

# FUNGI AND WAR IN UKRAINE

Philip Rogosky | @micotipo

Time and again during periods of oppression, upheaval, and revolt, Ukrainian artists and authors have rallied behind one story: the folktale called “War of the Mushrooms” (Война грибов; or *Voyna gribov*). This tale was published by Russian ethnographers Vladimir Dal and Aleksandr Afanas’ev in the mid-19th century, and first accompanied with illustrations by painter Yelena Polenova in 1889.

The most well known Ukrainian picturebook version, illustrated in 1909 by a young Heorhii Narbut (the future creator of the nascent state’s public image branding was still studying in Russia under Ivan Bilibin) stays quite true to the Russian original version. But, perhaps in order not to appear too explicitly revolutionary—following the 1905 turmoil in the country—omits naming the enemy: in the Russian versions of the tale, it’s either a turf-war against the wild berries or a call to arms against Царь Горох (Tsar Gorokh, aka “Emperor

Pea”). The latter, likely in response to Napoleon’s incursions in Russia in 1812–1813. In Narbut’s telling of the story, Боровик (Borovyk, *Boletus aereus*) calls upon a number of edible mushroom species to enroll in his army to fight off the enemy: Белянки (Belyanky, *Boletus edulis*), Волнушки (Volnushky, the Woolly Milk Caps *Lactarius torminosus* and *L. pubescens*), Мухоморы (Mukhomory, *Amanita muscaria*), Свинушки (Svinushky, a humble group including *Paxillus involutus* and *Lactarius trivialis*), Сморчки (Smorchky, *Morchella* spp.), Рыжики (Ryzhiky, the Rusty Milk Caps *Lactarius deliciosus* and similar), Опенки (Openky, Honey Mushrooms like *Armillaria mellea*), and finally Грузди (Hruzdy, the Peppery Milk Caps *Lactarius resimus* and similar). All are well known Slavic folk taxa, but it is only the last group, the fieriest of them all, that agrees to take arms alongside Borovyk.

In 1919 a second, more mycologically meticulous version of the story appeared on the heels of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, published in Kyiv and Odesa, and later in Prague,

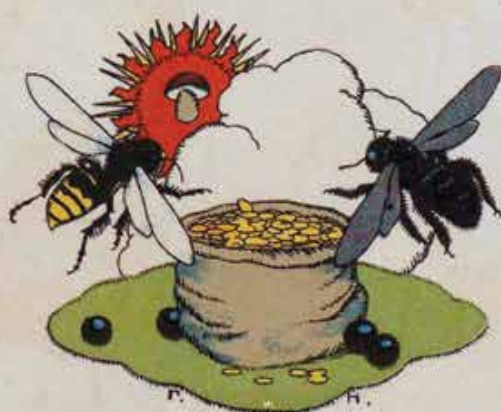


Oй вставайте вы, Сморчки,  
 Собирайтесь въ полчки!  
 Вамъ пора вставать,  
 На войну воевать!»

Отказались Сморчки:  
 — Мы старые старички,  
 — Неповинны мы тому,  
 — Не пойдёмъ мы на войну.

„Ой вставайте, Рыжики,  
 „Вы сѣрые мужики!  
 „Вамъ пора вставать,  
 „На войну воевать!“

Отказались Рыжики:  
 — Мы богаты мужики,  
 — Неповинны мы тому,  
 — Не пойдёмъ мы на войну.







(H. Narbut, 1909)



Задунав у лісі крик:  
То надумав Боровик  
Всі Гриби у гурт зібрати  
І Жуків повоювати.

1



Як почули Ковпаки,  
Стисли шаблі в кулаки,  
Шапки вгору, вуса вниз:  
— „Лютий враже, стережись!...“

Військо добре назбирало,  
Мухоморів в санітари  
Разом всіх попризначали:  
Мухомори-ж знають чари...



6

(O. Sudomora, 1919)

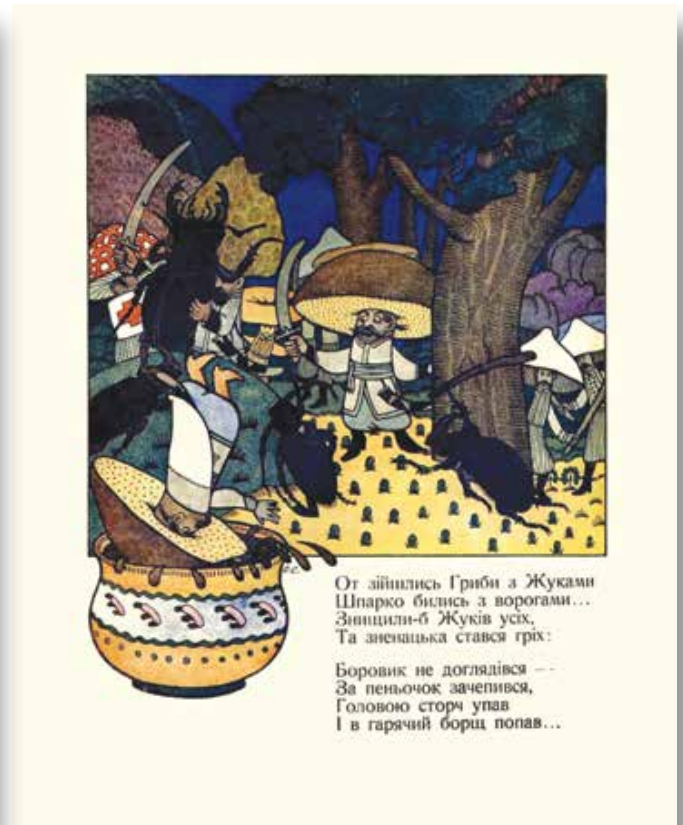
Continued from page 32.

with illustrations by another significant Ukrainian artist, Ohrim Sudomora, titled *Війна грибів з жуками* (*Vіyna hrybiv z zhukamy* (“The War Between Mushrooms and Beetles”). Here the tale is more detailed and unguarded, but also given an unexpected ending; it recounts a vastly more organized and ultimately successful enlistment campaign by Borovyk [NB: given that the text reflects the rise of Ukrainian patriotic self-determination in its spelling and fungal vernaculars, I’ve kept to specifically Ukrainian transliterations]. He first calls upon Опеньки (Openky, *Armillaria mellea*), Печерички (Pecherychky, *Agaricus* spp.), синенькі Маслюки (synenki Maslyuky, a blueing *Suillus* species) and Синегубці (Synehubtsi, *Russula cyanoxantha*, identifiable via the German name “Blauer Täubling”), but these groups decline to enroll, each with varying alibis. The second round of conscription is, by contrast, a resounding success, starting with the bitter Гірчаки (Hirchaky, *Lactarius rufus*), the popular Рижки (Ryzhky, Rusty Milk-Caps), the mitred Ковпаки (Kovpaky, *Morchella esculenta*), the obligatory Мухомори (Mukhomory, *Amanita muscaria*, who are elected medics for their famed pharmaceuticals), the ever-ready Сироїжки (Syroyizhky, the “Raw-edibles,” a pan-Slavic common name for mild *Russulales* species), and even the resolute Гадючкам (Hadyuchkam, deadly *Amanita phalloides* and similar)—a motley mycotic bunch agree to go fight the beetle squadrons.

In the comical surprise ending of the tale, the fungal army loses its leader—Borovyk trips into a steaming pot of soup. Deploying an unexpected turn such as this might seem defeatist, but its intent becomes clearer considering

the author of the text that Sudomora’s version of the story is based on: none other than Ivan Truba, the radical Ukrainian revolutionary activist-turned-educator and author. Truba rewrote the story in 1917 for a collection of folktales for schools, mixing mycological education with patriotic fervor. In his version he adapts a storytelling twist that Dal recorded in one Russian original (Aunt Varvara comes and forages the mushrooms, upending their imminent forest feud), to become the undoing of Borovyk. Perhaps this is a forewarning against a cult of strongmen leaders. Truba came from a storied Cossack family and his mission ended in exile (first to Austria and ultimately to the Czech Republic) at the Bolshevik’s takeover of the country in 1919. Sudomora himself was later arrested by the Russian authorities in 1949, and sentenced to 25 years forced labor for various explicitly anti-Soviet postcards and vignettes he had published. (Unsurprisingly, during his interrogation no mention was made of similar anti-Nazi illustrations he had previously published.) He was granted state amnesty after Stalin’s death in 1955 but denied rehabilitation; he passed away in dire poverty in 1968.

There have been numerous translations of this mycological Russian folktale into other languages over the years, each having to adapt local fungal knowledge and tradition. Indeed, all translations have ultimately redefined the very point of the tale, usually defaulting to a merely botanically educational aim. (Although some studies, for example by the Wassons, Dugan, Toporov, et al., have addressed the ethnomycological and semiotic aspects of the Russian originals.) In the locally topical Ukrainian versions throughout the ages, there is clearly much more at stake, illustrating how many histories a simple fungal folktale can contain.



(O. Sudomora, 1919)

With the most recent events unfolding in the country, a new Ukrainian revisiting of the story, *Війна грибів* *Viyna Hrybiv*, was published in December 2021 by local art house Rodovid Press (with translations in French and English now available on their website), featuring the artwork of Ukrainian emigré Nikita Kravtsov. This retelling of the popular folktale was penned by one of the foremost authors in Ukraine today, Russian-born Andriy Kurkov. Kravtsov's images are as raw as those currently emerging from the once-again contended territories. Alongside contemporary castings of the various mushroom characters, the images feature symbols of the local patriotic resistance throughout the ages, including anarchist Nestor Makhno's handgun. The illustrations are currently on view at the Ukrainian Museum in New York.

#### Acknowledgments

Special thanks to P. Józwikiewicz, A. Savchenko, L. Demydenko and N. Kravtsov. Images courtesy H. Narbut, public domain; O. Sudomora, fair use; N. Kravtsov, by kind permission of the artist.

**The newest Mushroom Thriller!**

Available in print and ebook versions at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) and many other outlets.

*(This is a PG read with some violence implied.)*

Visit [ellenkingrice.com](https://www.ellenkingrice.com) for Ellen's other titles.

*Ellen King Rice*

[Mycoboutique.com](https://www.mycoboutique.com)

**Totally Fungi**

Montréal

Text continues on page 39.



(N. Kravtsov, 2021)



(N. Kravtsov, 2021)

## Bibliography

- Afanas'ev, A.N. 1855–1863. Война грибов, in *Народные русские сказки*. Soldatenkov & Shchepkin, Moskva.
- Anon. 2020. Труба Иван Михайлович 1878–1950 (biography of Ivan Mykhailovych Truba). Website of Dnipopetrovs'ka Oblasna Universal'na Naukova Biblioteka. (Published online at <https://www.libr.dp.ua/region-truba.html>.)
- Anon. 1916. When the mushrooms went to war (English translation of Война грибов). *Primary Education* 24(9): 587. (Published online at [https://archive.org/details/sim\\_primary-education\\_1916-11\\_24\\_9/page/586/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/sim_primary-education_1916-11_24_9/page/586/mode/2up))
- Dal, V. (pseud. V. Lugansky) 1832. Война грибов с ягодами, in *Русские сказки из предания народного изустного на грамоту гражданскую*. Pluchart, Sankt-Peterburg.
- De Nardis, L. 1994. I funghi (Italian translation of Война грибов) in *Afanas'ev - Fiabe popolari russe*. Newton Compton, Roma.
- Dugan, F.M. 2016. The war of the mushrooms: A Russian folktale revisited. *FUNGI* 8(5): 35–36.
- Gruel-Alpert, L. 1988. Les champignons (French translation of Война грибов) in *Afanassiev - Les Contes populaires russes*. Maisonneuve et Larose, Paris. (See online at [http://www.guygaudreau.com/illustrations/champignons\\_culture\\_2015.pdf](http://www.guygaudreau.com/illustrations/champignons_culture_2015.pdf))
- Kurkov A. and N. Kravtsov (ill.) 2021. *Війна грибів | Viyna Hrybiv | The War of the Mushrooms / La Guerre des Champignons*. Rodovid Press, Kyiv. (See online at <https://rodovid.net/en/product/287/viyna-hrybiv-the-war-of-the-mushroom/>.)
- Meyer, A. 1906. Die Pilze (German translation of Война грибов) in *Russische Volksmärchen*. C. W. Stern, Wien. (See online at [https://books.google.it/books?id=\\_CzKDwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.it/books?id=_CzKDwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false) or at <https://www.weltbild.de/media/txt/pdf/9783828980495-188.866.802.pdf>.)
- Narbut, H. (ill.) 1909. *Война грибов*. Knebel, Moskva. (Published online at <https://chl.kiev.ua/ELIBRARY/Book/View/96#page/1/mode/2up>.)
- Parfan, N. (dir.) 2021. *БРЕНДАПИ | Brand Makers | Георгій Нарбут Heorhii Narbut*. (Published online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5hazdpLuAJY>.)
- Polenova, Y. 1889. *Война грибов*. Thiel, Moskva. (Published

Text continues on page 42.





(N. Kravtsov, 2021)



(N. Kravtsov, 2021)

Continued from page 39.

online at <https://thestrrip.ru/en/dlya-seryh-glaz/skazochnyimir-eleny-polenovoi-volshebnye-illyustracii-k-russkim/>.)

Serre, L. and S. Alzial. 2014. *Bill Bolet, le roi des champignons*. Bang, Barcelona. (See online at <https://mamutcomics.com/fr/bill.html>.)

Sudomora, O. 1919. *Війна грибів з жуками | Як вальчили houby s brouky*, Vydannya T-va "Chas," Kyiv; F. R. Tichý, Praha; Derzhavne vydavnytstvo, Odesa. (Published online at <https://diasporiana.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/books/11411/file.pdf>.)

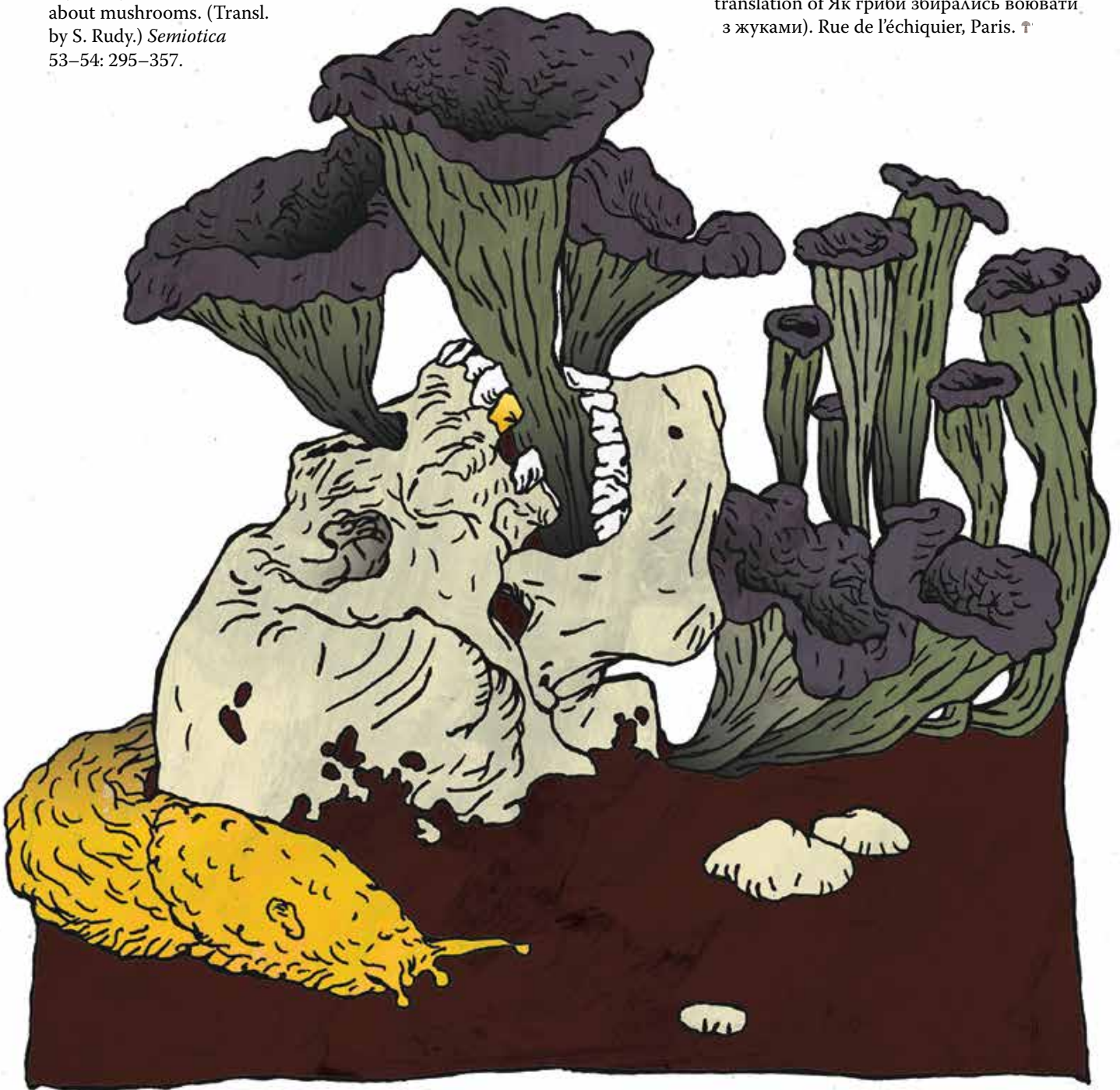
Toporov, V.N. 1985. On the semiotics of mythological conceptions about mushrooms. (Transl. by S. Rudy.) *Semiotica* 53–54: 295–357.

(Published online at [http://johnallegro.org/text/Toporov%20-%20On%20the%20semiotics%20of%20mythological%20conceptions%20about%20mushrooms%20\(Semiotica%2053\).pdf](http://johnallegro.org/text/Toporov%20-%20On%20the%20semiotics%20of%20mythological%20conceptions%20about%20mushrooms%20(Semiotica%2053).pdf).)

Truba, I., M. Kuzmenko, and M. Pohribnyak (ill.) 1917. *Як гриби збирались воювати з жуками*. Dytyacha biblioteka, Katerynoslav. (Published online at [https://chtyvo.org.ua/authors/Truba\\_I/Yak\\_hryby\\_zbiralysia\\_voiuvaty\\_z\\_zhukamy\\_vyd\\_1917/](https://chtyvo.org.ua/authors/Truba_I/Yak_hryby_zbiralysia_voiuvaty_z_zhukamy_vyd_1917/).)

Wasson, V.P., and R.G. Wasson. 1957. *Mushrooms, Russia and History. Vol. I*. Pantheon, New York.

Yombo-Demidova, A. 2017. *De la guerre des champignons contre les bousiers* (French translation of *Як гриби збирались воювати з жуками*). Rue de l'échiquier, Paris. †



(N. Kravtsov, 2021)