

**(Re)discovering Ukrainianness: Hutsul Folk Culture and Ukrainian Identity in
Soviet Film, 1939-1941**

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Abstract

This article examines the Soviet encounter with the Hutsul highlanders of the Eastern Carpathian mountains following the Soviet annexation of eastern Poland in 1939. It demonstrates that the period from September 1939 to June 1941 saw a wave of interest in Hutsul traditional practices across the Soviet cultural sphere that influenced expressions of Ukrainian identity in the USSR. Hutsul folk customs, clothing and handicrafts are displayed in detail in the two most prominent documentaries propagating the Soviet takeover of the Ukrainian west, Oleksandr Dovzhenko's *The Liberation* and Iuliia Solntseva's *Bukovyna Is a Ukrainian Land* (both 1940).

Through close analysis of the Carpathian sequences of these films and an examination of the attention given to the highlanders elsewhere in Soviet media, the article reveals how Soviet cultural practitioners view the Hutsuls through an ethnographic gaze that emphasises both their exoticism and their fundamental Ukrainianness. Drawing off a variety of precedents (both Soviet and non-Soviet), the films and other sources depicting Hutsul life contribute to a vision of Ukrainian identity defined by pre-modern culture and an absence of modernity, simultaneously furthering Ukrainian patriotism within the USSR and perpetuating imperialist perceptions of a civilisational gap between Ukraine and the Soviet centre.

Keywords: Soviet cinema; Ukrainian identity; Hutsuls; folk culture; ethnographic gaze; exoticism

Introduction

In September 1939, less than six weeks after the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union both invaded Poland, swiftly defeated its military and partitioned the country, leaving the Red Army in control of half of its territory. The annexation of eastern Poland, soon formalised when the newly christened Western Ukraine and Western Belarus were incorporated into the Ukrainian and Belarusian SSRs in November 1939, was justified by the Soviet authorities on predominantly national grounds as a humanitarian act necessary to protect Eastern Slavs from Polish oppression and from the lawlessness seemingly created by the collapse of the Polish state. The dismantling of Poland was the first of multiple Soviet territorial expansions in the USSR's western borderlands between 1939 and 1941 and its consequences were especially pronounced for Soviet Ukraine itself, which also gained the small territory of northern Bukovyna from Romania in June 1940. The populations of ethnic Ukrainians on both sides of the old Polish-Soviet border had been united into a single entity under Soviet rule, ending centuries of separation between the western and central/eastern Ukrainian lands and beginning a tumultuous phase of Sovietisation in the newly annexed provinces.¹ Yet the takeover of western Ukraine also had a profound impact on how Ukrainian identity was understood and expressed in the USSR more broadly in the short twenty-one-

¹ Though the urban centres of western Ukraine were dominated by Poles and Jews, Ukrainian peasants constituted a substantial majority of the region's larger rural population.

month period from September 1939 to the outbreak of war with Germany in June 1941.

This article presents a case study of the Stalinist state's expansion into the Ukrainian west, namely the Soviet encounter with the Hutsuls, a highland people living in the Eastern Carpathian mountains known for their colourful clothing and distinctive folk customs. The appearance, crafts and festivities of the Hutsuls are attentively depicted in two documentaries made to publicise the annexations, Oleksandr Dovzhenko's *The Liberation* (Russian: *Osvobozhdenie*, Ukrainian: *Vyzvolennia*)² and his wife and fellow filmmaker Iuliia Solntseva's *Bukovyna Is a Ukrainian Land* (Russian: *Bukovina – zemlia ukrainskaia*, Ukrainian: *Bukovyna – zemlia ukrains'ka*, both 1940).³ These films, however, are but two examples of a broader wave of interest in Hutsul practices across the Soviet cultural sphere between 1939 and 1941. Through a close analysis of the relevant sequences of *The Liberation* and *Bukovyna* and an exploration of the attention given to the highlanders in other media, I will trace how the Hutsuls became a central component of a Soviet vision of Ukrainianness defined by rural folk practices and pre-modern culture, a formulation that drew from both Soviet and non-Soviet precedents and would have a lasting impact on understandings of Ukrainian identity.

The Carpathians in Dovzhenko's *The Liberation*

² The film's full title is *The Liberation of the Ukrainian and Belarusian Lands from the Yoke of the Polish Lords and the Reunification of the Brother-Nations into a United Family* (*Osvobozhdenie ukrainskikh i belorusskikh zemel' ot gnet' pol'skikh panov i vossoedinenie narodov-brat'ev v edinuiu sem'iu*).

³ Each film was prepared and released in both Russian and Ukrainian-language versions, though the Russian versions are more easily accessible. The films' voiceover was read in each language by Leonid Khmara.

The first film to introduce the Carpathian highlands and their Hutsul inhabitants to Soviet audiences was Dovzhenko's *The Liberation*, the most prominent documentary dedicated to the USSR's annexation of the western Ukrainian and Belarusian lands from Poland. Work on *The Liberation* was begun almost as soon as Red Army control had been established in the region, since Dovzhenko, Solntseva and a team of camera operators led by Iurii Iekel'chyk (all wearing military uniforms) were sent out to L'viv in late September 1939, mere days after the city's Polish authorities had surrendered (Teliuk 2018). Depicting first the poverty and subjugation endured by the Ukrainian and Belarusian labouring masses under Polish rule before presenting scenes of Red Army troops being welcomed by the population as liberators, the documentary focuses predominantly on the cities and lowland countryside of the former Polish east and displays events such as the Ukrainisation of L'viv University, the revitalisation of the oil industry in Boryslav and Drohobych, and the redistribution of land to the peasantry in rural areas. In addition, much of the film's running length is dedicated to the formal incorporation of the annexed territories into the USSR, with particular attention given to the staged elections to the People's Assembly of Western Ukraine in October 1939 and speeches by assembly delegates in L'viv later that month. Nonetheless, Dovzhenko's work does contain a sequence on the Hutsuls and their mountainous home environment that reveals much about Soviet attitudes towards the highlanders during their early encounters.

Lasting four minutes in total, the sequence introduces the Hutsul region predominantly through images of its natural features, containing shots of picturesque mountain slopes, valleys, forests and the rivers Prut and Cheremosh. Dovzhenko next presents two highly performative episodes displaying the Hutsuls themselves, each

designed to showcase the highlanders' embrace of Soviet power. In the first, a large gathering of Hutsuls in full traditional dress attends an open-air pre-election rally held to propagate the benefits of state socialism and to encourage participation in the elections to the People's Assembly. The second, more visually striking episode shows a procession of Hutsuls carrying banners expressing support for Soviet rule, followed by a scene of folk celebrations replete with local styles of music and dance. Though the Soviet authorities justified their annexation of the region through a discourse of national liberation that emphasised the 'brotherly' bonds binding all Eastern Slavic nations, *The Liberation* presents an unmistakably hierarchical relationship between Soviet representatives and Hutsuls, where the latter's role is to listen passively and demonstrate loyalty to the former. The sequence also serves as a reminder of the simultaneously artistic and political role adopted by Soviet cultural practitioners in the lands recently taken over by the Red Army, since the speaker shown on screen addressing the Hutsul election rally is none other than Dovzhenko himself. It is well documented that, while in western Ukraine, Dovzhenko combined his duties as filmmaker with those of political activist. On 28 October 1939, he addressed the People's Assembly of Western Ukraine in L'viv on the day the body formally requested the region's incorporation into the Ukrainian SSR, while theorist and critic Viktor Shklovskii notes in his memoirs that he accompanied Dovzhenko to the Carpathians where the director delivered passionate speeches about the unification of Ukraine under Soviet rule at various gatherings in Hutsul villages ("Narodnoe sobranie" 1939, 2; Shklovskii 1966, 537-538). In the context of artistic works celebrating Soviet territorial expansion, then, it is impossible to disentangle thoroughly the cultural from the political, particularly in the case of Dovzhenko who actively blurred the distinction between the two, no doubt eager to demonstrate his

loyalty to the Stalinist authorities after spending much of the 1930s in a position of political vulnerability.⁴

From the outset of the highland sequence, *The Liberation* places emphasis on the innate ties between the Hutsuls and their surrounding natural environment. The presentation of the region begins with two wide shots that each show small rural houses towered over by the sloping Carpathian hills, followed by two panoramic images of mountain streams and lush wooded valleys stretching far into the distance. These opening four shots, accompanied by the sound of female voices singing a Ukrainian folk song in two-part harmony, contain no human figures, instead allowing the viewer to indulge in the region's picturesque nature. Before the local inhabitants are even seen, the film implies the Hutsuls' harmonious coexistence with their surroundings through images of their architecture, since subsequent shots displaying in detail a peasant cottage (or *khata*) and a wooden Orthodox church appear on screen surrounded by natural features, set in each case against a backdrop of tall forested hillsides (Figure 1). The film's frequent use of wide shots, showing not only Hutsul constructions but also their position against a landscape, serves to convey the notion that the highlanders exist apart from civilisation in the lowlands and portrays them as living in balance with, and perhaps even emerging from, the nature of the Carpathians. It is worth noting that throughout the sequence the Hutsuls themselves are repeatedly seen with mountains in the background, suggesting that for the filming team Hutsuls are defined by their exotic highland environment and its distance from any semblance of modernity. Katerina Clark (2011, 276-306) argues that late-1930s Stalinist culture was often defined by an 'imperial sublime' that placed emphasis on

⁴ On Dovzhenko's political difficulties in the 1930s, see Liber (2002), 120-153.

the overawing scale of natural landscapes in peripheral regions as a preface to their being subdued by representatives of Soviet power. In *The Liberation*, by contrast, the Carpathian landscape is beautiful but unthreatening, an impression partly aided by the absence of especially tall mountains in the Hutsul region. In addition, though, the highlanders' ease within their natural environment, together with their folk customs (see below), contributes to an impression in the film that the Hutsuls and their Carpathian home exude an ancient Ukrainian (and, by extension, Slavic) essence, requiring not domestication but merely restoration to their 'natural home' in the Ukrainian SSR.

[Insert figures 1a and 1b side by side]

Figure 1. Architecture in harmony with nature. *The Liberation* (Oleksandr Dovzhenko, 1940).

After introducing the viewer to the Carpathians' charming landscapes, the film characterises the Hutsuls by showcasing their specialist crafts reliant on raw materials. In the first images of the highlanders to appear on screen, a group of men is shown tying together logs from recently cut down trees before later navigating their way down the river on a completed wooden raft, shots that together outline the process by which a natural substance is crafted into a functional vessel. The Hutsuls' skill in exploiting local resources is also on display through the aforementioned images of a *khata* and an Orthodox church, both built from natural materials like carved wood and thatch. The sequence's focus on manual crafts and pre-industrial trades reinforces the presentation of the Eastern Carpathians and their inhabitants as a

region and people defined by a lack of socioeconomic development and a traditional rural culture. The seemingly symbiotic relationship portrayed between people and nature is also implied in the voiceover, written by Dovzhenko himself, which defines the Hutsuls according to their crafts by describing them as ‘natural-born artists’ and introduces the Carpathians as ‘ancient Slavic mountains [...] majestic in their nature and beautiful in their people’ (Solntseva 2014, 300).⁵ As well as expressing equivalence between the Hutsuls and their environment, this phrase implies by association a primordial essence to the highlanders’ traditional customs, as though their practices are a remnant of a bygone past preserved in the mountains outside the passage of linear time.

A further key aspect of the presentation of the Hutsuls in *The Liberation* is a consistent focus on their appearance and clothing. Throughout the sequence, the highlanders wear traditional dress and, in the episodes illustrating both the pre-election rally and the subsequent celebrations, they are displayed in a diverse range of shots that allow the viewer to perceive and study the full richness of their decorated, colourful folk costumes. The unique features of Hutsul dress are first exhibited in images of local men walking across the mountain glades to reach the pro-Soviet rally. In three protracted wide shots, each lasting over five seconds and, naturally, showing the towering peaks of the Carpathians in the background, dozens of Hutsuls saunter past the camera wearing such items as the *keptar*, an ornate vest with elaborately decorated trimming on the edges (traditionally made from lambskin and known as *smushok*), and the *sorochka*, a white shirt embroidered on the collar, front and cuffs in local patterns. Worn by some of the Hutsuls shown, though perhaps less eye-catching

⁵ All translations are the author’s.

than other garments, are the *kaptsi*, a kind of peasant footwear sewn from felt, while many of the men also sport a black felt hat called a *kresania* trimmed with a multi-coloured yarn cord (*cherviachok*) and carry a highland wooden walking stick (*topirets'*) (Odarchenko and Carynnyk 1992, 163-174). Though it shares some common features with variants of folk costume in other regions of Ukraine, Hutsul dress is highly distinctive in its form, the brightness of the colours it deploys and the intricacies of its folk patterns and decorations, factors that would have made it an obvious object of ethnographic intrigue for both Dovzhenko's filming team and contemporary Soviet audiences in the Ukrainian SSR and beyond. The extended duration and static nature of each initial shot of the highlanders lend the images a quality comparable to that of a museum exhibit, increasing the perceived distance between the viewer and the Hutsuls and reinforcing the latter's position as the objects of the camera.

The curiosity of the filmmakers towards traditional Hutsul attire can regularly be seen in the film's choice of camera positions. During the rally, the camera mostly dwells not on the speaker but rather on the strikingly dressed Hutsuls in the audience, who in an alternation of wide and medium shots are shown sitting on the ground deep in concentration. Here both the camera and the highlanders remain motionless except when applauding Dovzhenko's oratory, creating exhibitory pictures that allow for a close observation of the locals' idiosyncratic clothing as well as their inspired facial expressions. In similar style, the conclusion of the rally is followed by six consecutive images of Hutsul men, women and children captured at close range either individually or in small groups that together present a cross section of Carpathian society. These shots, of which two involve stationary Hutsuls staring into or slightly past the camera

as if posing for a photograph, appear to be intended as further opportunities for the viewer to absorb the finer features of Hutsul dress, on this occasion encompassing the clothing traditions of both genders and a range of ages (Figure 2). In both these episodes (in which the highlanders are seen but never heard), Dovzhenko's camera adopts an objectifying gaze towards the Hutsuls, filming their faces and clothing as focal points of a museum-like ethnographic examination and allowing the Soviet viewer to revel in the visual richness of their appearance.⁶ The unequal hierarchy between filmmakers and highlanders implied by the camerawork is reinforced by the voiceover, which on two occasions suggests a certain simplicity of mind among the Hutsul community. As the Hutsuls are shown en route to the rally, the voiceover comments, 'They walked as they would to a celebration', before later summarising the locals' response to the political speeches with the line, 'The people listened to us as if spellbound'. Most overtly, these observations presume an unearthly innocence among the Hutsuls who seemingly embrace Soviet power having had no prior experience of political culture in the lowlands. In addition, the second comment in particular highlights a clear 'us and them' dichotomy in the film between Soviet activists, arriving as representatives of an advanced civilisation, and local Hutsuls, who are regarded as underdeveloped but possessing an enticingly rich folk heritage.

[Insert figures 2a and 2b side by side]

Figure 2. Objects of an ethnographic gaze. *The Liberation* (Oleksandr Dovzhenko, 1940).

⁶ On the politics of museum display, see Karp and Lavine (1991).

Dovzhenko's interest in the vividness of Hutsul traditional culture in *The Liberation* extends from the highlanders' costumes to their festive music and dance. The last two minutes of the sequence are dominated by a soundtrack of Hutsul celebratory music, first heard extradiegetically to accompany images of highlanders marching in the procession before later purportedly emerging from the instruments seen being played on screen during the village festivities. During an episode that lacks any voiceover and hence allows the viewer to concentrate fully on the folk culture on display both visually and aurally, the film contains multiple shots of Hutsuls musicians (all in festive dress, of course) playing instruments ranging from the violin and the drums to the *sopilka* (a variety of flute) and the *tsymbaly* (a percussion instrument equivalent to the hammer dulcimer consisting of a wooden box across which metal strings are stretched and hit with two beaters). To a certain extent, these instruments provide a further example of the Hutsuls' skill in manual crafts, since all of them are products made by the highlanders themselves out of local materials. Beyond this, though, displays of folk music enable the filmmakers to showcase both the unique features of Hutsul culture and its belonging to a wider Ukrainian traditional identity. Variants of the *sopilka* and the *tsymbaly* are found in areas of Ukraine outside the Carpathians and, as such, would have been recognised by audiences in the Ukrainian SSR as symbols that demonstrate the shared cultural customs and origins of Hutsuls and lowland Ukrainians. Simultaneously, several aspects of the festivities unquestionably point to the particularity of Hutsul practices. The *tsymbaly* seen on screen are attached to the musicians via a strap around the neck and propped up against the waist, unlike versions of the instrument outside the mountains that are commonly positioned on a surface. Likewise, the film includes shots of Hutsuls playing the *trembita*, an alpine horn unique to the Carpathians whose sound is shown to reverberate around the

picturesque natural landscapes of the highlands (Figure 3). Even their celebratory dances, foregrounded in four extended wide shots, act as evidence of the Hutsuls' highly original lifestyle. Such scenes reveal the intrigue with which the filmmakers responded to regionally distinctive elements of Hutsul practices, which in their vivid, colourful nature far exceeded the established image of the Ukrainian peasantry in Soviet culture.

[Insert figures 3a and 3b side by side]

Figure 3. Hutsuls playing the *tsymbaly* (left) and the *trembita* (right). *The Liberation* (Oleksandr Dovzhenko, 1940).

Hutsul culture in Solntseva's *Bukovyna*

If the Hutsuls' folk customs only received a single sequence in *The Liberation*, a film whose scope encompasses all the western Ukrainian and (to a lesser extent) western Belarusian lands taken from Poland, in Solntseva's *Bukovyna Is a Ukrainian Land*, which depicts the Soviet annexation of northern Bukovyna from Romania in June 1940, they occupy a central position. Just as filmmakers had arrived in the Polish east within a week of the Soviet takeover in September 1939, Solntseva (2014, 301) reached northern Bukovyna to film her documentary there so quickly after the Red Army advance that the new frontier between the USSR and Romania had not yet been fixed, as a result of which border skirmishes were still frequent between Soviet and Romanian troops. Shot with many of the same camera operators that had worked on *The Liberation* and also featuring a voiceover penned by Dovzhenko (who, nonetheless, did not accompany Solntseva for the filming), *Bukovyna* follows a

similar narrative structure to the earlier documentary, introducing the suffering of the impoverished Ukrainian peasants of the region and their exploitation under ‘colonial’ Romanian rule. Incoming Soviet forces are then greeted by locals waving homemade banners supposedly made in secret prior to June 1940, before the peasants celebrate the redistribution of land by the new authorities and joyfully gather the harvest by hand. The film contains two short scenes depicting the territory’s main city, Chernivtsi, where (similarly to the shots of L’viv University in *The Liberation*) the university is shown being opened up to the ‘youth of all nations’ under Soviet Ukrainisation policies. Far greater emphasis, however, is placed on the Hutsuls of Bukovyna, who comprised a sizeable proportion of the region’s population and receive approximately half of the work’s thirty-minute running time.

Bukovyna devotes significant attention to the Hutsuls’ manual crafts, depicting not only the fine details of their completed products but also the intricacies of the processes of making them. The film’s demonstration of the highlanders’ embroidery practices, for instance, features a trio of Hutsul women (each named individually in the voiceover and, following the pattern of representation established in *The Liberation*, recorded outside with mountain peaks visible behind them) sewing regionally specific patterns into cloth.⁷ The women’s manual skills are revealed in three consecutive shots that each move the camera closer to the act of embroidery: a medium shot that introduces the female figures and their craft, a close-up on the faces and hands of two of the women, and finally an extreme close-up focusing only on a pair of hands labouring over an ornately decorated piece of fabric. Once the making process has been outlined, the frame is taken up entirely by two images of

⁷ It is worth noting that, perhaps due to technical limitations, all the highland footage in *Bukovyna* was shot outdoors. Though by no means all images of Hutsuls in *Bukovyna* contain mountains in the background, this representational trope appears repeatedly during the film.

embroidered decorations on cloth, exhibiting with as much clarity as possible the complex combinations of Hutsul folk motifs (Figure 4). Further footage of handicrafts in the film exhibits the highlanders' talent for woodcarving, as a Hutsul specialist is shown making delicate designs on the wooden handle of an axe using first a handheld lathe then a chisel. Just as with the embroidered cloth, the finely patterned completed axe is granted a full-frame close-up to allow for sufficient examination from the viewer. These two instances suggest Solntseva's interest both in *what* the Hutsuls produce with their crafts and in *how* the items are made, enabling a Soviet audience to witness the specialist skills of Hutsul manual practices and presenting their lifestyle as an enticing pre-industrial means of engaging with the natural world. Though *The Liberation* and *Bukovyna* belong to the same project of appropriating the Hutsul region for the Ukrainian nation (and, by extension, the Soviet state), Solntseva's film exhibits far greater focus on the practicalities of pre-modern labour.

[Insert figures 4a and 4b side by side]

Figure 4. Hutsul handicrafts. *Bukovyna Is a Ukrainian Land* (Iuliia Solntseva, 1940).

The most extensive display of traditional Hutsul production methods is dedicated to the ways in which the highlanders make their own clothes out of raw materials. As with the episodes depicting embroidery and woodcarving, though here offering more visual detail, Solntseva includes a step-by-step demonstration of how linen and *keptari* (Hutsul vests) are made. In shots that begin a deeply ethnographic sequence, Hutsul women appear on screen soaking raw flax in lake water in order to clean it and remove imperfections. We then see the flax being beaten by a manually operated

wooden threshing device, separating the plant's grains from the rest of the crop, before a woman then works the flax through a fixed threshing comb, straightening and strengthening the product. After being taken through multiple stages of the flax treatment process, the viewer is finally shown the completed linen cloth as it is gathered in long strips having been dried out in the sun. This journey from untreated natural resource to finished folk clothing is immediately followed by similar images of *keptari* being decorated with embroidered patterns made from woollen thread. After two shots of raw wool being spun by hand using a spindle, the camera cuts to reveal how the refined product is sewn onto the fronts of *keptari* by Hutsuls of both genders, while the sequence closes with a full-frame display of the rich decorations embellishing the prepared garment. These comprehensive demonstrations of manual crafts are in some ways comparable to the scenes in Mikhail Kalatozov's *Salt for Svaneti* (*Sol' Svanetii*, 1930) showing the traditional practices of the remote Svan people of northwest Georgia (see Filip Sestan's article in this issue). Yet whereas for Kalatozov pre-modern lifestyles inflict oppressive suffering on the Svan that must be ended by connecting their region with Soviet modernity, *Bukovyna* contains no emphasis on the need for developmental transformation in the Carpathians and instead presents folk customs as charming examples of a distinctive highland culture that must be protected and nurtured under Soviet power.

This last observation highlights that in style and content *Bukovyna* is more similar to early Soviet *kulturfil'm*, or ethnographic documentary film that most commonly depicted the peoples of Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Far North during the 1920s, than the cinema of high Stalinism, and Solntseva's work stands out as unusual in its era for the amount of cinematic detail with which it portrays the traditional

customs of a pre-industrial community like the Hutsuls.⁸ This fact raises the question of why *Bukovyna* grants the Carpathian highlanders such a central position in its presentation of northern Bukovyna to a domestic Soviet audience. I suggest that Solntseva's decision to focus predominantly on the Hutsuls at the expense of the region's lowlanders can largely be explained by three factors.

Firstly, Solntseva and her fellow filmmakers express a genuine fascination with Hutsul culture, a fact that is most clearly visible in the final extended sequence of *Bukovyna* that depicts a Hutsul wedding party. Culminating in a similar celebratory scene of singing and dancing to the one in *The Liberation*, this sequence lasts a full seven minutes and showcases in great detail the highlanders' age-old practices. The film illustrates several of the Hutsuls' idiosyncratic wedding customs, such as the bride weeping on her way to the ceremony as an expression of mourning for her maidenhood and, later, the sight of the groom crossing the threshold of his marital home on horseback together with his new wife to symbolise 'the abduction of the bride'. In addition to such unusual rituals, the costumes worn by the wedding-goers are even more elaborately decorated than those seen previously in either documentary, featuring groups of young women sporting rich headdresses containing lush braids that resemble feathered plumes while others wear flowered garlands. In *Bukovyna*, traditional dances are presented not merely as on-screen evidence of the Hutsuls' celebration of the Soviet takeover, as in *The Liberation*, but also as folk spectacles worthy of careful observation in their own right. As the highlanders engage in a dance involving holding hands to form a large circle, the voiceover describes their movements as 'constrained' and differentiates them from the livelier

⁸ See Sarkisova (2017).

Zaporizhzhian dances familiar to a Soviet Ukrainian audience, a comment that indicates the filmmakers' interest in the unique aspects of Hutsul customs (Figure 5). Accompanying this visual bombardment of folk details throughout the entire sequence is a soundtrack of Hutsul music, alternating between female ensemble harmonies and non-choral pieces featuring many of the same instruments heard in *The Liberation*. Though vivid and engaging, the content relating to the wedding party is often not indispensable for the narrative argument of the documentary and, as such, this sequence can be regarded as an indulgent display of ethnographic excess in both its visual and aural components.

[Insert figure 5]

Figure 5. A Hutsul round dance. *Bukovyna Is a Ukrainian Land* (Iuliia Solntseva, 1940).

Solntseva's personal fascination with the colourful lifestyle of the Hutsuls is also evident from her memoirs written years after her filming in the Carpathians. Referring to her first visit to the highlands during the shooting of *The Liberation* with Dovzhenko, she recalls 'the astonishing craftsmanship of the Hutsuls, who straightened tied logs with poles and jumped across the rapids of the turbulent river Cheremosh', adding, 'For us this trip was very interesting'. On her time working on *Bukovina*, Solntseva (2014, 300-301) comments fondly, 'I then saw Western Ukraine in detail, visited the Hutsul villages and saw the beautiful Hutsul dances of couples in multicoloured hats and with little mirrors around their necks'. The director's words and cinematic portrayal of the Hutsuls suggest her preoccupation with, and even

admiration of, their skills and crafts. Yet they also betray the colonial gaze with which the highlanders are viewed in her film. Indeed, the curiosity with which the makers of *Bukovyna* regard the Hutsuls can be construed as an intrigue held by individuals conscious of their role as representatives of an advanced industrialised state towards an ‘exotic’ traditional people who had not progressed past the lowest stages of societal development according to Marxist-Leninist doctrine. Despite the professedly benign intentions of the filmmakers towards the highlanders, this fact also accounts for several occasions in *Bukovyna* where Hutsuls are seen talking (including once directly to camera) but the words they supposedly speak are ‘heard’ only through the voiceover. While to an extent this can be rationalised on grounds of comprehensibility, since the Hutsul dialect is distinct from standard Ukrainian, it is indicative of the paternalistic attitude of Soviet cultural practitioners who reserve the right to ‘speak for’ their new Carpathian fellow citizens.

The second factor relates to the filmmakers’ perception of the Hutsuls as a pre-modern community that has maintained an organic relationship with its surrounding environment. It has been noted by multiple scholars that the first decade of Soviet power were characterised by an interest among theorists and cultural figures in less developed societies as possibly providing an intuitive sensory encounter with the material world that could serve as an example for revolutionary socialism to emulate. Emma Widdis (2017, 165-201) has explored how Soviet filmmakers of the 1920s looked towards the USSR’s eastern republics in search of an ‘intensified sensory experience’ with physical reality based on Marxist ideas of primitive communism. Elsewhere in cinema, Michael Kunichika (2012) argues that Dziga Vertov’s *One Sixth of the World* (*Shestaia chast' mira*, 1926) attempts to demonstrate how even the

underdeveloped peoples of the USSR could contribute to the building of socialism and deems the continued existence of pre-industrial communities as compatible with the march towards socialist modernity. Regarding civilisations beyond Soviet borders, Edward Tyerman (2022) discusses Sergei Tret'iakov's efforts in the 1920s to overcome cultural and developmental barriers between the USSR and China through sensory experience, revealing how the writer and theorist advocated a documentary reportage approach that would convey 'an element of visceral fascination' (27) with China while inscribing it into a common project of revolutionary modernity. Such utopian attitudes towards traditional cultures lost their potency after the 1920s, as a lack of industrialised development was reconstrued in the era of socialist construction as 'backwardness' that needed to be overcome. I do not argue that the ethnographic focus on Hutsul culture in *Bukovyna* belongs to any attempt to propose an alternate model of sensory existence comparable to those outlined above. However, Solntseva's film is, I suggest, evidence that as late as 1940 an attraction still remained in Soviet cultural circles towards so-called 'primitive' societies due to their close relationship with nature and their pre-capitalist economic practices. This understanding in part explains the consistently detailed portrayals of manual craftwork in *Bukovyna*, particularly in the clothes-making sequence during which the voiceover comments admiringly, 'Subsistence agriculture has been preserved here like nowhere else in Europe'.

The third, and arguably most important, factor is a perceived connection in the film between Hutsul folk customs and Ukrainian national identity. The idea of an inherent link between these two concepts is implied in *The Liberation* where Hutsul celebrations of 'reunification' with Ukraine under Soviet rule are expressed through

traditional folk spectacle. The argument, though, is presented far more overtly in *Bukovyna* during an exposition of Hutsul architecture that explores the defining features of local *khaty* in exceptional detail. After four establishing shots of a Hutsul village seen from above, each of which moves progressively closer to ground level, Solntseva displays as many as seventeen consecutive shots of a single *khata*, taking up almost an entire minute of screen time. Ranging from wide shots of the entire house to close-ups of precise details on its exterior, this scene contains images examining the *khata*'s thatched roof, the shape of its windows, the painted decorations of flowers and birds on its outer walls, the buttresses holding up its roof and even the small porcelain receptacles hung on the walls for ornamentation (Figure 6). This comprehensive study of the design and characteristic features of Hutsul *khaty* is followed by two shots of Carpathian churches that, according to the voiceover, share the same 'distinctive archaic form'. Far from being a close observation of Hutsul building style for its own sake, though, the scene highlights the precise features of the highlanders' architecture as evidence of their intrinsic belonging to the wider Ukrainian nation, as is explicitly outlined in the voiceover text spoken as the *khata* is displayed on screen:

'For almost six hundred years, the Ukrainian people was divided and Bukovynia came under the rule of five states. And yet, no matter what Bukovynian village you look at, you will say, 'This is Ukraine'. The oppressors came one after another, but the people retained their culture, language, architecture and clothing. [...] Born in the struggle for national culture and tempered in this struggle, Ukrainian folk art has not died!'

[Insert figures 6a and 6b side by side]

Figure 6. A Hutsul *khata*. *Bukovyna Is a Ukrainian Land* (Iuliia Solntseva, 1940).

In *Bukovyna*, then, the artistic distinctiveness of the Hutsuls is due in large part to their defiant expression of their Ukrainian national identity in the face of centuries of foreign oppression. Viewed from this perspective, the skilled crafts of the highlanders and the ornate garments they wear can be understood not as ethnographic curiosities in isolation but rather as examples of protest against outside rule continued across the generations and as gestures of kinship with fellow Ukrainians across the national space. Historically speaking, this argument is an inaccurate explanation of the origins of Hutsul folk practices, not least because the national allegiance of the Hutsul community was far from settled in 1939 (a subject I will return to later). It is, however, indicative of a trend in Soviet cinema that had been established long before the USSR's annexation of the Hutsul region, according to which Ukrainian national identity was tied to manifestations of rural folk culture. Perhaps the most famous examples of this phenomenon under high Stalinism are the *kolkhoz* musical comedies of the 1930s, most prominently Ivan Pyr'ev's *The Wealthy Bride* (*Bogataia nevesta*, 1938) and *The Tractor Drivers* (*Traktoristy*, 1939), which rely on a set of tokenistic folkloric motifs to decorate their presentation of a Ukrainian rural space harmonised by Soviet power.⁹ Equally important, though less studied in scholarship, is the body of films (mostly historical dramas) set in the USSR's western borderlands where the Ukrainian labouring masses are defined in opposition to their Polish rulers according to elements of folk culture such as song, dance, clothing and peasant architecture.¹⁰

Against this background, we can see how the ethnographic depictions of the Hutsuls

⁹ See Taylor (1999); First (2015), 23-32.

¹⁰ Examples include *Karmeliuk* (Favst Lopatyns'kyi, 1931), *Koliivshchyna* (Ivan Kavaleridze, 1933) and *Nazar Stodolia* (Heorhii Tasin, 1937).

in the films of Dovzhenko and Solntseva are built on precedents in Stalin-era portrayals of Ukrainian identity, simultaneously indulging in the exoticism of Hutsul traditions while also stressing the highlanders' fundamental Ukrainianness by means of their vivid folk culture.

Hutsul displays in other Soviet media

Evidently, then, the Hutsuls captured the curiosity of Dovzhenko, Solntseva and their team of filmmakers as they entered the areas of the Eastern Carpathians that came under Soviet control from 1939. Yet the Soviet exploration of Hutsul culture in this era is by no means unique to the two documentaries discussed above. Indeed, the early encounters between representatives of Soviet power and the colourfully dressed highlanders resulted in a surge of attention towards the Hutsul region across the cultural and political spheres between 1939 and 1941. Elsewhere in cinema, Mikhail Slutskii and Roman Karmen's 1940 documentary *A Day of the New World (Den' novogo mira)*, which claims to show events filmed on a single day across the entire Soviet Union, contains a sequence depicting a Hutsul wedding party, which is shot in similar style to that of Solntseva in *Bukovyna*. Lasting two minutes and purportedly filmed in the highland town of Iaremche in August 1940 (very shortly after Solntseva's documentary was recorded), the sequence features tropes of representation also found in *The Liberation* and *Bukovyna* such as traditional dress, folk dance and music as well as wide shots of Hutsuls set against a mountainous landscape. In addition to documentary material, plans were afoot for a feature film to be made showcasing the Hutsuls. *Oleksa Dovbush* (1941), inspired by Carpathian folk legends about the eighteenth-century eponymous hero famed for stealing from the nobility to help the poor, was based on a script by Liubomyr Dmyterko and was due

to be directed by Ivan Kavaleridze, with location shooting planned in L'viv and several Hutsul settlements ("Pisnia" 2017, 657-658). After eight days of filming in the village of Zhab'e involving local Hutsuls as extras, production was interrupted by the German invasion of the USSR, resulting in the project being postponed indefinitely (Kavaleridze 2017, 184).¹¹ As such, it seems likely that if war with Germany had not broken out in June 1941 more films depicting the Hutsul community would have been made for the Soviet screen around this time.

Beyond cinema, a wider interest in the Hutsuls is evident in the Soviet press of the time. Between September 1939 and June 1941, at least twenty articles were published in the all-Union newspapers *Pravda* and *Izvestiia* that described extensively the nature of the Hutsul region and the customs of its people. Appearing regularly in print across the twenty-one month period and often adopting the form of travel notes written by a correspondent passing through the Carpathians, these articles have a strong focus on ethnographic detail and contain strikingly similar content and ideological arguments to those found in *The Liberation* and *Bukovyna*.¹² The authors extol the beauty of the rivers, peaks and glades of the highlands, a natural environment with which Hutsul practices and constructions are said to coexist harmoniously. Attentive descriptions are provided of the appearance, manner of speaking and clothing of the Hutsuls, including regular references to their styles of embroidery and unique garments like the *keptar*. The texts place great emphasis on Hutsul handicrafts such as woodcarving, decorating leather and weaving carpets, sometimes accompanied by mentions of recent Soviet initiatives intended to safeguard and propagate these traditions within the Hutsul community. Perhaps more fundamentally, the articles repeatedly assert the

¹¹ *Oleksa Dovbush* was eventually filmed and released in reworked form in 1959 without Kavaleridze's involvement, directed instead by Viktor Ivanov.

¹² See, inter alia, Pavlenko (1939), 3; Bachelis (1939), 3; Ianovskii (1941), 4.

notion expressed in the documentaries that the unique folk customs of the Hutsuls are proud manifestations of their Ukrainian national identity maintained through the ages despite the threat of persecution from foreign rulers. One *Pravda* article from November 1939, for instance, formulates this idea in words that could conceivably have been taken straight from one of voiceovers penned by Dovzhenko: ‘Oppressed through the ages, driven into the mountains, the Hutsuls transferred Ukrainian ornamentation of high artistic taste to their costume as a banner of national loyalty’ (Pavlenko 1939, 3). In the printed press, then, just as in cinema, Soviet representatives offer an exoticising depiction of Hutsul particularity while holding up their folk culture as evidence of their dedication to the Ukrainian nation.

Elsewhere in the Soviet cultural sphere too, we can observe a notable increase in the attention paid to pre-modern culture among the Hutsuls and even in western Ukraine more broadly. From September 1939, the monthly architecture journal *Architecture of the USSR (Arkhitektura SSSR)*, for example, published a regular stream of articles dedicated to traditional culture in the Ukrainian west. These features, which number over half a dozen within a two-year period and bear such titles as ‘The artistic particularities of the Western Ukrainian *khata*’ and ‘The decorative techniques of Ukrainian folk architecture’, mostly explore the traditional architecture of the region, such as the designs of historic churches and peasant dwellings.¹³ The rural, folk-centred subject matter of these articles and their regular inclusion in an all-Union publication are in contrast to the journal’s predominant focus at the time on large-scale urban reconstruction projects across the USSR in socialist realist style. Indeed, the articles’ appearance between 1939 and 1941 signals a telling shift in

¹³ See, inter alia, Kakovskii (1940), 58-59; Bekhman (1940), 53-56.

representations of Ukraine in *Architecture of the USSR*. Firstly, these years see a sizeable increase in the frequency of articles devoted to Ukrainian architecture, which had previously consisted of occasional pieces on the Soviet transformations of urban centres including Kyiv, Kharkiv and Zaporizhzhia. Secondly, the articles mark a new emphasis on history and traditions in Ukraine that before 1939 had been absent, since explorations of ancient architecture had mostly been restricted to the Russian context. Though the texts in question describe a broader area than just the Carpathian highlands, Hutsul architecture is referenced repeatedly, with attention given to Hutsul churches, *khaty* and ornamentations. Moreover, the specific features of folk architecture from both the Hutsul region and the western Ukrainian lowlands that are outlined in the journal bear strong resemblance to those shown in *The Liberation and Bukovyna*, as the articles both analyse and contain photographs of the multi-layered domes of wooden churches, the structure of thatched *khaty* and the floral patterns decorating their walls (Bekhman 1940, 53-56; Kakovskii 1940, 58-59; Tsapenko 1941, 66-71) (Figure 7). Such content in *Architecture of the USSR* demonstrates how the attention generated by the Hutsuls at all-Union level belonged to a wider exploration of traditional folk culture and heritage in western Ukraine that marked a new direction in representations of Ukraine and its identity within the USSR.

[Insert figures 7a and 7b side by side]

Figure 7. Traditional Ukrainian architecture in focus in *Architecture of the USSR*.

Manually-produced Hutsul goods also found themselves on display in the USSR's museum spaces. On 20 December 1940, an exhibition opened in Moscow's State

Museum of New Western Art (*Gosudarstvennyi muzei novogo zapadnogo iskusstva*) that was the first in the Soviet capital dedicated to the ‘fine arts of the western oblasts of Ukraine and the works of the Hutsuls’ (“Narodnoe tvorchestvo” 1940, 6). Though the exhibition consisted of eight rooms and 700 items from across western Ukraine including paintings, sculptures and wooden icons, a major attraction was its objects of Hutsul handicrafts, which receive a prominent place in the event’s write-up in *Pravda* published the day after its opening. The text provides details of the embroidered Hutsul garments, carved wooden crockery, ornate carpets and ceramic wares featured in the exhibition, accompanied by the author’s expressions of delight in the originality and imagination of Hutsul manual skill that were typical of Soviet media reactions to the group at the time (6). The fact that Hutsul goods merited a mention in the title of the exhibition indicates a degree of name recognition among the general Soviet public, implying that an intrigue among Soviet citizens in the customs of the highlanders extended beyond cultural practitioners alone. Even the parts of the exhibition displaying art from the lowlands share the focus on rural folk tradition that is integral to the Hutsuls’ characterisation in the works explored in this article. In a prime example of the importance of decorative folk patterns in defining the region’s image in Soviet culture, one of the new works of socialist realist art showcased was a painting entitled ‘They Decorate the Home’ (‘Dekoriruiut dom’). Notably, several rooms of the exhibition housed historic works by western Ukrainian artists dating back to the fifteenth century, demonstrating the same emphasis on national history in the Ukrainian west that is present in the journal articles of *Architecture of the USSR* (6). From this body of evidence, then, we can see how in the period 1939-1941 an interest in Hutsul customs and a consistently expressed narrative regarding their past and their national affiliation are found not only in the USSR’s cinematic output but

also in its press, cultural publications and museums, extending far beyond the western periphery to Moscow itself.

Findings and reflections

Three principal conclusions can be drawn from the material analysed here. Firstly, the takeover of the western Ukrainian lands in September 1939 marks a turn away from the cultural climate of the preceding decade in Soviet Ukraine. In both cinema and other media, we find an unashamed celebration of Ukrainian (or purportedly Ukrainian) traditions and heritage after the annexation that might have risked incurring accusations of ‘bourgeois nationalism’ earlier in the 1930s, a decade characterised in the republic by catastrophic famine, a scaling back of cultural and political autonomy and multiple waves of persecution targeting Ukraine’s intelligentsia. Serhy Yekelchuk (2002, 61-63) has observed that the incorporation of western Ukraine into the USSR resulted in a rehabilitation of Ukrainian patriotic narratives in Soviet media and historiography, noting the widespread use of the phrase ‘the great Ukrainian people’ from late 1939, which marked a symbolic promotion for Ukrainians where previously only the Russians had been granted the epithet ‘great’.¹⁴ In the Hutsul case examined here, this trend manifests itself in the Soviet adoption of a Ukrainian patriotic discourse borrowed in large part from an earlier generation of Ukrainian nation-building intelligentsia. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Ukrainian scholars and cultural figures had devoted significant attention to the Hutsul region, attempting to inscribe it into the Ukrainian nation and shaping their formulations of Ukrainianness in response to Hutsul culture. The highlander community gained popularity among Ukrainians in Habsburg Galicia after the 1899

¹⁴ Similarly, Serhii Plokhy (2011, 314-319) discusses how the annexation was popular among many intellectuals in the Ukrainian SSR on Ukrainian patriotic grounds.

publication of Volodymyr Shukhevych's five-part study of Hutsul ethnography, *The Hutsul Region (Hutsul'shchyna)*, which laid the basis for further work by Fedir Vovk, another member of the Shevchenko Scientific Society, who aimed to prove that Hutsuls and lowland Ukrainians belonged to a single 'anthropological type' (Dabrowski 2021, 94; Rohde 2022).¹⁵ In the cultural sphere, the Hutsul village of Kryvorivnia became an important intellectual centre prior to 1914 as the holiday destination of prominent Ukrainians including Ivan Franko, Mykola Kotsiubyns'kyi and Lesia Ukrainka who took inspiration from their highland surroundings for their writing projects (Dabrowski 2021, 94). Most prominently, based on his Hutsul encounters in Kryvorivnia, Kotsiubyns'kyi wrote his novel *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors (Tini zabutykh predkiv)*, published in 1911), which would later become the basis for Sergei Paradzhanov's acclaimed 1965 film (94). Behind the actions of all these individuals was not only the desire to incorporate the Hutsul region into Ukraine's mental geography but also the belief that the highlanders were 'ancient' representatives of the Ukrainian nation itself. There are undeniable parallels between the argumentation of these early twentieth-century Ukrainian intellectuals and the Soviet cultural activists entering western Ukraine from 1939, who both rely on ethnographic observations to 'prove' the Hutsuls' Ukrainian identity. This similarity, though, is far from coincidental, since the heritage of Ukrainian nation-building in Kryvorivnia is directly referenced in Soviet media (albeit only in the press and not the films). A *Pravda* article from April 1941, for instance, describes the village as 'famous in Ukrainian literature' and relates a conversation with a Hutsul named Vasyl' Iakibiuk who claims to have hosted Franko in his *khata* and met Kotsiubyns'kyi (Ianovskii 1941, 4). The Soviet co-option of the legacy and arguments

¹⁵ See Shukhevych (1899-1908).

of earlier Ukrainian writers and ethnographers in the Hutsul region, then, further demonstrates how expressions of pride in Ukrainian identity in the USSR became much more possible from 1939 than they had been previously in the Stalin era.

Secondly, I argue that the years 1939-1941 see a renewed emphasis on what we could call an ‘ethnographic gaze’ in Soviet culture. It is well documented that the 1920s was a period of ethnophilia when ethnographic research was widely conducted into the traditional cultures and practices of many non-Russian peoples of the USSR. This ethnography, which (as mentioned above) in film manifested itself in the form of *kulturfil'm*, aimed to document the uncharted realms of the socialist state and to provide evidence that would aid the delineation of internal borders between the new Soviet republics¹⁶. By the early 1930s, however, the official proclamation that all backwardness had been overcome in the USSR during socialist construction led to the persecution of many ethnographers and a debilitating assault on the profession described by Yuri Slezkine as ‘the fall of Soviet ethnography’, as a result of which the field was heavily restricted for the rest of the decade (Slezkine 1991). I suggest that after 1939 the annexation of new Soviet lands that had not yet been ‘transformed’ by forced collectivisation or rapid industrialisation made it possible for regionally specific folk cultural practices and manual crafts, such as those of the Hutsuls, to be explored more openly in the cultural and academic spheres (albeit only in the territories recently brought under Soviet power). While some displays of traditional folk culture can of course be found in 1930s Soviet cinema, the films discussed here move these features from the background to the foreground in their depictions of Hutsul life and offer a greater attention to ethnographic detail than had been seen for

¹⁶ See Slezkine (1991); Hirsch (2003); (2014).

most of the preceding decade. Though Dovzhenko and Solntseva's displays involve a significant degree of staged performativity (see below), the examinations of Hutsul customs, clothing and crafts in cinema and elsewhere in Soviet media from 1939 to 1941 reveal an increased interest in authentic regional particularity that distinguishes them from works of the 1930s.

My third finding relates to the wider impact of Hutsul culture on Soviet society. Patrice Dabrowski (2021) has argued that areas of the Carpathian mountains have been subject to multiple waves of 'discovery' by Polish and Ukrainian intellectuals from the mid-nineteenth to the late twentieth centuries, during which a newfound awareness of the highlands as a place to escape modernity influences understandings of national identity in the lowlands. Building on Dabrowski's work, I suggest that the period 1939-1941 sees a Soviet 'discovery' of the Eastern Carpathians and their Hutsul inhabitants. In the course of this discovery, cultural practitioners from Ukraine and the Soviet centre document and popularise the practices of the Hutsuls across the USSR, simultaneously presenting them as an exotic 'other' whose differences from Soviet Ukrainians can be revelled in and appropriating them for the Ukrainian nation in a way that impacts expressions of Ukrainian identity.

This last idea contains two complexities that may not be entirely intuitive at first sight. Firstly, before 1939 the national identity of the Hutsuls was still highly contested and it was far from universally acknowledged that the highlanders even belonged to the Ukrainian nation. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, members of the Hutsul community had a variety of political allegiances ranging from advocates for Ukrainian independence to supporters of Polish statehood as well as

those defining themselves more in regional terms. As a result, a fierce rivalry ensued between Poles and Ukrainians who each sought to win over the Hutsuls to their national cause. In 1880, when the region was still under Austrian Habsburg rule, the occasion of a visit from Emperor Franz Joseph to Eastern Galicia resulted in Poles and Ukrainians organising rival ethnographic exhibitions of Hutsul culture in order to buttress their respective claims to the area. The opening of the more prominent Polish-arranged exhibition in the town of Kolomyia was even made a part of the Emperor's tour and became a highly choreographed event involving a team of Hutsuls on horseback escorting Franz Joseph from the train station, hundreds of Hutsuls dressed in traditional costumes and the performance of two Hutsul wedding parties for the emperor (Dabrowski 2005). I have already discussed the wave of Ukrainian ethnographic and cultural interest in the Hutsuls at the turn of the twentieth century spearheaded by Volodymyr Shukhevych. Far from an isolated phenomenon, though, this attention came in direct response to an earlier wave of Polish ethnography led by Oskar Kolberg who co-organised the 1880 Kolomyia exhibition and published on the Hutsul region, evidence of long-term contention between Polish and Ukrainian scholars over the highlanders' national identity.¹⁷ This antagonism in cultural, museal and academic matters before 1914 was followed by major state-led actions in the interwar period, as in the 1930s Polish authorities launched multiple initiatives in the Carpathians, such as subsidised tourism to the Hutsul region, joint alpine sporting competitions involving Hutsuls and Poles, and events to celebrate the collaboration between Hutsul soldiers and the Polish Legions during the First World War. All these efforts (coexisting with an exoticised depiction of the highlands in travel literature) were designed to gain Hutsul support for the Polish state and to turn the Hutsul region

¹⁷ See Kolberg (1970-1971).

into an integral part of the Polish political nation, achieving moderate success in the years leading up to 1939, according to Jagoda Wierzejska (2019; Dabrowski 2020). While the would-be Ukrainian nation-builders of the Polish east sought to sabotage these Polish campaigns and conduct efforts of their own, they were inhibited by their lack of state infrastructure and even expressed fears that the Hutsuls were not sufficiently pro-Ukrainian, for instance, by being too willing to accept money from Polish organisations or refusing to have their children educated solely in Ukrainian (Dabrowski 2021, 127-128).

Bearing in mind this context, we can see the scale of the shift from before 1939, when Poles and Ukrainians are competing to bring the Hutsuls into their political nations, and after 1939, when Soviet cultural practitioners declare the Hutsul region to be an indisputable part of Ukraine under Soviet rule. Indeed, as the material analysed above indicates, for Soviet representatives the Hutsuls were not merely Ukrainians but perhaps the most quintessentially Ukrainian people of all, an idea based on their ornate folk culture and traditional lifestyle. This understanding of the Hutsuls as ‘the most Ukrainian of all Ukrainians’ bore little relation to how most highlanders would have thought about themselves at the time and borrows in part from the thinking of the early twentieth-century nation-builders who popularised the region among Ukrainian intellectuals. More fundamentally, however, it is also a logical extension of the notion outlined above that had been present for decades in Soviet culture, according to which Ukrainian identity was closely connected to displays of traditional folk culture. Considering this deeply rooted association, we can, I hope, understand the wider Soviet interest in the Hutsuls after the annexation, since their highly decorated, original folk customs offered the alluring possibility that they possessed

the most 'authentic' form of Ukrainianness, seemingly unaffected by capitalist or socialist modernisation.

A further counterintuitive aspect of this Soviet 'discovery' of the Carpathians is the extent to which the 'ethnographic gaze' of Soviet culture towards the Hutsuls borrows from non-Soviet precedents in the region. As discussed, homage is openly paid to non-state actors including Franko and Kotsiubyns'kyi who inscribed the Carpathians into the Ukrainian literary tradition. Arguably, though, Soviet depictions of the Hutsuls share more in common with past initiatives organised by local and national authorities under the Habsburg Empire and the Second Polish Republic. All three states deployed ethnographic displays to popularise their rationale of how Hutsul identity was compatible with government ideology, from the 1880 Polish-run exhibition in Kolomyia to the films of Dovzhenko and Solntseva in 1940. All three presented a vision of Hutsul culture as exotic and 'pre-modern' to further their political goals. And all three relied on performativity to showcase Hutsul particularity, an aspect found not only in the Soviet films but also in Emperor Franz Joseph's carefully planned state visit and the numerous Polish events organised in the Eastern Carpathians throughout the 1930s. Multiple common features emerge between these performances, such as an insistence that Hutsuls wear full traditional dress (which was usually worn only for special occasions), efforts to showcase the Hutsuls in their natural environment and displays of singing, dancing and highland musical instruments. One key recurring element is the Hutsul wedding party, performed for the first time in a political context as the centrepiece of the Habsburg imperial visit of 1880 and later appearing as a celebration of Soviet power in *Bukovyna* and *A Day of the New World*. As such, Soviet portrayals of Hutsuls should be seen not just in the

context of past Ukrainian efforts in the region or even previous Soviet ethnographic cinema, but as part of a continuing pattern of state appropriation of Hutsul culture via staged performances of loyalty to and compatibility with the authorities of the day.

Conclusion

Through their presentations of the Hutsul region, the films and other cultural sources produced to celebrate the Soviet annexations of territory from Poland and Romania display a visual, aural and even tactile indulgence in a traditional, exoticised vision of Ukrainian national culture. The works view the Hutsuls through an ethnographic gaze that both emphasises their ‘otherness’ and appropriates them for the Ukrainian nation, portraying them as simultaneously the most exotic people of the region and the most fundamentally Ukrainian. This article’s case study is an instance of an encounter with a peripheral region impacting wider formulations of a country’s national identity. More specifically, though, the 1939-1941 wave of Soviet interest in Hutsul culture served to further both Ukrainian national pride within the USSR and the broader imperial aspirations of the Soviet centre. By framing the Carpathian highlanders as a subject of autoexoticist curiosity and demonstrating the richness of Ukrainian culture’s folk origins, the works of Dovzhenko, Solntseva and others bolstered Ukraine’s claims to full nationhood within the USSR. Yet they also articulate an image of Ukrainian identity centred on pre-modern folk practices that entirely elides any element of modernity or development, perpetuating imperialist perceptions of Ukraine as ‘backward’ and serving to convey a civilisational gap between Ukraine and the Soviet centre.

This study of the Soviet ‘discovery’ of the Carpathians also highlights the longer-term impact of the period 1939-1941 on expressions of Ukrainian identity in the USSR. The Soviet takeover of eastern Poland enabled cultural practitioners to explore and celebrate Ukrainian folk customs to a greater extent than had been possible in the previous decade, part of a surge of officially sponsored Soviet Ukrainian patriotism that would continue into the war years.¹⁸ Furthermore, the twenty-one months from September 1939 mark the moment when the narratives and geographical focus of Ukraine’s early twentieth-century nation-builders were incorporated into Soviet state discourse, a development that would notably influence Ukrainian culture of subsequent decades. In the 1960s and 1970s, a new generation of Ukrainian filmmakers, led by Sergei Paradzhanov and Iurii Illienko, looked towards the Ukrainian west in search of a more ‘authentic’ expression of national identity and found inspiration for some of their greatest works among the Hutsuls.¹⁹ These directors’ definition of ‘authenticity’ undoubtedly differed from that of the Stalin-era filmmakers discussed here. But the understanding of the Carpathians as home to the most genuine Ukrainian culture, an idea first formulated in Soviet media between 1939 and 1941, went on to shape one of the most celebrated periods of Ukrainian artistic cinema.

Acknowledgements

¹⁸ On wartime Soviet Ukrainian patriotic discourse, see Yekelchuk (2002), 63-74.

¹⁹ Examples of Hutsul-inspired films from these years include Paradzhanov’s *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (*Tini zabutykh predkiv*, 1965), Illienko’s *The White Bird Marked with Black* (*Bilyi ptakh z chornoiu oznakoiu*, 1971) and Borys Ivchenko’s *Annychka* (1968).

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Notes on contributor

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