

BOOK REVIEW:

**Iurii Shapoval, (2022) *Neproshchenyi: Oleksandr Dovzhenko i komunistychni spetssluzhby*
[from Ukr.: Unforgiven: Oleksandr Dovzhenko and the Communist Secret Services].
Kyiv, Warsaw: Instytut politychnykh i etnonatsional'nykh doslidzhen' NANU;
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One hallmark of Yuri Shapoval's prolific historical writing has been intense interrogation of archival sources with the objective of addressing issues concerning the past of Ukraine that have contemporary urgency. Another is this author's ability to fascinate a non-specialist audience—whether readers of his captivatingly narrated books or viewers of his video documentaries. Both features are on prominent display in Shapoval's book on Oleksandr Dovzhenko, Ukraine's most revered filmmaker and one of the very few Ukrainian contributors to global modernism whose Ukrainianness the appropriation mechanisms of Soviet colonialism could not entirely occlude.

The immediate objective of the study is to illuminate Dovzhenko “not as an icon, but as an absolutely real, highly impulsive and vulnerable person with virtues and failings, pluses and minuses” (Shapoval 2022: 14), correcting the all-too-hagiographical portraiture characteristic of a good part of what Shapoval, not without irony, calls “the boundless, mightily turbulent and sometimes uncertain seas of Dovzhenko studies” (Shapoval 2022: 18) or “the Mont Blanc of published and unpublished Dovzhenkiana” (ibid. 54). But Shapoval's inquiry, marshalling as it does the 420 separate documents (not counting addenda to many of them) contained in the four volumes of Dovzhenko's dossier that were put together by the KGB and its organisational predecessors and today repose in the archives of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU, Sluzhba Bezpeky Ukrainy), does far more than refine our understanding of the life of an eminent individual. It reveals in fine-grained detail the life experience of people involved in the Soviet culture industry—the mortal risks they faced, the anxieties and humiliations they felt, and the adaptation strategies, including calumniating and betraying their colleagues, that they adopted in order to survive. It is sobering to realize that respected figures of the standing of the poet Mykola Bazhan and the painter Mykola Hlushchenko were regular informers. Clarifying these psychological and cultural legacies of totalitarian oppression as part of the process of overcoming them is one of the tasks that Shapoval's study—like much of his other work on the Soviet period—implicitly addresses.

Shapoval's encounter with the secret documentary record, as the author confesses, “upturned [his] image of Dovzhenko as indisputably an adept of the communist system, albeit with distinctly Ukrainian traces” (ibid. 34) and propelled the realization that, “in

parallel to his public, official life this laureate of the Stalin Prize, this member of various state and community commissions, committees and councils, this person who seemed so fully integrated into the system possessed such an extensive nonconformist inner life” (ibid. 14). Two strands of such nonconformity made him intrinsically suspect to the security organs. One was his lifelong determination to carve out for himself a space where he would be free to pursue his creative urges—a determination that, Shapoval argues, Dovzhenko could partly realise only up to the creation of *Earth* (1930); thereafter it was systematically frustrated, his subsequent output being fully at the behest of the party-state. Dovzhenko’s other irreducibly intransigent attribute was his attachment to Ukraine—its landscapes, people and culture. It was this emotional affiliation that caused Dovzhenko’s dossier to be labelled with the “coloration” (*okraska*: in the jargon of the organs the term referred to the main reason for regarding a subject as suspect) of “Ukrainian counterrevolution” and, later, “active participation in a Ukrainian nationalist organisation” (ibid. 26).

These two themes figure throughout the book’s seven chapters, of which the first is the most contextual. It explains the nature of the material that the dossier presents for analysis—in the first instance, the genre of the *donos*. A term not easily rendered in English, its meaning rests between “denunciation” and “report”: “a communication by a private person to representatives of the governing authority on the territory in question of information concerning a person’s activities which, from the point of view of the authority, are blameworthy” (ibid. 23). There are also operatives’ reports, abstracts of monitored correspondence and telephone calls, excerpts from relevant testimonies by arrestees and prisoners, and commentaries and reports compiled by the organs themselves.

This kind of evidence raises the methodological question which Shapoval formulates in the title of the chapter: “Can one build a picture of a person on the basis of the words of informers?” The answer, never stated directly, is implicit in the whole of the book. Of course, the *donosy* reflect the interest of the informers in protecting their own backs by telling the organs what they wish to hear; sometimes they bear the marks of outright malice or envy. Often what they present as fact can neither be corroborated nor disproved. Yet, taken together and compared with other sources, including published ones (Dovzhenko’s diaries, for example), they enable the accumulation and crystallization of insights and even the unveiling of previously unknown or vaguely suspected states of affairs.

Chapter One also offers a psychological portrait of Dovzhenko, in whom Shapoval ventures to detect hypomanic features: an overestimation of one’s talents and capacities; a tendency toward precipitate, impulsive decisions; eloquence spilling over into garrulousness; attention-seeking and egocentricity; and a restlessly energetic mind, constantly brimming with ideas and plans (ibid. 46). The diagnosis is more than adequately borne out by the remainder of the book.

Chapter Two, which deals with the reasons why Dovzhenko attracted the interest of the organs in the first place, adduces evidence showing that in the post-revolutionary wars of 1917-1920 Dovzhenko sided with the Ukrainian People’s Republic. He even bore

arms for the Republic and took part in its suppression of the pro-Bolshevik rebellion in the Kyiv Arsenal—an event that he later dramatized from the opposite, emphatically Soviet perspective in his 1929 film *Arsenal*. Ideologically socialist but dedicated to independence for Ukraine, the Republic was demonized throughout the Soviet period as an embodiment of pernicious nationalism. In Shapoval's judgment, Dovzhenko's conversion to the Soviet ideology was genuine, though he was often bitter in his private critique of its implementation. Yet his early participation in the Ukrainian struggle for independence forever tarred him with the brush of Ukrainian nationalism, thus indelibly identifying him as an enemy of the system.

Chapter Three is dedicated to the agents of the organs of state security—who they were, how they were recruited and how they operated. Chapter Four seeks to clarify the influence over Dovzhenko of his wife of many years, Yuliia Solntseva. Here, as elsewhere, Shapoval reads the documents as telling a story that is full of ambiguities. Solntseva emerges, on the one hand, as a staunch defender and advocate of Dovzhenko and his reputation, on the other—as having little understanding of the importance for Dovzhenko of his Ukrainian identity and doing what she could to put him at odds with his Ukrainian friends, deflect him from Ukrainian projects, and anchor him firmly in Moscow.

The fifth chapter addresses a theme which, as time progressed, became increasingly prevalent in the *donosy* against Dovzhenko: his alleged anti-Semitism (a topic, Shapoval notes, discreetly passed over in most of the literature on Dovzhenko). Shapoval reads the evidence as pointing, not to an anti-Semitic mindset on Dovzhenko's part, but to sporadic outbursts of anti-Jewish rhetoric that stemmed from his emotive and poorly controlled personality and from conflicts with particular rivals of Jewish background in a context where the influence of Jews in the Soviet film industry was considerable. Chapter Six contemplates in chronological order the gestation of Dovzhenko's films and the attendant frustrations, intrigues and interventions by political heavyweights, including Stalin; Chapter Seven explores Dovzhenko's similar tribulations during the war and the post-war period.

Shapoval's splendid book enriches considerably our factual and contextual grasp of Dovzhenko's life and the painful complexities of his interactions with a vicious political system. Its extensive footnotes contain another invaluable gift: information about the lives and careers of the many individuals at the intersection of Soviet politics and culture with whom Dovzhenko had dealings. One important field of issues, however, Shapoval raises only peripherally. The genius of Dovzhenko's cinema, he writes, "should not stand in the way of problematising the fact that part of his artistic output was in the service of a totalitarian regime" (ibid. 15). Indeed it should not. But should one not go further and demand that judgments of the aesthetic merit of a work of art not be isolated from consideration of its ethical validity? Can it be a matter of indifference to Dovzhenko's standing as an artist that his much-extolled *Earth*, for example, collaborates in the inhumane project of demonizing the less impoverished among the peasantry as class enemies? How the morality of Dovzhenko's films was discreetly overlooked in the process of establishing his exalted place in the canon of cinema by an unlikely alliance of Soviet propagandists, Western film historians keen to amplify the Soviet contribution to the

development of the cinematic arts, and advocates of Ukrainian culture in the USSR and abroad unwilling to desecrate one of the few internationally recognized Ukrainian modernist icons, is a history that remains to be written.

Bibliography:

Shapoval, Iurii. (2022) *Neproshchenyi: Oleksandr Dovzhenko i komunistychni spetssluzhby* [from Ukr.: Unforgiven: Oleksandr Dovzhenko and the Communist Secret Services]. Kyiv, Warsaw: Instytut politychnykh i etnonatsional'nykh doslidzhen' NANU; Instytut Studiów Politycznych Polskiej Akademii Nauk.