

# “Death or Freedom”: Transformation of Household Plots into Political Ones. On the material of the hidden Ukrainian state coat of arms on embroidered Ukrainian towels (*rushnyks*)

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**Abstract:** This article is devoted not only and not so much to the presence of national symbols (in particular, the trident which is the state coat of arms of Ukraine) on century-old Ukrainian *rushnyks* (embroidered towels). The main goal of this study is to show how closely the so-called political (patriotic) may be intertwined with household (everyday) embroidered plots, as we may sometimes easily confuse them. Since during the different periods of the struggle for state independence it was dangerous to embroider and then store Ukrainian national symbols, such signs often had to be masked. Thus, such usual embroidered scenes, as entertainment and fun or separation and meeting of a boy and a girl, could hide political undertones. And vice versa, using the ready-made printed cross-stitch papers containing the state coat of arms of Ukraine, girls sometimes could avoid embroidering this sign. Also, the current article shows the historical prerequisites for the creation of textile products with a bright nationalistic orientation in a rather limited time and space.

**Keywords:** the coat of arms of Ukraine (*tryzub*); embroidered Ukrainian towels (*rushnyks*); folklore formulas; inscriptions; household (everyday) and political (patriotic) motifs.

## ENG “Muerte o libertad”: Transformación de parcelas domésticas en parcelas políticas (sobre el material del escudo de armas del estado ucraniano oculto sobre toallas ucranianas bordadas)

**Resumen:** Este artículo está dedicado no sólo y no tanto a la presencia de símbolos nacionales (en particular, el tridente, que es el escudo de armas estatal de Ucrania) en los *rushnyks* (toallas bordadas) ucranianos centenarios. El objetivo principal de este estudio es mostrar cuán estrechamente pueden estar entrelazados los llamados temas políticos (patrióticos) con los bordados populares (cotidianos), que a veces podemos confundir fácilmente. Puesto que era peligroso bordar símbolos nacionales ucranianos durante la ocupación y la lucha por la independencia del Estado, a menudo había que enmascarar dichos símbolos. Por lo tanto, escenas tan habituales como entretenimiento y diversión o separación y encuentro de un niño y una niña, podrían ocultar matices políticos. Y viceversa, utilizando los papeles de punto de cruz impresos y confeccionados que contienen el escudo estatal de Ucrania, las niñas a veces podían evitar bordar este signo. Además, el presente artículo muestra los requisitos históricos para la creación de productos textiles con una clara orientación nacionalista en un tiempo y espacio bastante limitados.

**Palabras clave:** escudo de armas de Ucrania (*tryzub*); toallas ucranianas bordadas (*rushnyks*); motivos folclóricos; inscripciones; motivos cotidianos y políticos.

**Summary:** 1. Introduction. 2. Modifications of political and everyday plots, or Where the coat of arms of Ukraine may be hidden. 2.1. “Death or Freedom” (the patriotic inscription was first embroidered and subsequently removed, but the national coat of arms and the flag of Ukraine remained). 2.2. “My Heart Is Beating So Hard, My Hryts Has Gone to China, He May Not Return...” (the Ukrainian coat of arms was originally embroidered, but later unstitched). 2.3. “Two Hearts – One Spirit, Love Only One [Girl or Country], but Not Two [Girls or Countries]” (the Ukrainian coat of arms, which had been supposed to be embroidered according to the scheme, was replaced with a wreath of flowers in the embroidery). 3. A brief historical excursion of creating Ukrainian epigraphic embroidery with national symbols and patriotic inscriptions. 4. Conclusions. 5. Acknowledgements. 6. Written sources and bibliographical references.

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## 1. Introduction

*Tryzub* is the national coat of arms of Ukraine. *Rushnyk* is a sacral embroidered Ukrainian towel. Combining these two heavy duty symbols in one place – the embroidery of the *tryzub* (trident) on the *rushnyk* (Ukrainian embroidered towel) – has a powerful emotional effect on the minds of Ukrainians. Today, during the struggle of the Ukrainian people for independence, we can see a lot of embroidery schemes, where it is suggested to make such patriotic towels.<sup>1</sup>

However, not always and not everywhere Ukrainians were able to embroider national symbols and then store such products freely and without fear.<sup>2</sup> For storing Ukrainian heraldry on a towel a hundred years ago, there was a threat of severe punishment from the Soviet occupiers, which is confirmed by numerous stories from the descendants of embroideresses.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, during this period there was still a short period of time on a small piece of Ukrainian land, where the people still had the opportunity to so creatively express their patriotism (more about the historical prerequisites for the creation of nationally marked textile products will be discussed in the last section before the conclusions).

In my monograph,<sup>4</sup> I have systematized the most popular patriotic folklore formulas (both verbal and visual) in Ukrainian embroidery (on the basis of the *Interactive Online Index of Folklore Formulas (Epigraphic Embroidery)*).<sup>5</sup> Nowadays, in different sources they began to mention more and more such towels,<sup>6</sup> as well as to hold special exhibitions where the emphasis is on such embroideries with national symbols.<sup>7</sup>

In my opinion, it is still not possible to clearly distinguish patriotic from everyday embroidered subjects. They should be studied comprehensively, as political and household plots were closely intertwined. Particularly, this article demonstrates how the national emblems of Ukraine or patriotic inscriptions could be disguised on *rushnyks*, for example, hiding behind household scenes from the everyday life of an ordinary

<sup>4</sup> Tetiana Volkovicher, *Verbalni teksty u narodnii vyshyvtsi kint-sia XIX – pershoi polovyny XX st.: geneza, semantyka, prah-matyka* [Verbal Texts in Folk Embroidery from the End of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to the First Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: Genesis, Semantics, Pragmatics]. Kyiv: Naukova dumka, 2019. Accessed June 30, 2024. <http://www.etnolog.org.ua/pdf/stories/monografiji/2019/volkovicher.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> *Interaktyvnyi elektronnyi pokazhchik folklornykh formul (Epifrafichnna vyshyvka)* [Interactive Online Index of Folklore Formulas (Epigraphic Embroidery)] / T. Volkovicher (T. Brovarets). 2016–2025. Accessed September 10, 2025. <http://volkovicher.com> (the password: 2707).

<sup>6</sup> Yura Phinikovskiy, "Vyshytiy rushnyk iz kolektsii Liubomls-koho kraieznachchoho muzeiu" [The Embroidered Rushnyk from the Collection of the Liuboml Museum of Local History]. Liubomlskyi kraieznachyi muzei [Liuboml Museum of Local History]. November 9, 2020. Accessed July 2, 2024. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/395501504207720/posts/1021209451636919>; Olia Putko-Harlach, "Prodovzhuiuchy znaiomstvo z fondovoi hrupoiu 'Tkanya' Chervonohradskoi filii LMIR, sohodni diznaiemos pro vyshyti rushnyky" ["Continuing to Get Acquainted with the Fund Group 'Fabric' of the Chervonohrad Branch of the Lviv Museum of the History of Religion, Today We Will Learn about Embroidered Rushnyks"]. Muzei istorii relihiy (Palats Pototskykh) [Museum of the History of Religion (Potsky Palace)]. April 1, 2021. Accessed July 4, 2024. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/palacpotockyh/posts/357787228231775>; Starovynni rushnyky [Ancient Rushnyks]. "Z Dnem Nezalezhnosti, moia kokhana, moia naikrashcha, moia neskorena i vilna Ukraino!" ["Happy Independence Day, My Beloved, My Best, My Unconquered and Free Ukraine!"]. August 24, 2022. Accessed July 4, 2024. [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=pfbid-0WeQxZvzatW7TpRDyt1iCXsWM3SfLHeXvJKMu1ShUJAc-mxBkBRmNXGobg8jYdX5HI&id=313388289315456](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid-0WeQxZvzatW7TpRDyt1iCXsWM3SfLHeXvJKMu1ShUJAc-mxBkBRmNXGobg8jYdX5HI&id=313388289315456).

<sup>7</sup> Olena Petryshyn, "Znak na shchity: u Kyievi vidkryly vystavku pro istoriui tryzuba" [The Sign on a Shield: An Exhibition about the History of the Trident Has Been Opened in Kyiv]. *Vechirnii Kyiv*. [Evening Kyiv]. August 25, 2023. Accessed July 29, 2024. <https://vechirniy.kyiv.ua/news/87430/>; "Vystavka Rushnya z Volyni" [An Exhibition of the Rushnyk from Volyn]. Accessed June 30, 2024. <https://svitlycya.com.ua/vystavka-rushnya-z-volyni.html>; Svitlana Kocherhina, Doli halytskykh politviazniv ta alegorychna symvolika v yikh tabirnykh vyrobakh (na materialakh vystavky 'Voiennno-istorichnykh pamiatok,' 2001) ["Fate of Galitic Political Prisoners and Allegorical Symbolism in Their Camp Products (on the materials of the exhibition 'Military Historical Monuments,' 2001)"]. *Yavtukhovych, Bozhyvu Spyrydon*. January 26, 2015. Accessed July 5, 2024. <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=798631490184163&set=a.609161612464486>.

<sup>1</sup> Bronyslava Cherneha-Kachur, "Vzhe pozadu velychezna, tytanichna pidhotovka ta provedennia zakhodiv z nahody 30-richnysi Dnia Nezalezhnosti Ukrayny." ["The Huge, Titanic Preparation and Holding of Events on the Occasion of the 30th Anniversary of Independence Day of Ukraine Have Already Passed"]. *Kultura Kryvozershchyny* [The Culture of Kryve Ozero Raion]. August 25, 2021. Accessed July 2, 2024. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/3425116607616331/posts/4061537293974256>; Galinfo. "U Ternopoli vidkryly vystavku vyshytykh rushnykiv" ["An Exhibition of Embroidered Rushnyks Has Been Opened in Ternopil"]. August 20, 2021. Accessed July 4, 2024. [https://galinfo.com.ua/news/u\\_ternopoli\\_vidkryly\\_vystavku\\_vyshytyh\\_rushnykiv\\_370355.html](https://galinfo.com.ua/news/u_ternopoli_vidkryly_vystavku_vyshytyh_rushnykiv_370355.html).

<sup>2</sup> Ukrainian People Magazine. "Tsei rushnyk u 1939 rotsi zhinka v sloiku zakopala v zemli i tak perekhovala (selo Dobriany na Stryishchyni, Lvivska obli)" ["In 1939, a Woman Buried This Rushnyk in a Jar in the Ground, Thus Hiding It (the village of Dobryany in Stryshchyna, Lviv region)"]. November 13, 2021. Accessed July 4, 2024. <https://www.facebook.com/ukrainianmagazinediaspora/posts/pfbid0pILFKqthEVwbDgkLLXaj2gYWjVYD5f23Bm7z-K19xMxFBetSqaMpd7xF3jF6Ju891>; Visti Cherkashchyny [News of Cherkasy]. "Rushnyk, yakiy 50 rokiv khovaly pid dolivkou" ["A Rushnyk That Has Been Hidden under a Shed for 50 Years]. June 17, 2021. Accessed July 4, 2024. <https://viche.ck.ua/region/rushnyk-yakyj-50-rokiv-hovaly-pid-dolivkou/>. Drawing parallels with these century-old stories, one must realize that today, during Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, people living in the temporarily occupied Ukrainian territories also face real risks, if they dare to make and/or store such patriotic items.

<sup>3</sup> Nataliia Hliuz, "V moiemu seli ye shkhozhyi rushnyk" ["There Is a Similar Rushnyk in My Village"]. *Ukrainian People Magazine*. November 13, 2021. Accessed July 4, 2024. <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=2385077391624707&set=p.2385077391624707&type=3>; Halyna Kazhan, "Shchob enkavedysty ne znaishly rushnya z tryzubom, zakhova yoho v... klubok nytok" ["So That the Enkavedists Would Not Find the Rushnyk with the Trident, She Hid It in... a Ball of Threads"]. *Volyn*. August 22, 2017. Accessed July 4, 2024. <https://www.volyn.com.ua/news/84163-shchob-enkavedisti-ne-znayshli-rushnika-z-tri-zubom-zakhova-yogo-v-klubok-nitok.html>.

person. Furthermore, using cultural-historical and historical-genetic methods, I will explain the probable reasons for the mass embroidery of political symbols by Ukrainians precisely in a rather narrow time and space, which is mainly Eastern Galicia and Volyn, 1930s.

## 2. Modifications of Political and Everyday Plots, or Where the Coat of Arms of Ukraine May Be Hidden

### 2.1. “Death or Freedom” (the patriotic inscription was first embroidered and subsequently removed, but the national coat of arms and the flag of Ukraine remained)

Let me demonstrate the embroidered Ukrainian towel (Ternopil region, 1937) where one can easily notice masking of political undertones under a household plot (see fig. 1a). The first thing that immediately catches the eye is a scene from everyday life, where a girl and a boy are dancing.



Figure 1a. An embroidered Ukrainian towel (Ternopil region, 1937) with the image of the scene of dancing boy and girl, and the inscription (which, according to evidence, was later destroyed):

“Death or freedom” (in Ukrainian). The primary source of the photo: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/919385634907612/permalink/1564630263716476/>.<sup>8</sup> The source of the photo in the *Interactive Online Index of Folklore Formulas (Epigraphic Embroidery)*: <https://volkovicher.com/baza-daniih-i-za-neyibeztalannu-gospoda-molyite/4-r-ya/smert-abo-volya-1937/>.

Figure 1b. An ancient cross-stitch paper with the image of the scene of dancing boy and two girls (no inscriptions, no *tryzub*).

The source of the cross-stitch paper: A. Siu and Co, a free flyer with perfume advertising, the end of the 19th century.<sup>9</sup>

The source of the photo in the *Interactive Online Index of Folklore Formulas (Epigraphic Embroidery)*: <https://volkovicher.com/ikonichni-formuli/l-ch-tantsyuye-kvitka-i-2-zh-tantsyuyt/>.

I managed to find a vintage cross stitch pattern that this scene had been based on (see fig. 1b). Comparing from the two figures below (see fig. 1a and fig. 1b), we can see that the embroiderer used two characters (one boy and one girl) from the original scheme (which shows three characters: one boy and two girls) for creating her own plot.

I am talking namely about the **creation** of a new plot by the embroiderer, but **not** the **reproduction** of a ready-made plot from the printed scheme. And this is a fundamentally important thesis. It is about the fact that the second point which is also not difficult to see when looking at the towel for a little longer, is that the national symbols of Ukraine are woven into the ornament of this *rushnyk*. Between the boy and the girl, above the flower pot, practically in the center of the embroidered part, the state flags of Ukraine (blue and yellow) are placed (crosswise). In addition, between the other two vases with flowers, above the embroidered year “1937”, in the upper part of the embroidered part, the national coat of arms of Ukraine (a trident or *tryzub*) is placed. Although we do not see any verbal texts on this towel, the embroidered national symbols speak for themselves.

Fortunately, some information about the history of creation and subsequent use of this product has been preserved.<sup>10</sup> Here is an excerpt about it: “In the

<sup>9</sup> If we carefully compare the images on the embroidered *rushnyk* (fig. 1a) and the original printed pattern (fig. 1b), it can be seen that the male character's clothing has been greatly altered. The ear-covering flaps of the hat which is associated mainly with Russian culture (a so called *ushanka-hat*) have been removed in the embroidered version (obviously, in order to break any hint of Russianness). And even more than that, the neutral black belt has been replaced with a yellow and blue one which corresponds to the Ukrainian flag (without a doubt, the embroiderer had done this in order to highlight the character's Ukrainianness). This case is a vivid example of the so-called phenomenon of cross-dressing in folk epigraphic embroidery, when this is done not simply for the sake of the embroiderer's aesthetic preferences, but becomes one of the main plot-forming elements. For more details on such cross-dressing cases, see: Tetiana Volkovicher, “Verbalni teksty u narodnii vyshyvtsi kintsia XIX – pershoi polovyny XX st.: geneza, semantyka, prahmatyka” [Verbal Texts in Folk Embroidery from the End of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to the First Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: Genesis, Semantics, Pragmatics]. Kyiv: Naukova dumka, 2019. Pp. 131-135.

<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, I have to state that the absolute majority of the stories which tell about the creating ancient *rushnyks* (in particular, the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) have already been irretrievably lost to us. Therefore, when the owners of family heirlooms tell such information, it is a great value and a rarity for researchers. At the same time, it cannot be denied that these stories may occupy an intermediate position between documentary evidence (in case the description of the object is accurate to the slightest nuances) and folklore tales or legends (in the event that the storytellers, using a real fact (an embroidered towel with a certain plot), add/remove/change certain motifs). For each case, there is often no way to trace the transition line from historical (documentary) to folklore (with a creative re-interpretation) text. So far as the Figure 1a is concerned, it is difficult to notice at least some traces of the fact that there was an inscription at all (which, according to the cited testimonies, was later cut out). The center of the towel (where the trace of the destroyed inscription should have been) is unfortunately not visible in the photo. It is important to realize that while some such testimonies were entirely true (in the specific case just mentioned, we are inclined to trust this story), other somewhat similar *rushnyk*'s narratives may turn out to be folklorized. At all events, I would like to empha-

<sup>8</sup> Mariia Makarovska, “Z Dnem Nezalezhnosti, Ukraino!” [“Happy Independence Day, Ukraine!”]. *Yaskravyi i tenditnyi svit mystetstva* [The Bright and Fragile World of Art]. August 24, 2020. Accessed July 1, 2024. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/919385634907612/posts/1564630263716476/>.

center of the *rushnyk*, the embroidered inscription: ‘Death or freedom’ was cut out and burned, because, even for a scrap of the inscription on the towel, the life of its owner could be taken, and the *rushnyk* was hidden and protected so that we would not forget our grief, our history washed in blood and sweat”.<sup>11</sup>

If one looks at the page of the *Interactive Online Index of Folklore Formulas (Epigraphic Embroidery)* where all the embroidered samples known to the author with this scene of dancers are collected, he/she can make sure that most of the inscriptions to this image focus on dancing. The most popular embroidered verbal text for this plot is lines from a Ukrainian dance song: “*Hop, my godmother, don’t be sad, turn here and there*”.

From a folkloristic point of view, it is interesting that, judging by the inscription on one of the *rushnyks* (which has been embroidered according to the same printed pattern), the emphasis here is not on the fact that people are depicted in dancing poses (as in the previous cases), but on the number of male and female representatives (see fig. 1c). The fact that there is only one boy and two girls, so he has to make a choice in favor of only one girl. As an inscription, a folk proverb is used here: “*Two hearts – one spirit, love one [girl], but not two [girls]*”.



Figure 1c. An embroidered towel (the place and year of embroidery is unknown) with the image of the scene of dancing boy and girl, and the inscription: “*Two hearts – one spirit, love only one [girl], but not two [girls]*” (in Russian). The source of the photo in the *Interactive Online Index of Folklore Formulas (Epigraphic Embroidery)*: <https://volkovicher.com/katalog/dvartsa-odin-duh-lyubi-odnu-a-ne-dvuh/>.

size that each such text – whether it is documentary evidence or a folklore legend – has an extremely great value for us as researchers, primarily folklorists. After all, the story of an embroidered inscription, being preserved in family memory and passed down from generation to generation, functions as a piece of folklore in itself, even if this embroidered inscription never existed.

<sup>11</sup> Mariia Makarovska, “Z Dnem Nezalezhnosti, Ukrainer!” [“Happy Independence Day, Ukraine!”]. *Yaskravyi i tenditnyi svit mystetstva* [The Bright and Fragile World of Art]. August 24, 2020. Accessed July 1, 2024. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/919385634907612/posts/1564630263716476/>.

Specifically, this cited text – “*Death or freedom*” – actually exists in a folklore tale about the *rushnyk*’s history (orally), as well as in a virtual postcard on a Facebook page as a photo greeting for Independence Day of Ukraine (2020) (digitally). Therefore, regardless of whether this slogan once existed as an inscription on a towel (in embroidered form), its folklore existence as a story about a towel inscription (in oral and digital forms) cannot be denied. This indicates that this text not only actually exists and is linked to epigraphic embroidery, but also has a deep symbolic content, which gives us the scientific legitimacy to include it in the title of this article.

As we can see, the embroideresses could put not only sense of fun and entertainment into this scene of dance, but also discover new shades of meaning: from a love meeting to the struggle for state independence. It is no coincidence that I just displayed a *rushnyk* with this dance scene and the text instructing a young man to choose one of two girls (see fig. 1c).<sup>12</sup>

Since the overall topic of the current article is the state coat of arms in embroidery, let me return to the first towel I demonstrated. This one is with the embroidered national symbols (Ukrainian flags and tridents) and the removed inscription: “*Death or freedom*” (see fig. 1a). If it is clear with the state symbolism that it is directly related to the inscription “*Death or freedom*”, then the image of the dances does not quite obviously illustrate this verbal text. We can make various assumptions about why its embroideress chose this particular dancing scene with the obvious aim to create a patriotic product. For example, it may seem that a person, fighting for freedom, associates this dream will with dancing.

Also, there is another interesting version inspired by the last towel with the same scene and inscription (see fig. 1c). In this last example, the emphasis is shifted to the need to make a choice (one boy and two girls). By analogy with this logic of the last towel, it is possible to interpret the first towel, where a person is also faced with a choice: “*Death or freedom*”. Of course, in these two cases we are talking about completely different aspects of life (choosing a loved one or fighting for independence). However, it is important that in both inscriptions the emphasis is on opposition (either one or the other). And in the folk consciousness, this scene of a male character between two girls can symbolize this contrast which may be in all spheres – from private to state – of human’s life.

## 2.2. “*My Heart Is Beating So Hard, My Hryts Has Gone to China, He May Not Return...*” (the Ukrainian coat of arms was originally embroidered, but later unstitched)

The next example can be the evidence of complete destructing the obvious political features.

As we can read on the towel below (fig. 2a), the whole verbal text (from the both sides which are not identical) consists of several verbal formulas which are transmitted in the form of a dialogue between a girl and a boy:

- 1) “*My heart is beating so hard, my Hryts has gone to China, he may not return*” (replica of the girl);
- 2) “*Don’t cry, Marusia, I’ll be back soon*” (replica of the boy);
- 3) “*Oh, Hryts, I’m separated from you*” (replica of the girl);
- 4) “*This is my Hryts going*” (replica of the girl);

<sup>12</sup> In one of the following subsections of the article, we will see how this verbal text (but embroidered with a different image) can acquire political connotations.

5) "I have been waiting for you so much" (replica of the girl).

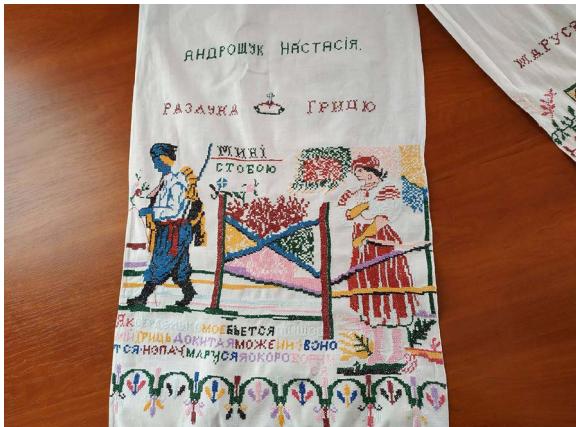


Figure 2a. An embroidered Ukrainian towel (Rivne region, 1937) with the image of the scene of the girl's separation from the boy and the boy's departure, and the inscription: "My heart is beating so hard, my Hryts has gone to China, he may not return / Don't cry, Marusia, I'll be back soon / Oh, Hryts, I'm separated from you / Androschuk Nastasiya" (from the one side); the image of the scene of the boy's return and meeting his girlfriend at home, and the inscription: "This is my Hryts going / I have been waiting for you so much / Marusia / my Hryts" (from the other side) (in Ukrainian). The primary source (the photo by Yuri Oitsius): <https://rvnews.rv.ua/ost/view/1545251412-pro-scho-rozpovidayut-rukopisi-muzeyu-sela-kunin-na-zdolbunivschini.><sup>13</sup>

The source of the photo in the *Interactive Online Index of Folklore Formulas (Epigraphic Embroidery)*: <https://volkovicher.com/abetka-r-ya/tsezh-mij-gryts-yde-yak-ya-tebe-zhdala-marusya-mij-gryts-yak-serdenko-moe-betsya-pijshev-mij-gryts-do-kytaya-mozhe-y-ne-venetsya-ne-pach-marusya-y-skoro-vernusya-razluka-grytsyu-myni-s-toboyu-androsh/>.

Also, one may note two different signatures of female names: *Nastasiya* ("Androschuk Nastasiya" – from the signature on the one side of the towel) and *Marusia* ("Don't cry, Marusia, I'll be back soon" – from the boy's reply on the one side of the towel and "Marusia / my Hryts" – from the signature on the other side of the towel).

This is a very important nuance from a folkloristic point of view which should not be overlooked. This is the so-called folklore synonymy in its classical

manifestation.<sup>14</sup> The thing is that *Nastasiya* is the embroiderer's real first name (and *Androschuk* is her last name), and *Marusia* is the first name of the heroine in the embroidered story, with whom the towel's embroiderer associated herself (as it follows from the history of making this *rushnyk*). The folklore synonymy is that for the embroiderer (whose real name was *Nastasiya* which she also marked on the product), it turned out to be quite natural, embroidering this plot as her own story, not to replace the established name of the main character (*Marusia*)<sup>15</sup> with her own real name (*Nastasiya*). Therefore, these two female names are used in this embroidered text in parallel, referring to the same girl who embroidered this towel (see fig. 2a).



Figure 2b. An ancient cross-stitch paper with the image of the scene of the girl's separation from the boy and the boy's departure (the inscription: "My heart is beating so hard, my Hryts has gone to China, he may not return / Separation", no tryzub) (in Ukrainian). The source of the cross-stitch paper: A. Siu and Co, a free flyer with perfume advertising, the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The source of the photo in the *Interactive Online Index of Folklore Formulas (Epigraphic Embroidery)*: <https://volkovicher.com/ikonichni-formuli/i-zh-stoit-ruka-na-sertsu-hustka-i-ch-ide-torbina/>.

Figure 2c. An ancient cross-stitch paper with the image of the scene of the girl's separation from the boy and the boy's departure (the inscription: "My heart is beating so hard, my Hryts has gone to

<sup>14</sup> The deviation from which we will consider on the example of the inscription on the next towel (which has been embroidered according to the same printed template).

<sup>15</sup> In the original which is the printed scheme for embroidery (see fig. 2b and fig. 2c), there is no female name *Marusia*, but only the male name *Hryts*. However, the combination of the names *Hryts* and *Marusia* as a couple is very common in Ukrainian folklore. Therefore, the addition of *Marusia*'s name to this plot can be considered as completely fitting into the tradition.

<sup>13</sup> Anna Lehka, "Pro shcho rozpovidaiut rukopisy Muzeiu sela Kunyn na Zdolbunivshchyni" [What Are the Manuscripts of the Museum of the Village of Kunyn in Zdolbuniv Raion Talking About]. *RvNews*. December 19, 2018. Accessed July 1, 2024. <https://rvnews.rv.ua/post/view/1545251412-pro-scho-rozpovidayut-rukopisi-muzeyu-sela-kunin-na-zdolbunivschini#>.

*China, he may not return / Separation*", no *tryzub*) (in Ukrainian). The source of the cross-stitch paper: M. Karahodina, a sheet from an album for embroidery, the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>16</sup> The source of the photo in the *Interactive Online Index of Folklore Formulas (Epigraphic Embroidery)*: <https://volkovicher.com/ikonichni-formuli/l-zh-stoyit-ruka-na-sertsi-hustka-i-ch-ide-torbina/>.

I was lucky enough to find embroidery patterns for this scene (of the girl's separation from the boy and the boy's departure) in two sources from different publishers (see fig. 2b and fig. 2c). They are practically identical both in terms of the image and the inscription ("My heart is beating so hard, my *Hryts* has gone to *China*, he may not return / Separation") offered for embroidery.

Comparing these printed cross-stitch papers (see fig. 2b and fig. 2c), where there is no trident (as well as no other national symbols) with the *rushnyk* above where, according to the legend about it, the coat of arms of Ukraine was originally embroidered (see fig. 2a), we can make sure that the embroideress introduced new accents to the plot by adding national motifs. As we remember, in this aspect this case is analogical to the story of the towel with a dancing plot where the embroideress added the coat of arms and the flag of Ukraine (compare the case 1 (see fig. 1a and fig. 1b) with case 2 (see fig. 2a, fig. 2b and fig. 2c)). One may wonder why *China* is present in the text (both in the original printed versions and the slightly modified embroidered version with adding a *tryzub*). Indeed, the plot about separation from the boyfriend, which the embroideress projected on herself, could not necessarily be connected with his departure specifically to Celestial Empire.<sup>17</sup> However, we are again dealing with folklore synonymy here. So, *China* could mean foreign space or space for others in general.

In this aspect, the following embroidery, designed in the form of a picture with a frame, is a unique find (see fig. 2d). It contains the same image (this is the scene

<sup>16</sup> As we can see, two practically identical cross-stitch patterns were published both in Odessa, i.e. on the territory of Ukrainian lands (fig. 2c), and in Moscow (Fig. 2b). Regardless of which publisher borrowed the pattern from the other, it is obvious that not only is the printed inscription in Ukrainian, but the plot about the man's departure to *China* is also Ukrainian. Despite the rather widespread misconception about the imposition of Russian culture through typographic patterns of epigraphic embroidery, this case indicates the opposite: in particular, there was a great influence of Ukrainian folk culture on those products of mass culture that were distributed throughout the Russian Empire.

By the way, the fact that typographic patterns for cross-stitch embroidery, which were published in the Russian Empire, also spread to those Ukrainian lands that were not under its control, requires separate consideration.

<sup>17</sup> In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Ukrainians massively settled in the so-called *Trans-China* (some well-known names of these Ukrainian settlements are *Zelenyi Klyn*, *Green Ukraine*, *Zakytashchyna*, etc.). These are territories in the Far East, between the Pacific Ocean and the Amur River. The nuances of Ukrainian resettlement in the so-called *land beyond China* are clearly demonstrated on the maps "Participation of Ukrainians in the agricultural colonization of the Eurasian Steppe (from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> till early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries)", "Regions of Ukrainian migrants' departure to Asia" and "Paths of Ukrainian migrants to Asia" from the following source: Yurii Loza, *Istorychnyi atlas Ukrayiny* [Historical Atlas of Ukraine]. *Karty VI-27. VI-28. VI-29* [Maps VI-27. VI-28. VI-29]. Kyiv: Vydavnytstvo "Mapa", 2022. P. 198-199.

As for the embroidered inscription mentioning *Hryts*' departure to *China*, the original text was probably closely related to this historical fact. However, it is also important to understand that later these lines gradually turned into a folklore formula, that is, *China* in the epigraphic embroidery may be perceived not as the so-called *Trans-China*, but as a foreign space in general.

of the girl's separation from the boy and the boy's departure) as one of the sides of the previous towel (see fig. 2a). A trident is clearly visible in the center of the embroidered picture. Fortunately, unlike the previous case, here the state coat of arms of Ukraine has been preserved. Unfortunately, unlike the previous case, the history of the manufacture and use of this embroidery has not been preserved. Even the approximate place and time of embroidering this picture is not known. However, missing this information does not detract from its value for research, since it contains an even more elaborate version of the verbal text, which further politicizes it. Like the previous case, the embroidered verbal text on this picture is not limited to one formula ("My heart is beating so hard, my *Hryts* has gone to *China*, he may not return / Separation") which was proposed in the printed version, but has several formulas that already form a new plot:

- 1) "My heart is beating so hard, my *Hryts* has gone to Ukraine, he may not return" (it is modified version of the folklore formula where *China* is replaced with *Ukraine*);
- 2) "Our hearts loved each other so much; one heart gave the love to the other one";
- 3) "Oh, God, save Ukraine for us".



Figure 2d. An embroidered Ukrainian picture (the place and year of embroidery is unknown) with the image of the scene of the girl's separation from the boy and the boy's departure, and the inscription: "My heart is beating so hard, my *Hryts* has gone to Ukraine, he may not return / Our hearts loved each other so much; one heart gave the love to the other one / Oh, God, save Ukraine for us" (in Ukrainian). The primary source of the photo: <https://www.reddit.com/media?url=https%3A%2F%2Fredd.it%2Fwftfa00dhcvy71.jpg>. The source of the photo in the *Interactive Online Index of Folklore Formulas (Epigraphic Embroidery)*: <https://volkovicher.com/baza-daniih-i-za-neyi-beztalannu-gospodamolyite/4-r-ya/yak-serdenko-moe-betsya-pijshov-mij-gryts-na-ukrainu-mozhi-j-ne-vernetsya-oto-sertsy-sya-kohaty-oto-sertse-sertsyu-lyubov-dalo-bozhe-ukrainu-nam-spasy/>.

In the above cited embroidered verbal text, the first point I would like to draw attention to is the replacement of *China* with *Ukraine* in the first folklore formula. Unfortunately, we do not know exactly about the socio-historical context of the creation of this embroidered picture. From a folkloristic point of view, it can be stated that this moment was very important, because in order to indicate the word *Ukraine*, the embroideress even resorted to deviation from folklore synonymy (which usually prevails in epigraphic embroidery).<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> The fact is that, as we have already noted above, in folklore texts it is quite normal to use names of some objects which

The next point in this verbal text which is fundamentally important for us is the third verbal formula ("Oh, God, save Ukraine for us") which directly indicates a patriotic orientation. This text is best associated with the embroidered national coat of arms of Ukraine in the center of this *rushnyk*.

According to the *Interactive Online Index of Folklore Formulas (Epigraphic Embroidery)*, this verbal formula – "Oh, God, save Ukraine for us" – was most often embroidered with another image, which also included the image of a trident, as well as two angels above it. The next subsection will analyze this in more detail.

### 2.3. "Two Hearts – One Spirit, Love Only One [Girl or Country], but Not Two [Girls or Countries]" (the Ukrainian coat of arms, which had been supposed to be embroidered according to the scheme, was replaced with a wreath of flowers in the embroidery)

Before looking at the next *rushnyk*, let us also recall the previous subsection where we considered the dancing plot (a boy and two girls are dancing). We have identified one of those towels with the image of dances (see fig. 1a) as patriotic (since, according to its legend, it contained the inscription "Death or freedom", as well as the Ukrainian coat of arms and flag), while the other towel embroidered according to the same scheme (see fig. 1c) appeared to be quite household (since it had the inscription "Two hearts – one spirit, love only one [girl], but not two [girls]", and there was no national symbol).

The next example is a *rushnyk* (fig. 3a) that contains the same embroidered verbal text as the last mentioned: "Two hearts – one spirit, love only one [...], but not two [...]" As we can see below, there is neither the Ukrainian coat of arms nor the Ukrainian flag. Therefore, looking purely at this towel, without knowing the context of creating other similar towels, someone can attribute it to everyday subjects (it seems that nothing political catches the eye). The two angels here supposedly symbolize two girls, one of which a boy must choose.

However, after carefully studying other *rushnyks*, where these two angels are depicted, we will see that most often they were embroidered above the trident (see fig. 3b). It turns out that the angels act as guardians of the Ukrainian state coat of arms and, more broadly, of Ukrainian independence. Unfortunately, I have not yet had any luck finding the printed pattern for the embroidery we see above. This pattern is artificially generated by me from numerous embroidered towels that contained this common visual plot – if there were many similar *rushnyks*, then it is obvious that the printed pattern existed in this form (depicting two angels over a trident).

are already established in folklore formulas while referring to other subjects. In other words, a girl can call herself *Marusia*, having the name *Nastasiya* (that is, as the famous saying goes: "you can't throw the words out of the song"). In the *Interactive Online Index of Folklore Formulas (Epigraphic Embroidery)*, if we look at all the available embroidered samples based on this plot, we will see that the word *China* remains unchanged in almost all of them, although it is clear that every girl who embroidered the scene of separation from her boyfriend, projecting it onto herself, was not thinking namely about *China*, but about a foreign space (which could be another region in Ukraine, and not necessarily a foreign country).

Knowing this, we can no longer categorically classify this towel (see fig. 3a) as purely household. Yes, it is quite possible that the embroideress decided to replace the political plot with an everyday one, to remind a guy that he should be faithful to one girl in love. Then we can qualify such a case (transformation of a primarily political plot into a household one) as the opposite of the previous ones (transformation of a primarily household plot into a political one (remember fig. 1a, 2a, 2d)).



Figure 3a. An embroidered Ukrainian towel (Rivne region, 1937) with the image of two angels above a wreath of flowers, and the inscription: "Two hearts – one spirit, love only one [girl], but not two [girls]" (in Ukrainian). The primary source of the photo: <https://history.rayon.in.ua/topics/388020-rushniki-z-trizubami-stolitni-vishivanki-bambetel-shovok-chim-divue-muzei-u-litovezhi>.<sup>19</sup> The source of the photo in the *Interactive Online Index of Folklore Formulas (Epigraphic Embroidery)*: <https://volkovicher.com/pokazhchik-tekstiv/a-d/dvertsya-oden-duh-lyuby-odnu-a-ne-dvoh/>.



<sup>19</sup> Oksana Melnychuk, "Rushnyky z tryzubamy, stolitni vyshivanki, bambetel-skhovok: chym dyvuiie muzei u Lytovezhi" ["Rushnyks with Tridents, Hundred-year-old Embroidered Cloths, a Bambetel-Hiding Place: What Is Amazing about the Museum in Litovezh"]. *Raion. Istoryia* [Area. History]. April 12, 2021. Accessed July 2, 2024. <https://history.rayon.in.ua/topics/388020-rushniki-z-trizubami-stolitni-vishivanki-bambetel-shovok-chim-divue-muzei-u-litovezhi>.

Figure 3b. Approximate scheme for cross-stitch embroidery, derived from collected towels for which this plot (two angels above the coat of arms of Ukraine) is common. The source of the image in the *Interactive Online Index of Folklore Formulas (Epigraphic Embroidery)*: <https://volkovicher.com/ikonichni-formuli/> (This scheme is artificially generated (the original scheme is not yet known to us) based on many collected Ukrainian *rushnyks* that had this common element).

However, there may be another, no less intriguing assumption about this case. Taking into account that it was dangerous to embroider tridents (as well as other national symbols), the embroiderer could deliberately not reproduce it on her product. At the same time, she could implicitly mean the Ukrainian coat of arms, since it was generally associated with this image of two angels. Delving further into this history, we can also give the phrase ("Two hearts – one spirit, love only one [girl], but not two [girls]") a different sound – as the importance of making a choice in favor of the native state ("Two hearts – one spirit, love only one [homeland], but not two [countries]").

### 3. A Brief Historical Excursion of Creating Ukrainian Epigraphic Embroidery with National Symbols and Patriotic Inscriptions

Finally, I would like to introduce the esteemed reader to the historical and cultural context regarding the geographical and chronological boundaries of the analyzed embroideries. The phenomenon of epigraphic embroidery was widespread almost throughout the entire territory of ethnic Ukrainian lands in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. What about *rushnyks* and other textile items of that time, which contained national symbols and/or patriotic inscriptions, as my experience in this topic shows,<sup>20</sup> these ones had quite clearly defined chronological and geographical boundaries. This is evident both from the samples presented in this article and from all the other units that I managed to enter into the aforementioned *Index*. In the process of collecting and systematizing the material, I noticed that all these embroideries with a bright nationalistic color were made in the 1930s and in a rather limited part of Western Ukrainian lands.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> My experience in this field consists of over twelve years (since the beginning of 2013) of collecting and systematizing samples of epigraphic embroidery (mainly Ukrainian towels with inscriptions about a century old). The result of this work is the *Interactive Online Index of Folklore Formulas (Epigraphic Embroidery)*, located on my own website: *Interaktyvnyi elektronnyi pokazhchyk folklornykh formul (Epihrafichna vyshyvka)* [Interactive Online Index of Folklore Formulas (Epigraphic Embroidery)] / T. Brovarets. 2016–2024. Accessed June 30, 2024. <http://volkovicher.com> (the password: 2707).

<sup>21</sup> The most popular patriotic embroidered formulas, as well as their folk contaminations were identified and shown in the monograph: Tetiana Volkovicher, "Verbalni teksty u narodnii vyshyvtsi kintsia XIX – pershoi polovyny XX st.: geneza, semantyka, prahmatyka" [Verbal Texts in Folk Embroidery from the End of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to the First Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: Genesis, Semantics, Pragmatics]. Kyiv: Naukova dumka, 2019. (pp.133–134), published on the basis of my PhD thesis, defended in 2018. This source also first indicated the chronological framework of such embroideries, which is the 1930s (p.134). Later, with the gradual accumulation of material, it became clear to me that similar (with a pronounced patriotic accents) samples were limited not only chronologically, but also geographically. In my subsequent publications, I expanded this topic, in particular, by including individual embroidered patriotic inscriptions in the headings (as, for example, in such sources: Tetiana Volkovicher, "Liubliu svoi

It is important to draw the right conclusions from the above observation about the rather limited geographical boundaries (which is – I repeat, because this is key – a small part of the western part of Ukraine, but not all of Ukraine) of embroidered patriotic formulas. In order to reject superficial thoughts that may immediately come to mind about the supposedly different level of patriotic attitude between the population of the western (where this phenomenon was widespread) and eastern (as well as all the rest of the Ukrainian lands, where, despite the prevalence of epigraphic embroidery in general, samples with a bright nationalistic coloration were not recorded) parts of Ukraine, one should not limit oneself to purely cultural studies, but turn to the historical context of the prerequisites for the emergence of such embroideries at that time and in that place.

Ukrainu y budu liuby do zahynu...": slovianska tradytsia epihrafichnoi vyshyvky na zakhidnoukrainskykh zemliakh ["I Love My Ukraine and Will Love [My Motherland] to Death...": Slavic Tradition of Epigraphic Embroidery in the West of Ukrainian Lands]. *Slavistyka y ukrainistyka: vzaiemne posylennia rozvytku: Materiały Mzhhnarodnoi naukovoї konferentsii* [Slavic and Ukrainian Studies: A Mutual Reinforcement of Development: Proceedings of the International Scientific Conference] (Kyiv, 2019, May 24). Kyiv, 2019. P. 62; Tetiana Brovarets, "Rise Up, Ukraine! A Light of Truth Will Shine, and Slave Children Will Pray in Freedom": The Embroidered Folklorized Works by Taras Shevchenko. Literary Process: Methodology, Names, Trends. 2022. Vol. 19. P. 6. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.28925/2412-2475.2022.19.1>). Addressing this topic, I constantly emphasize that it clearly requires more detailed study with the involvement of additional historical sources.

Having devoted these materials to such a complex issue as the masking of national symbols among everyday motifs in embroidery, I would like to express my acknowledgment to all three double-blind reviewers of the current article. I am grateful to Reviewer B for drawing attention to the fact that the topic of patriotic embroidery was raised in my previous works, the ideas of which were later borrowed by the publishers of the ethnographic photo album "Imperishable. Ukrainian state symbols in the folk embroidery and weaving" / contr. L. Voroniuk, V. Shchybria (2023) ("The topic of the article is important and relevant. Some of these topics were covered in the works of T. Volkovicher, and then her ideas were taken when writing the text for the publication 'Incorruptible' ('Netlinni')"), without proper referring to it (while using its specific research terminology, in particular, about various folklore contaminations of folklorized patriotic authorial texts), and with erroneously asserting that supposedly similar patriotic embroideries were mainly produced "during the Soviet occupation" (<https://den-vyshyvankiwayforpay.shop/prod/467848>) (many thanks to Reviewer B for his or her sensible comments). In this regard, my sincere gratitude also goes to Reviewers A and C, the first of whom pointed out the need to properly explain the historical context of creating these embroideries on Ukrainian lands in the interwar period namely under Polish rule (great thanks to Reviewer A for his or her valuable guidance), and the last Reviewer also confirmed that it is worth showing clear chronological and geographical boundaries of the analyzed phenomenon, since this would allow to show a certain pattern (huge thanks to Reviewer C for his or her cheering advice). Thanks to all three mentioned double-blind reviews, the current paper for the first time emphasizes that patriotic Ukrainian embroideries were produced at a time and place when there was **no** Soviet occupation. This statement is of paramount importance for at least two reasons: 1) it clearly confirms that Ukrainians still had more political freedoms under Polish rule than under Russian rule; 2) despite the widespread myth about the supposedly different mentality and patriotic level of residents of Ukrainian east and west, in reality it turns out that such obvious expressions of patriotism (such as the creation of embroidery with nationalist motifs) were facilitated by specific historical prerequisites precisely during that period in the territory of the western part of Ukraine (after all, when these lands had been annexed to the Ukrainian SSR, new similar samples were no longer mass-produced there).

To my mind, the most logical explanation for this observation is the uneven level of constraining the political liberties in different parts of Ukraine. The point is that the assessment of the varying degrees of political freedom of Ukrainians who found themselves in the Interwar period (1918–1939) under the rule of four different states (Romania, Czechoslovakia, Poland and Russia) is presented by historians as a base, that is, a generally recognized fact that everyone should know.

Particularly, the well-known work by Serhii Plokhy “The Gates of Europe: a History of Ukraine” (2015), which has been addressed to the Western and primarily English-speaking readers (to explain the essence of the Russian armed aggression against Ukraine, which has been ongoing since 2014), while comparing the situation of Ukrainian lands during the interbellum, highlights the principles of electoral democracy in the political system as what sharply distinguished the Republic of Poland from the Soviet Union.<sup>22</sup>

Training manuals on the history of Ukraine also emphasizes that Ukrainians in the Second Polish Republic “despite their status as second-class citizens, were in a better political position than their compatriots in the UkrSSR”, since “Poland, despite the dominance of openly chauvinistic sentiments among certain of its political circles, still remained a European state based on constitutional principles”.<sup>23</sup> The same is said in the classical “History of Ukraine for School-Age Children”: “In the Western Ukrainian lands, that is, in Galicia, Volyn, Kholmshchyna and Podlachia, that were incorporated into Poland with the consent of the Western powers, life was somewhat easier. Although Poland persecuted and limited the rights of the Ukrainian people <...>, they <...> were able to defend their small rights at least a little”, in contrast to how in the same 1930s in the Ukrainian lands within communist Russia “even those who were communists but tried to speak out in defense of our people were destroyed or driven to suicide by persecution”.<sup>24</sup>

Using historical maps, one can clearly see this, first by finding out how exactly the Ukrainian territories were divided between different states and what political regimes ruled there in the interwar period (the maps “Ukrainian land management in 1932 and 1938”, “Political regimes of Europe in the 1920s and 1930s”, and “Rusyns-Ukrainians and Poles: the formation of an ethnic boundary”), then by studying the formation of the ethnic border between Ukrainians and Poles (the map “Rusyns-Ukrainians and Poles: the formation of an ethnic boundary”), and finally by looking at the Ukrainian lands (Volyn, Galicia, Northern Bukovyna and Southern Bessarabia), which were ceded from Poland to the Ukrainian SSR by the Soviet and German agreement of September 28, 1939 (the map “Inclusion of Volyn, Galicia, Northern Bukovyna and Southern

Bessarabia into the Ukrainian SSR”).<sup>25</sup> The last just mentioned map is the key in this context, since by comparing the years of embroidering national symbols and/or patriotic inscriptions (these dates had been recorded on many textile products by their embroideresses themselves), from the one side, and the years of hiding these embroidered products (we can learn these dates from some folk narratives, mainly by descendants of the embroideresses), from the other side, a discernible pattern has emerged here. This is that patriotic embroideries had a time and place of origin that coincided with being that part of Ukraine under the rule of the Second Polish Republic. After these lands had been transferred to the Ukrainian SSR, new similar embroidered products were no longer mass-created, and the already made patriotic embroidered plots were carefully hidden, while some others were destroyed (partially or completely).

As we can see, epigraphic embroidery captures not only the fight against the oppression of the Ukrainian nation as a phenomenon in general, but also relevant historical nuances that we cited above (and these are quite specific things that can significantly deepen our understanding of this phenomenon). Actually, the stories of creating patriotic textile products and the subsequent existence of them is a vivid illustration of the dramatic contradiction that, on the one hand, “the accession of the western part of Ukraine to the UkrSSR merged a significant part of ethnic Ukrainian lands under one, albeit Soviet, flag”, in the meantime, this merger, unfortunately, could not strengthen the struggle of the Ukrainian people for their rights, because, on the other hand, “the formation of the ‘Soviet people’ was then taking place, which, based on communist ideology and class identity, had been to reject the so-called nationalist remnants at a later stage”.<sup>26</sup>

#### 4. Conclusions

Thus, this article considered only a few short stories of hiding meanings on Ukrainian *rushnyks* from a century ago. The owners of these towels, embroidering the Ukrainian coat of arms (*tryzub*) or implicitly having it in mind, carefully hid this sacred sign behind the plots that at first glance appear to be completely everyday scenes from the life of an ordinary person.

In the given examples, we saw how political meanings are actually hidden behind such ordinary plots as the dance of a boy and a girl (a *rushnyk* with the inscription “Death or freedom”), or the separation and meeting of a couple in love (a *rushnyk* with the inscription “My heart is beating so hard, my Hryts has

<sup>22</sup> Serhii Plokhy, *Brama Yevropy. Istoryia Ukrayny vid skifskykh voien do nezalezhnosti* [The Gates of Europe. A History of Ukraine from the Scythian Wars to Independence]. Kharkiv: Knyzhkovyi Klub “Klub Simeinoho dozvillia”, 2023. p. 511, 312 (Translated into Ukrainian by the publisher: Plokhy, S. *The Gates of Europe: a History of Ukraine*. New York: Basic Books, A Member of the Perseus Books, 2015).

<sup>23</sup> Mykola Lazarovych, and Natalia Lazarovych, *Korotka istoriia Ukrayny. Navchalnyi posibnyk* [A short history of Ukraine. Text-book]. Ternopil: Navchalna knyha – Bohdan, 2011. P. 180.

<sup>24</sup> Anton Lototskyi, *Istoryia Ukrayny dla ditei shkilnoho viku* [History of Ukraine for School-Age Children]. Kyiv: Tsentr uchbovoi literatury, 2021. P. 220.

<sup>25</sup> Yurii Loza, *Istorychnyi atlas Ukrayny* [Historical Atlas of Ukraine]. Karty VIII-23 “Ustrii ukrainskykh zemel u 1932 ta 1938 rokakh”. VIII-24 “Politychni rezhymy Yevropy v 1920-30-kh rokakh”. VIII-29 “Rusyny-ukrainsi y poliaky: formuvannia etnichnoi mezhii” [Maps VIII-23 “Ukrainian land management in 1932 and 1938”. VIII-24 “Political regimes of Europe in the 1920s and 1930s”. VIII-29 “Rusyns-Ukrainians and Poles: the formation of an ethnic boundary”]. Kyiv: Vydavnystvo “Mapa”, 2022. Pp. 242-243, 246; Yurii Loza, *Istorychnyi atlas Ukrayny* [Historical Atlas of Ukraine]. Karta VIII-30 “Vkluchennia do Ukrainskoi RSR Volyni, Halychyny, Pivnichnoi Bukovyny ta Pivdennoi Basarabii”. [Map VIII-30 “Inclusion of Volyn, Galicia, Northern Bukovyna and Southern Bessarabia into the Ukrainian SSR”]. Kyiv: Vydavnystvo “Mapa”, 2022. P. 247.

<sup>26</sup> Radomyr Mokryk, *Bunt proty imperii: ukrainski shistdesiatnyky* [Rebellion Against the Empire: Ukrainian Sixties]. Kyiv: A-BA-BA-HA-LA-MA-HA, 2024. p. 24.

gone to China, he may not return / Don't cry, Marusia, I'll be back soon / Oh, Hryts, I'm separated from you / Androschuk Nastasiya" (from the one side), and the inscription: "This is my Hryts going / I have been waiting for you so much / Marusia / my Hryts" (from the other side)), or the separation (a *rushnyk* with the inscription "My heart is beating so hard, my Hryts has gone to Ukraine, he may not return / Our hearts loved each other so much; one heart gave the love to the other one / Oh, God, save Ukraine for us").

Also, such a seemingly everyday proverb, which contains a recommendation to love only one girl, but not two girls, is embroidered next to the image, which, according to the scheme, originally contained the state coat of arms of Ukraine. However, the presented towel does not have a *tryzub*. And now, we can only make assumptions about what its embroiderer actually had in mind, while not excluding the political subtext. Taking into account the above-mentioned considered evidences of removing a trident from a finished product, the probability of patriotic subtones is very high. In any case, the fact that several cases of the so-called masking of political plots as household ones have already been recorded suggests that there were many more such stories that remain unknown to us (if not in this particular case, then certainly in others).

Actually, patriotic plots did not exist in a vacuum, that is, they were not apart from ordinary everyday motifs. The interweaving of meanings of the so-called political and household subjects is so close that it is not worth considering them separately. And this is not only and not so much because some important contextual nuances will be lost if someone analyzes embroidered patriotic symbols and inscriptions separately, ignoring all other signs and texts that were embroidered at approximately the same time and in the same space. The thing is that we cannot always be sure exactly (or rather, we can rarely be sure) what true meanings were hidden behind these or those embroidered signs and verbal texts. Political stories may over time acquire a household sound, and those motifs that seem to us to be as a part of everyday life, in fact, hide patriotic undertones.

Given the discovery of a rather limited spatial and temporal framework of embroidery with a bright nationalistic coloration (a small part of the western Ukrainian lands, mainly in the 1930s, under the rule of the Second Polish Republic), we have reached important conclusions, on the one hand, confirming visually the well-known fact about the much greater limitation of the rights and freedoms of Ukrainians under the Soviet occupation than under the rule of other states, in particular Poland (after all, after the annexation of this part of the Ukrainian lands to the Soviet Union, similar embroideries ceased to be mass-created, while the already made samples of this kind were carefully hidden/disguised/destroyed), and, on the other hand, debunking the myth of a supposedly large difference in mentality between the inhabitants of the eastern and western regions of Ukraine.

The study of epigraphic embroideries enhanced by the stories about their creation and further existence (both those of them which are closer to documentary evidence and those ones that are more reminiscent of folk tales) actually opens up a limitless field for historical research. In fact, the samples of embroidered epigraphy may be considered as both tangible and

written historical sources, while epigraphic *rushnyks*' stories are valuable oral historical sources. We not only can, but we need to study history, *inter alia*, through epigraphic textile products, consistently and competently introducing such material into scientific circulation. In this case, the samples of epigraphic embroidery and folk tales about them vividly confirm what we have perceived as an axiom from school.



Figure 4. An embroidered Ukrainian picture (Ivano-Frankivsk region) with the image of the coat of arms of Ukraine (a trident) supported by two crowned lions, and the inscription: "Freedom or death / 1918" (in Ukrainian). The embroidered year "1918" probably indicates not a year of creation of the product, but the date of approving the Fourth Universal of the Ukrainian Central Rada (1918, January 22) which clearly proclaimed the Ukrainian People's Republic as an independent, free, sovereign state of the Ukrainian people. The primary source of the photo: <https://report.if.ua/kultura/opilska-vyshyvka-mynulogo-yak-prykarpatci-beregly-rodynni-oberegy/>. The source of the photo in the *Interactive Online Index of Folklore Formulas (Epigraphic Embroidery)*: <https://volkovicher.com/pokazhchik-tekstiv/a-d-volya-abo-smert-1918/>.

P.S. After completing the double-blind peer review process of the current paper, dedicated to the hidden traces of patriotism and the struggle for the independence of Ukraine in epigraphic embroidery and in the title of which the slogan "Death or freedom" was symbolically included (this article shows a photo of a *rushnyk* with Ukrainian national symbols, and also mentions evidence according to which there were also the embroidered words "Death or freedom", but this inscription had to be destroyed to avoid political persecution), I was lucky to come across a very significant sample of patriotic epigraphic embroidery in this context.<sup>27</sup> In the last example, both the coat of arms of Ukraine (trident) and a variant of this

<sup>27</sup> Yuliia Martsiniv, "Opilska vyshyvka mynuloho. Yak prykarpattsi berehly rodynni oberehy" ["Opil's Embroidery of the Past. How the inhabitants of Pycarpattia (Ciscarpathia) protected their family amulets"], *Reporter*. May 16, 2024. Accessed September 10, 2025. <https://report.if.ua/kultura/opilska-vyshyvka-mynulogo-yak-prykarpatci-beregly-rodynni-oberegy/>.

verbal formula: “Freedom or death” have been clearly preserved (fig. 4). Regarding this particular verbal formula in embroidered form, I happened to see it on a piece of ancient fabric for the first time – until now I knew that it could be embroidered only from folk narratives. So, I immediately included this item in the *Interactive Online Index of Folklore Formulas (Epigraphic Embroidery)*. This is evidence that many patriotic slogans have functioned and function not only in oral culture (including *rushnyks*’ legends which say that the owners of such towels sometimes had to destroy the corresponding inscriptions), but also in a fixed (embroidered) form, as in the last photo. All these stories together make us think about how many more such hidden or implicit patriotic signs (particularly, in Ukrainian epigraphic embroidery, as it was a mass phenomenon a century ago) could have existed – destroyed later or encrypted from the beginning – that we have no way of knowing about.

## 5. Acknowledgements

During the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, continuing my research into patriotic Ukrainian epigraphic embroidery (in this case, its hidden traces on *rushnyks*) would have been impossible if not for the selfless work of many people who physically repelled the enemy and overcame the consequences of hostilities. Like my compatriots who also did not leave our Motherland, I am forever indebted to the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the State Emergency Service, volunteer civil defense formations (within the latter structure, it was my honor to be a member from June 2022 to January 2024, working on disaster recovery efforts (mainly clearing the rubble of the destroyed buildings) after the Russia’s armed aggression), and others.

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