



Mikhail Mikhailovich Bozhi

(1911 - 1995) b. Odessa, Ukraine

Ukraine Reclaims 1958

oil on canvas



A woman in a bright, traditional dress stands in a woodland clearing. She looks into the distance towards green conifers that grow tall and vibrant. Around her, the ground is scarred with tree stumps. At her feet and in the foreground, wiry saplings struggle toward the sun. The landscape is marked by what's been lost, but also by what's returning. An invitation to reflect on destruction, resilience, and recovery, this painting is a powerful commentary on Ukraine's tumultuous history and their difficult relationship with the Soviet Union.

In 1922, Ukraine's struggle for independence was interrupted when its western portion was absorbed into the newly formed Soviet Union, becoming one of its 14 republics. While the Soviet Union promised its republics equality, it often delivered control, enforcing policies that undermined the culture and sovereignty of these constituent nations. In Ukraine, this led to the suppression of the Ukrainian language and identity. During this time, Ukraine also suffered under brutal economic and agricultural programs created by Soviet leader Joseph Stalin.

The most brutal chapter came in the early 1930s, when one such agricultural program requisitioned grain and stripped Ukrainian villages of their food. This led to a devastating man-made famine that lasted from 1932-33. An estimated 3.9 million Ukrainians died—about 13 percent of the population. Starving people roamed the countryside, desperate for anything to eat. One witness said: “You could see them walking about, just walking and walking, and one would drop, and then another...” In some areas, physically weak mourners resorted to burying the bodies in mass graves due to the overwhelming extent of the devastation.

In the 1940s, Soviet industrialization projects continued to abuse the Ukrainian land, prioritizing extraction and production over ecological or cultural concerns. Such projects often displaced rural communities and left major scars on the land. Throughout this, Ukrainian nationalist movements persisted throughout Ukraine opposing Soviet rule.

After Stalin's death in 1953, his successor, Nikita Khrushchev, lessened restrictions and began to reform Stalin's programs. This created space for new conversations about national and cultural identity and a cautious revival of Ukrainian culture and language.

Ukraine Reclaims was painted during this time of revival. Just like the saplings beginning to grow among the stumps, Ukrainian traditions and spirit persist and recover despite decades of suppression. Both land and people are resilient and have the capacity to heal and persevere. *Ukraine Reclaims* reminds us that even in landscapes of loss, new life can take root.

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