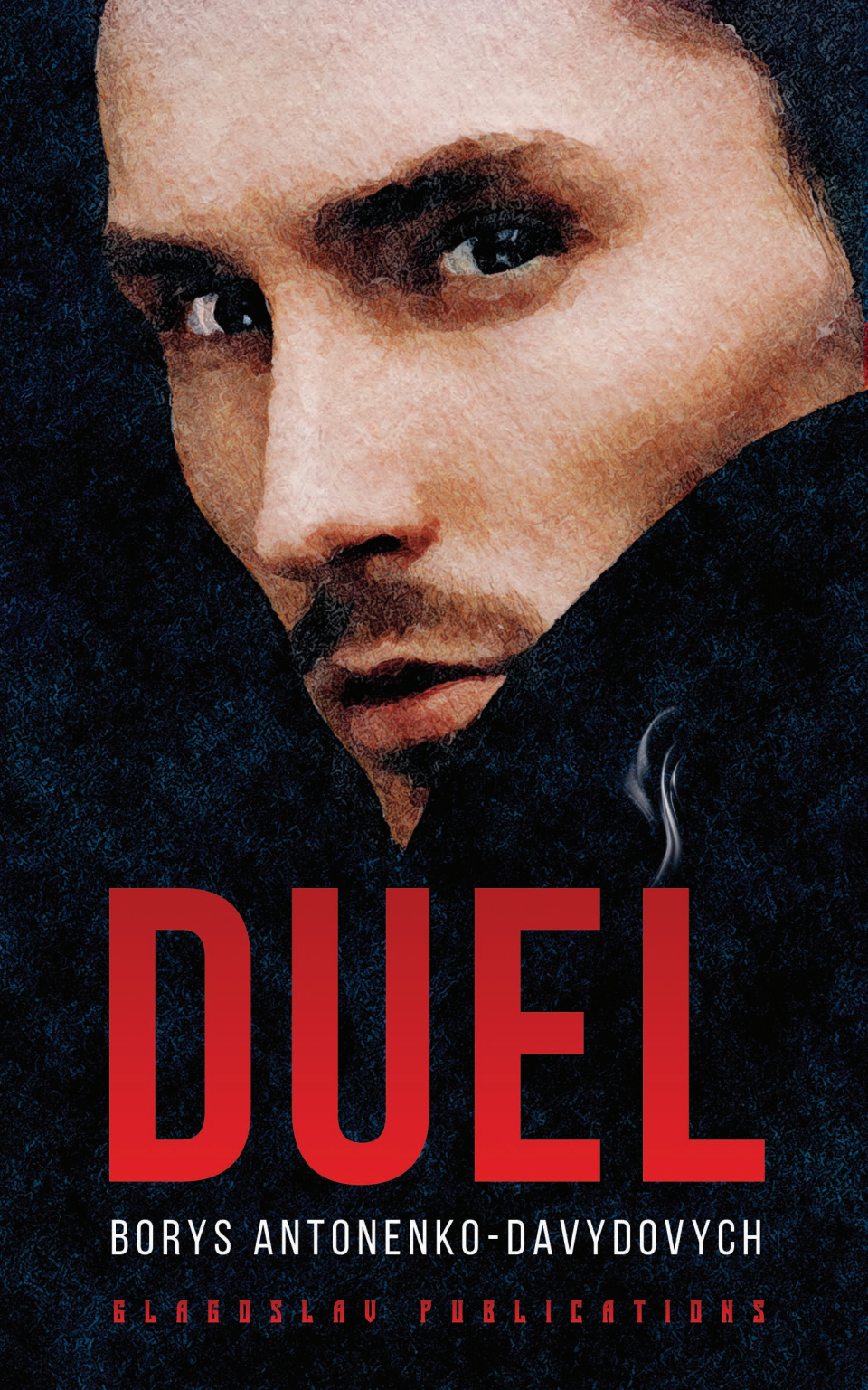

DUEL

BORYS ANTONENKO-DAVYDOVYCH

GLAGOSLAV PUBLICATIONS

DUEL

DUEL

by Borys Antonenko-Davydovych

Translated by Yuri Tkacz

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CONTENTS

BORYS ANTONENKO-DAVYDOVYCH

(1899-1984)

For life one pays only with blood,
Death can only be overcome with death.
Vasyl Ellan

INTRODUCTION

Borys Antonenko-Davydovych (1899-1984) belongs to that colourful group of post-revolutionary writers who resurrected Ukrainian literature. He was born in 1899 in Romny, Poltava Province, into the family of an engine-driver. Before the 1917 revolution he had already finished his secondary education, and later studied at Kyiv University and the people's Institute of Education. In 1920, during the times of militant Communism, he took part in the battles against the anarchist Makhno. Shortly thereafter he headed the Education Department in Okhtyrka, later working in publishing houses and at the Kyiv Cinema Plant.

Antonenko-Davydovych was not only a writer, but also a thorough expert of the Ukrainian language and a translator of books from Russian. Altogether he wrote 24 books. His better works have been reprinted in England, the USA and Australia, as well as being translated into English, Polish, Bulgarian and Russian. The author's early works *included Knights of the Absurd* (1924), *Dusty Silhouettes* (1925), *Took-Took* (1926), *Blue Strawflower* (1927), *Duel* (1928), *Throughout Ukraine* (1930), *The Wings of Flying Artem* (1933).

ln 1934-37, during Russia's rout of Ukrainian culture, when 240 Ukrainian writers perished, Antonenko-Davydovych was sentenced to ten years hard labour in Krasnoyarsk, Siberia. He remained in exile for 21 years, and only returned to Kyiv in 1956, after his rehabilitation.

He resumed writing once more: *Behind the Curtain* (1961), *Mother's Word* (1964), *Selected Works* (1967), *From Near and Far* (1969), *How We Speak* (1970).

However the early 1970s again saw the resumption of arrests, trials and the persecution of Ukrainian patriotism. One hundred and thirty-two writers, artists and scholars signed a protest letter to the regime against the renewed destruction of Ukrainian culture. Antonenko-Davydovych was one of the signatories. From then on his works stopped being published. The KGB began to make frequent searches of his home, confiscating letters, books and manuscripts, and a campaign of attacks was launched in the press.

In the last years of his life he was a sick, hounded man, blind in one eye. His wife, whom he had married in exile, spent periods in psychiatric hospitals until her death in 1982. And two years later, in May 1984, Borys Antonenko-Davydovych himself passed away, his memoirs having been earlier confiscated by the KGB.

Duel (titled *Smert'* in the Ukrainian original) brought the author fame and recognition for his courageous and talented work, but at the same time it brought even greater misery, persecution, and finally – exile. The novel was first published in 1927 in the Kyiv magazine *Life and Revolution*. *Duel* looks at the life and activities of a Party organization during the period of militant Communism. The action takes place in a small provincial town, reminiscent of Okhtyrka, where the author worked in 1920-21. At the time young Borys was a member of the Ukrainian Communist Party, later liquidated in 1924 on orders from the Comintern. Thus the author was well acquainted with Party politics, the circumstances prevailing in the city and the countryside. *Duel* is interesting in that it has no fictional characters, some even retain their real names.

In those days the Party organization assumed control of all aspects of everyday life. The situation was quite tense – the city was surrounded by the hostile countryside, which had no desire to pay levies to the occupying Russian regime. Besides, insurgent bands were organized in the villages to fight the Soviet government.

The novel's central hero is Kost Horobenko, a former Ukrainian nationalist, who now plays an active role in Party life. He has crossed over to the Soviet side, accepted their platform, but his actions, his judgements of people and his thoughts reflect a sustained inconsistency, a constant struggle with his own conscience. He is forever tormented by doubts. The villages had been the base of Ukrainianism, but now he has to venture there with others to collect taxes, arrest and execute people for the slightest resistance. Most of his fellow Party members are newly-arrived Russians or Russified Ukrainians. Though he heads the local Education Department, he must perform many other odious Party duties, often armed.

With a sharp eye for detail, the author has presented us with a whole gallery of Party workers, exploring their mentality and actions. Through Horobenko's eyes we see that the Party treats not only the villages as enemy targets, attacking and wreaking bloody havoc upon them. In the towns they confiscate private libraries and equipment which the Ukrainian intellectuals need to continue with their work.

And so throughout the book our hero, the upstanding Communist is forever duelling with his alter ego, the Ukrainian nationalist.

Dmytro Chub

DUEL

I

Kost Horobenko examined his Party ticket, and this time the familiar and rather ordinary words seemed to him much too expressive and ambiguous:

Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik).

A languorous thought occurred to Kost: what nonsense – to print the word 'Russian' in Ukrainian… And yet actually it wasn't this, which had caught his eye and continually drove him to pull the small pink book from his pocket when he was alone and to stare at the first page.

The whole essence of it, all of its durable force, which had focused his attention over the past few months, was to be found, it seemed, in that quite superfluous word tacked onto the end, hiding inside parentheses, but which in reality was neither superfluous nor ordinary – (Bolshevik)…

'Bolshevik!' This was by no means the same thing as 'communist'. 'Communist' was a new term, and Kost had grown accustomed to it straight away, even associating himself with it. But not with the word 'Bolshevik', that very same Bolshevik who, according to recent terminology had 'borne communism from the north of Russia to Ukraine' on the tips of bayonets – no.

Kost laid his Party ticket on the table and looked about the room. It was quiet. Through an open window came the monotonous twitter of some small ridiculous bird in the orchard. The sun was setting in the west, somewhere behind the leaves of the trees, and its pale rays painted a greyish marbled network on the wall. Books lay scattered

about the room, there was a pair of pants on his pillow, a revolver on the table – all these things were deaf and dumb… Nothing here could eavesdrop on Kost's innermost thoughts, to voice them later in a hushed whisper to the organization's members in some corner behind his back. Kost calmly looked out the window into the orchard and said quietly to himself:

"I am a Bolshevik..."

He wanted to imprint this onto the very depths of his consciousness, but once more failed to do this. Kost became embarrassed and sat down, tired. A light ironical smile played on his lips. He felt uncomfortable. Just as he had once felt when he had deceived his parents by hiding his fail grade in dictation. Was there any difference here? Then it had been a fail grade, and now it was those two stores from which his luckless father had once traded in this very same town, and that high school which remained standing in a park on the corner of two streets, but in which they now held pedagogical courses. It was these things, which irritated his communist conscience or, more simply, his soul; it was this, which stopped him from calmly considering himself a Bolshevik, no different from all the other members of the organization. It was these things.

Kost rested his elbow on the table and thought: 'Why the hell is all this giving me no peace? Father was a petty bourgeois – that's true. It's a fact. What's more, he even kissed the hand of the synodal appointee, the auburn-haired Father Havrylo, and his sister, my aunt, was married a second time to a merchant who was a neophyte – this is true too. It's all true. But father took the trouble to die a year before the Revolution and, heaven preserve him, did well to do so. I detest him because he was my father and am grateful to him that he is no longer around. Now I

have no one. All this is quite true. I am not responsible for my parents. And anyway: some were destined to be heirs of their class and others – renegades. Let it be, according to their theory, that I'm a petty-bourgeois intellectual! Although I see it a little differently – as a renegade of the petty bourgeoisie. It's more important how I see myself, than how someone else sees me. And I needn't reproach myself! Yes, I was a Ukrainian nationalist, I supported the head of the district branch of the National Alliance;[1] while still a moustacheless youth, fresh out of high school, I spoke at meetings in this town in 1917, crucifying myself at various gatherings in support of 'Mother Ukraine', calling as my witness the long-forgotten names of Cossack leaders such as Sirko and Hordiyenko. This is all fact and I'm not hiding it from anyone. But that's all in the past, and now I'm a…'

Kost paused again but strained and said aloud: "Bolshevik!"

Suddenly he recalled a folk tale from school or perhaps his childhood years, and it made him want to laugh and feel sad.

An alchemist had been seeking his philosopher's stone. He prayed to all the saints he knew, appealed to the Virgin Mary, and finally asked Christ Himself to help him, but all were silent, just like the ordinary stone of which his house was built. Then the alchemist cursed them all and turned to the devil. Satan eagerly agreed to help, but with one proviso: 'You'll find what you're seeking. There's only one condition, my friend: don't think of polar bears for a week'. The poor alchemist, who probably hadn't ever seriously thought about bears during his long life, let alone

1 Ukrainian National Alliance (*Natsional'nyi soiuz*) is an alliance of socialist parties opposed to Skoropadsky's monarchist Hetmanite government in Kyiv in 1918.

polar bears, could not think of anything else even for a moment the rest of that week.

Horobenko smiled and thought: 'Bolshevik – this is my polar bear, but what philosopher's stone am I seeking...?'

He replaced the Party card in his pocket, picked up his revolver, securely closed the window and left the house.

This detestable provincial town with its ridiculous dirty lanes, that shed in the marketplace, those awful pink merchant's houses, a town where everyone knew every trifle about one another and were thoroughly sick of each other – this town was witness to his past. It knew everything. Here was the public hall. His father had stood here with the tsar's portrait during a demonstration to mark the taking of Peremyshl; here was the marketplace and beyond it, to the left, the street where Nadia had lived with her aunt…

Kost strode quickly across the soft dust of the marketplace. The market was dead now. The half-destroyed stalls repugnantly projected their partly rotted rafters. They were the victims of the municipal department's struggle with private enterprise. The stalls stank of human excrement and the long row of meat stalls looked like collapsed horse skeletons.

In one corner several women were selling apples, squatting like accursed souls against the stone wall of a building; further on stood a peasant cart, and to one side of it was a wall with a sign cut in two by a downpipe:

Sapozhnaya masterskaya Uezdso/besa[2]

The downpipe had mercilessly split the two parts of the Russian word, making the first part '*Uezdso*' feel

2 Cobbler's Workshop of the District Social Security Office.

orphaned and lonely, however the '*besa*'[3] seemed quite appropriate. It had derisively jumped away from the downpipe and, pointing the tongue of its 'b' into the air, it laughed derisively at the pious townsfolk.

This led the women selling at the market, once wives of merchants and treasurers, to spread all kinds of uncertain rumours about the Antichrist (see, the authorities were also admitting that it was the devil's…).

An unexpected thought occurred to Horobenko: 'Had it been written in Ukrainian, this wouldn't have happened, even if the downpipe had split the sign in two.' However, he immediately became ashamed of his own primitivism. He had focused his attention on the wall not because of the '*besa*', but because the Petliurites had executed someone here. Horobenko smiled to himself:

'Actually, looking at it logically, given the climate of those days, I too should have been executed, and it's very strange that this never happened… True, I wasn't in the army, I was only involved in cheap politics, so to speak, but all the same…'

Horobenko crossed the wide paved main street and ascended the stairs of an entrance to a building. There had once been a bank here, where the father of a friend of his from the high school had worked, but now this was a workers club. Because of a lack of space in the District Party Committee offices, the organization's general meetings were usually held here.

Yellowed garlands of pine, paper flags and portraits of leaders hung sloppily on the walls, alongside posters sullied by flies and someone's dirty fingers, there was an untuned piano on which someone was forever hammering out The International – all this looked cold and

3 Genitive case of the Russian *bes*, meaning devil.

uninviting. There was no trace of a caring hand here and the place lacked spirit. People appeared here suddenly. They filled the hall with a noisy hubbub, bringing with them the smell of their skin, tar, grease, *makhorka*[4] tobacco, even the dust of country roads, and then chairs were scattered about, the floor became littered with cigarette butts and the room filled with a pall of thick bluish smoke. But when the people left, the room became quiet, empty, pervaded by sadness, and resembled a burnt-out ruin.

The general meeting had not yet begun. Party members were filing into the hall, drifting into corners in small groups.

Slavina rushed up to Horobenko. Her close-cropped hair did not suit her gaunt face, and he was quite annoyed by the ring on her finger.

"Comrade Garabyenko. Comrade Garabyenko." With her bony fingers she grabbed hold of his shirt button and began to twist it about mercilessly.

"Where have you been hiding? I really must talk to you."

Her Russian, with its fake Moscow accent, immediately fell several tones and lapsed into whispers. She gradually dragged Horobenko off into a far corner.

"You know… This is impossible…! This undermines our integrity. Firsov was drunk when he spoke at the teachers' meeting yesterday…! This must be included in the minutes without fail... If only you knew how he..."

Horobenko was looking for a way to get rid of her. This head of socialist education was really far too tiresome. He pushed his cap back and replied languidly:

"These are trifles, Comrade Slavina, now isn't the time to discuss them…"

---

4 A variety of strong tobacco commonly grown in villages.

Popelnachenko slid his hands deep into his trouser pockets and contemptuously screwed up his eyes with their long black eyelashes: "You, brother, I'm telling you Horobenko, you're a genuine one-hundred-percent intellectual. You should be sent off three times or so to deal with the kulak rubbish – then you'd be hardened, but the way you are now…"

Popynaka didn't finish. He choked in a fit of coughing, which resounded loudly throughout the room, bouncing off the ceiling, and left everyone feeling uncomfortable. People standing in groups nearby grew silent. A woman came running up with a rusty mug of water.

Popelnachenko waved his arms about and angrily spat to one side. Horobenko studied Popelnachenko's contorted figure and a thought drifted through his head like a wisp of cigarette smoke:

'He's a cynic all the same…'

At the table the Party Committee secretary, Krycheyev, yelled loudly: "Comrades, please take your seats! Please…"

He hammered his fists against the plywood and then said in a calm monotone, as if he was talking to someone in a corner of the room, rather than addressing a hall filled with Party members: "I propose we elect a chairman and a secretary…"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Borys Antonenko-Davydovych was born on 5 August 1899 in Romny, Poltava Province, Ukraine into a working-class family. His early years were spent in Briansk, Russia. Borys learnt Ukrainian at six, after the family returned to Okhtyrka in Ukraine.

His father died in the First World War. After finishing high school in 1917, Borys left to study at Kharkiv University, then later transferred to the Kyiv Educational Institute. Though his first literary efforts were in Russian, the political struggle in Ukraine during the 1917 Revolution prompted him to start writing in Ukrainian.

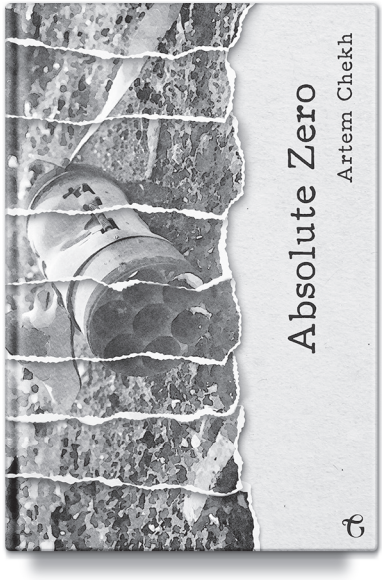
His most significant early works were *Smert'* [Death, 1927; in English *Duel*, 1986], *Zemleiu ukrains'koiu* [Through Ukrainian Lands, 1929] and *Pechatka* [The Seal, 1930].

After groundless attacks in the press and accusations of nationalism, Antonenko-Davydovych was arrested in 1935 and sentenced to ten years in labour camps. He returned to Kyiv in 1956, an ailing man. Notwithstanding this, he was very active in Ukrainian literature during the 'Thaw' of the 1960s, his most popular novel of this period being *Za shyrmoiu* (*Behind the Curtain*, 1962; in English 1980). During the Brezhnev period of the 1970s he was strenuously persecuted by the authorities for his involvement in the dissident movement and his works stopped being published.

He is the author of 24 books, many of which have been translated into the languages of the former USSR.

ABSOLUTE ZERO

by Artem Chekh



The book is a first person account of a soldier's journey, and is based on Artem Chekh's diary that he wrote while and after his service in the war in Donbas. One of the most important messages the book conveys is that war means pain. Chekh is not showing the reader any heroic combat, focusing instead on the quiet, mundane, and harsh soldier's life. Chekh masterfully selects the most poignant details of this kind of life.

Artem Chekh (1985) is a contemporary Ukrainian writer, author of more than ten books of fiction and essays. *Absolute Zero* (2017), an account of Chekh's service in the army in the war in Donbas, is one of his latest books, for which he became a recipient of several prestigious awards in Ukraine, such as the Joseph Conrad Prize (2019), the Gogol Prize (2018), the Voyin Svitla (2018), and the Litaktsent Prize (2017). This is his first book-length translation into English.

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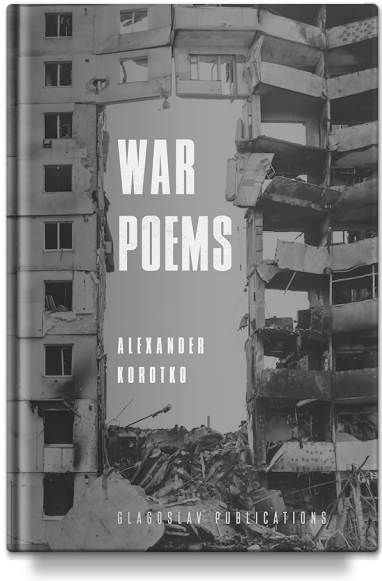
WAR POEMS

by Alexander Korotko



Soon after Russia invaded Ukraine on 24th February 2022, author and poet Alexander Korotko began to set down as poetry the turbulent responses at the emotional, philosophical and simply human levels evoked by the resulting war. Thus, we read in the 88 poems in this volume – completed in just less than 100 days – of the seemingly endless wail of sirens; of sheltering in cellars and tunnels; of the celebrated Ukrainian steppe, churned by tanks; the dead – "our killed, have become our Saviour Angels"; and whole poems devoted to Irpin and Mariupol as the atrocities there and elsewhere became known. Korotko is not without compassion for the Russian soldier – "Russian soldier, what did you forget in my land? We had grief enough without you." – and the soldier's mother when she receives his dead body as "cargo 200". Neither does he conceal his frustration with Ukraine's allies – "we pay the West for help with blood, but the West makes no haste to deliver."

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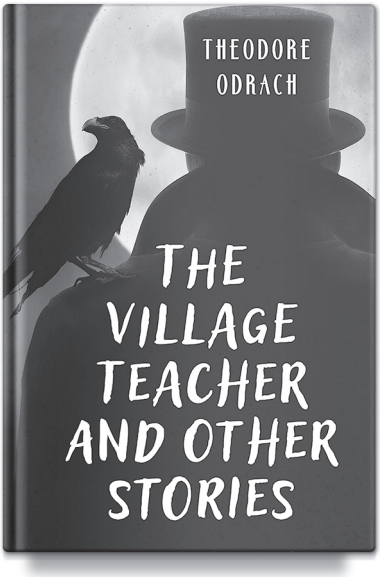
THE VILLAGE TEACHER AND OTHER STORIES

by Theodore Odrach



The twenty-two stories in this collection, set mostly in Eastern Europe during World War Two, depict a world fraught with conflict and chaos. Theodore Odrach is witness to the horrors that surround him, and as both an investigative journalist and a skilful storyteller, using humor and irony, he guides us through his remarkable narratives. His writing style is clean and spare, yet at the same time compelling and complex. There is no short supply of triumph and catastrophe, courage and cowardice, good and evil, as they impact the lives of ordinary people.

In "Benny's Story", a group of prisoners fight to survive despite horrific circumstances; in "Lickspittles", the absurdity of an émigré writer's life is highlighted; in "Blood", a young man travels to a distant city in search of his lost love; in "Whistle Stop", two German soldiers fight boredom in an out-of-the-way outpost, only to see their world crumble and fall.

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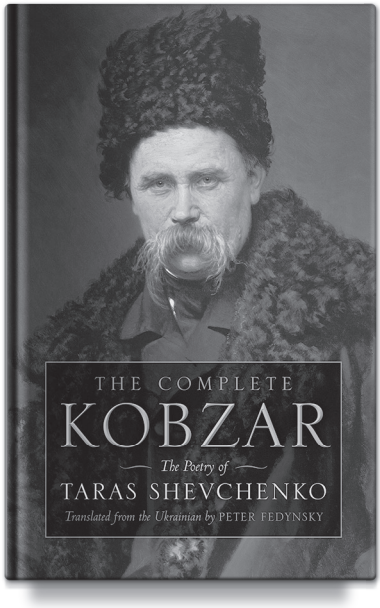
The Complete
KOBZAR
by Taras Shevchenko



Masterfully fulfilled by Peter Fedynsky, Voice of America journalist and expert on Ukrainian studies, this first ever English translation of the complete *Kobzar* brings out Ukraine's rich cultural heritage.

As a foundational text, The *Kobzar* has played an important role in galvanizing the Ukrainian identity and in the development of Ukraine's written language and Ukrainian literature. The first editions had been censored by the Russian czar, but the book still made an enduring impact on Ukrainian culture. There is no reliable count of how many editions of the book have been published, but an official estimate made in 1976 put the figure in Ukraine at 110 during the Soviet period alone. That figure does not include Kobzars released before and after both in Ukraine and abroad. A multitude of translations of Shevchenko's verse into Slavic, Germanic and Romance languages, as well as Chinese, Japanese, Bengali, and many others attest to his impact on world culture as well.

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More coming . . .

The central character in the gripping, psychological novel *Duel* is the Ukrainian intellectual Kost Horobenko. Set in the first years of the new Soviet Ukrainian state, the period of militant Communism, Horobenko, is forever duelling with his alter ego, the Ukrainian nationalist.

This novel is one of a number of early works from the 1920s by Borys Antonenko-Davydovych, in which the writer tries to analyse the fate of intellectuals during the revolution in the Russian Empire, in particular the fate of those who were initially active in the Ukrainian national revival, and later, because of changed circumstances, were forced to switch to cooperating with the Soviet authorities. Of Antonenko-Davydovych's works devoted to this question, it is the largest and most profound, according to the literary critic Hryhoriy Kostiuk, and is psychologically complex and multifaceted. The works by Antonenko-Davydovych were welcomed for his rather sharp, satirical view of life.

The novel was first published in the magazine *Zhyttia i revoliutsiia* in 1927 (iss. 10-12). It was subsequently published in this English translation by Lastivka Press in 1986, with a print run of 2000 copies, and it has been out of print for many years.

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