Tatiana Tairova-Yakovleva, *Ivan Mazepa and the Russian Empire*, Jan Surer trans., McGill-Queens University Press/CIUS Press: Edmonton, 2020; 440 pp., 1 map; 9780228001744, $49.95 (pbk)

Reviewed by: Gary Marker, *Stony Brook University, USA*

This outstanding book by Tatiana Tairova-Yakovleva, a revised and updated translation of the author's 2007 book, *Ivan Mazepa i Rossiiskaia Imperiia: Istoriia 'predatel'stva'*, deserves a large audience. The appendices have been dropped, as has much of the commentary in the footnotes, but otherwise the organization, basic narrative and fundamental arguments remain the same. The translation also includes a great

deal of additional research done (largely in Moscow archives) subsequent to the first edition, as well as reassessments of some critical details. The result is an exhaustively researched monograph.

The author has an unabashedly revisionist brief: to debunk the many myths and stereotypes that surround Mazepa, his embrace of Sweden in the summer of 1708 in the depths of the Northern War, and his larger aspirations for Ukraine during his time as Hetman. The narrative proceeds in a detective-like manner, via a sharp-eyed review of the documentary evidence, private letters, decrees, secret correspondence, and the on-the-scene accounts of foreigners such as Charles Whitworth and Patrick Gordon, whom she at times presents as informed and relatively nonpartisan observers. Where appropriate, she does not shy away from criticizing other scholars – even highly esteemed ones – both on empirical and explanatory grounds. She takes almost nothing at face value, wise for any historian but especially so for one trying to make sense of Mazepa, his time and place, a milieu in which the relationship between words and actuality was rarely certain. She acknowledges that much remains opaque and that communication between leading figures likely obscured – more often than not by design – as much it revealed. Thus, her conclusions are often phrased conditionally and speculatively, but never without foundation.

Several of the chapters are exceptionally well argued: the discussion of Mazepa and the Right Bank (ch. 5); his complicated relations with Russian officials in Moscow and in Ukraine (chs 2, 8 and 9); and most importantly, the analysis of the critical events of the Northern War. She convincingly rejects the views, philo-Russian and philo-Ukrainian alike, that Mazepa had a long-term vision or plan to break with Peter. In what is a tour-de-force reconstruction, she pieces together moment-by-moment the events of 1707–1708 in order to show the rapidly deteriorating situation on the ground, in particular Peter's proposed scorched-earth plan that, if implemented, would have destroyed and systematically depopulated the fields of both Left and Right Bank Ukraine. She deems this set of fraught options 'the tragedy of choice'.

One of the book's strengths is its care in situating Mazepa's rule against the backdrop of other Hetmans before him, in particular Ivan Samoilovych and Dmitro Doroshenko. It also provides a vivid series of accounts regarding the unsettled nature of political relations throughout Mazepa's long reign as Hetman, both within the Hetmanate(s) and between them and the states among whom they existed. True, the Ruin had ended, but its legacy of instability and violent struggle remained as an ongoing fact of life. Tairova-Yakovleva makes it clear that all of these polities constantly sought not just to learn the truth about each other's politics, policies and choice of leaders, but to influence them as well. Mazepa understood these fragilities, witness his extensive networks of secret informers and his deft use of language, almost invariably lending itself to multiple readings.

One question that hovers in the background throughout the book concerns the arc or trajectory of Mazepa's rule – whether, for example, he was working to construct a new type of sovereignty for the Hetmanate, something akin to statehood with all the powers of sovereignty, taxation and legislation. In some places Tairova-Yakovleva suggests that state-building was indeed his vision. This comes through, for example, in the extended

discussion of lease-holding as well as the status of the armed forces under his command. It is similarly implied in the characterization of his *universaly*, which sound more and more like legislative decrees as the book develops. Elsewhere, however, the narrative conveys something more contingent and less clearly defined, an unending attempt by Mazepa to navigate the inescapable realities brought on by the unstable geopolitics and contested borders lying between the Polish Commonwealth, Muscovy, Sweden, Crimea, and the Porte, not to mention the changing borders and complicated relationships among the various Hetmanates themselves. One way to interrogate this creative interpretative tension might be to integrate some conceptual approaches from recent empire studies, such as layered and segmented sovereignty or negotiated spaces of borderlands.

A final thought: both the Russian and English edition of this unstintingly scholarly work end on a reflective and philosophical note, worth quoting in light of Russia's current war against Ukraine. 'One would like to believe that the time has come … to learn from the tragedies and mistakes of our ancestors, and to listen to and understand one another'. Alas, it appears, not yet.