian-wide cultural and artistic socio-political action ‘*Rushnyk* of National Solidarity’ [Рушник Національної Єдності] to foster the filling of social pride upon the nation and state, and create the air of social concord... constructive dialogue between all country political forces, development of independent Ukraine, strengthening of its economy and cultural development, to improve the nation’s well-being and to gain international authority...” [www.ukrsov.kiev.ua/s_catalog.nsf/d84f0d771f7b78b8c2256f0100714d3a/e310_10ac3ed5f535c].

The coordinated effort was termed an *aktisiia*, a socio-political action that would take on the tangible form of a *rushnyk* that would be created from materials from numerous corners of Ukraine, with the labor of some 1340 embroiderers from every region of the nation (and émigré communities abroad), “of various

nationalities, faiths and political persuasions” and as it was stitched it would physically traverse all the territories of Ukrainian habitation [<http://rushnyk.ukrsov.kiev.ua/4>]. The physical journey and presence of the *Rushnyk* of National Unity would symbolically and ritually function to bind the combative regional entities into a united whole. Its creation as an act of building community is analogous to the piecing together of the AIDS Quilt in the USA (1985-present) that helped to foster a shared sense of purpose in combating the pandemic. As of 2010, the Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt was the largest and longest ongoing example of “community folk art” in the world [www.aidsquilt.org]. The *Rushnyk* of National Unity quickly achieved similar status. Nikolai Stepanenko, Towel Project Director, summarized, “[T]his towel is already a national towel. This is our avatar, our relic” [<http://74.86.97.24/en/20080125/37854-celebrating-ukrainian-national-unity.html>].

The initial design for the *rushnyk* was conceived by Aleksandra Telizhenko, “Honored Artist of Ukraine,” who imbued every aspect of the composition with symbolic meaning. Rather than an aggregate design that intermingled the traditional regional embroidery patterns, Telizhenko sought to interpret the entire scope of Ukrainian history using various motifs and symbols that represent three significant stages of the development of the nation and its culture: the pre-historic *Trypillian* culture, Kyivan Rus’, and the independent “democratic” Cossack state. Throughout the composition are embedded archaic pre-Christian symbols, as well as allusions to auspicious sacred numbers. The three bands that represent these historical periods are repeated at both ends of the *rushnyk*, and surmounting them are elaborate Trees of Life. At the center of the Trees is a “polysemantic image” of a stylized lyre that morphs into an image of the “goddess” Berehynia with raised arms, whose head is rendered like the featureless face of the ritual dolls known as *motanky*. The figure of Berehynia is encountered on some of the most archaic *rushnyky* of the Slavs. (8) At the very center of the *rushnyk* is the Emblem of Ukraine, the Trident, stitched in gold threads, which is surrounded by an open wreath “of laurel and oak leaves,” motifs of glory and power.

The woven linen used for the *Rushnyk* of National Unity was an authentic village relic, produced entirely by hand between 1952 and 1955 by Kateryna Andrushchak and her family in the village of S'omaky, Khmel'nyts'ka *oblast'*. The linen was ceremonially washed on the Eve of the Feast of the Holy Trinity in May 2007, in Kaniv (where Taras Shevchneko is buried) in the Dnipro River. The embroidering of the *rushnyk* commenced on June 7, 2007, on Khortytsia Island (Zaporiz'ka *oblast'*)—one of the islands in the Dnipro River where the Zaporizhian Sich was first established in the 16th century and where the Museum of Zaporizhian Cossacks is located. Over the course of the next year and a half, the linen was embroidered in all *oblasti* of Ukraine, as well as in diaspora communities throughout the world. In January 2008, the First Lady of Ukraine Kateryna Yushchenko took part in the ceremony of embroidering the finishing stitches on the *Rushnyk* in the St. Sophia National Preserve in Kyiv. She noted, “This is another proof that we are a single country and a single nation. We share a common history and culture, a common past that we are reviving, and a common future we are creating” [<http://www.ukraine3000.org.ua/eng/today/todnews/6264.html>]. Because of the divided church jurisdictions in Ukraine, the *rushnyk* was blessed four times—by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarch), Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Kyiv Patriarch), the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church and the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church, and a fifth time by the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Crimea. By the time of its completion, members of ethnic minorities living in Ukraine had also taken part in its creation—Poles, Belarusians, Russians, Armenians, Germans, Tatars and Greeks. The *rushnyk*, while a traditional Ukrainian amulet, was to acknowledge the multi-ethnic realities of the new nation. (Curiously, there is no mention in any of the news reports that Jewish communities participated.) (9)

Conclusion

It is remarkable to note that even after the depredations, dislocations and turmoil of the twentieth and twenty first

centuries—confiscation of village land in the collectivization process, the genocidal famine of the 1930s, World War II, and the Soviet attempt to eradicate archaic folk rituals, not to mention the technological development that had the inadvertent effect of destroying folkways (industrialization, migration of village populations to urban centers, and the destructive force of electricity, television and the Internet), the use of *rushnyky* is still an integral part of traditional life-cycle ceremonies in Ukraine, and have been inserted into new traditions where they can play a symbolic (if no longer fully understood ritual or magic) role.

In June 2007, I was again in my grandmother's village and I happened to arrive on the day of the high school graduation. After the typical array of speeches and declamations, the graduating class of six students was led off the stage by means of a *rushnyk* "bridge"—a ritual towel had been laid across the stage as a "road of life" along which the graduates formed a procession behind two people carrying loaves of bread (also held on *rushnyky*). Thus did they transition to the next stage of life. Yet again the archaic talisman had been inserted into an entirely modern initiation rite. At the same time, the creation of the *Rushnyk* of National Unity was in full gear. The twenty first-century reinvention of the *rushnyk* as a political binding talisman (*oberih*) is remarkable evidence how it still resonates in the Ukrainian popular mentality.

NOTES

1 "*Span* is from the verb *spin*, which originally meant 'draw out, stretch long'...Both thread and time were linear, both easily and arbitrarily broken," as Barber notes in her essay "Behind the Myths" [1994: 235, 238].

2 Thus throughout the *Odyssey* Athena and 'the wily Odysseus' (her favorite devotee) are constantly hatching ingenious plots to escape one tight situation or another, rallying with the words 'Come, let us weave a plan'" [Barber 1994: 242-3]. Athena "represents everything that human skill and know-how (*tekne*,

whence our word technology) can accomplish; she is the goddess of ‘civilization’ itself,” and stands in stark opposition to the enemy of Odysseus, Poseidon, who represents “the untamed forces of nature” [Barber 1994: 242].

3 That ritual of the binding of the hands with a “wedding knot” should be familiar to anyone who has witnessed a typical Anglican wedding ceremony--the recent royal wedding in Westminster Abbey included. The royal couple, on their knees, clasped right hands and the priest wrapped his stole around them while invoking what is essentially an incantation, “Those whom God has joined together let no man put asunder.” This is the origin of the phrase “tying the knot,” the magic act of binding a union.

4 See Natalie Kononenko, “Glossary of Rushnyk Symbols,” at the *Ukrainian Traditional Folklore* website <http://www.artsrn.ualberta.ca/uvp/index.htm?menu=1-0:0> and Kytova 2003: 112-158; see also Kytova’s discussion of the symbolism of deer on 138-9.

5 <http://honchar.org.ua/halereya/rushnyky/>. For a Russian example from Iaroslavl’ province, see the NYPL Digital Gallery, Image ID: 55294 at <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/index.cfm>.

6 Offered for sale on an Internet website, http://www.larusse.ru/index.php?task=good&goods_id=372.

7 On the Soviet-period adaptation of *byliny* and *stariny* in the form of *noviny*, see Miller 1990: 61-3.

8 On the complex image of Berehynia in Ukrainian folk art, see Kononenko’s 2005 article “Goddess Figures in Ukrainian Folk Art,”

9 The official *Rushnyk* of National Unity website is the best source for accessing the documents relating to the conception and creation of the *rushnyk*, as well as photographs:

<http://rushnyk.ukrsov.kiev.ua/4>; additional sources and news reports at http://soippo.edu.ua/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=328%3A2013-02-19-14-01-29&Itemid=1; <http://www.volyn.com.ua/?rub=11&article=0&arch=692>;

<http://shevchenko-museum.com.ua/default/blog/view/216/blog/1/%C2%ABRushnik-Nats%D1%96onalnoyi-YEdnost%D1%96%C2%BB-na-Tarasov%D1%96y-gor%D1%96;>
<http://www.vox.com.ua/data/publ/2008/01/23/obiinyaty-rushnykom-usyuu-ukrainu.html>.

Ukrainian *rushnyky* from the author's collection may be viewed on the following site: <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.210073355695822.45492.140476139322211&type=3>.

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