Episode 1: "Artificial Intelligence Discusses Nikolai Gogol"

This podcast episode examines the identity of Nikolai Gogol, a writer born and raised in Ukraine who wrote in Russian during the Russian Empire. The discussion highlights aspects of Oleh S. Ilnytzkyj 's academic work ***Nikolai Gogol: Ukrainian Writer in the Empire. A Study in Identity*** https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111373263

Ilnytzkyj delves into the intricate relationship between Nikolai Gogol, his Ukrainian identity, and his contributions to both Ukrainian and Russian literature. He challenges the traditional portrayal of Gogol as a 'Russian' writer, asserting that Gogol was fundamentally Ukrainian, even as he wrote in Russian within the imperial cultural framework. The book examines critical responses to Gogol's work, shedding light on the conflicting interpretations of his nationality and the competing narratives of Ukrainian and Russian identities within the Russian Empire. Ilnytzkyj illustrates how Russian intellectuals appropriated Gogol's work to advance their own national narratives and how both Gogol and Ukrainian intellectuals resisted these efforts. Ultimately, the study re-evaluates Gogol's legacy, firmly anchoring him within the broader history of Ukrainian culture and identity as it evolved under imperial rule.

Transcript 1

[Introduction by Oleh S. Ilnytzkyj]: Welcome to the Nikolai Gogol Podcast, where we delve into the long-debated question of Gogol's identity: Was he a Ukrainian or Russian writer? Hello, I'm Oleh Ilnytzkyj, Professor Emeritus at the University of Alberta and author of *Nikolai Gogol: Ukrainian Writer in the Empire. A Study in Identity*, which was published in July 2024. This podcast series is titled "Artificial Intelligence Discusses Nikolai Gogol." It presents paraphrased overviews of my book in a unique and accessible format. Each episode features a dialogue created by Google's NotebookLM. This AI tool took creative liberties with my text but produced an engaging and mostly accurate conversation that captured the essence of my ideas for a non-specialist audience. Let me emphasize that the two voices you will hear in this podcast are entirely AI-synthesized. What they say was generated by NotebookLM, which was trained on my original work. Thank you for tuning in. I hope this AI-driven discussion sparks your curiosity and offers fresh insights into Gogol's identity. See you next time!

[Long Pause]

[Male AI]: Welcome to the Deep Dive. Looks like we're diving into Nikolai Gogol today. You sent over a ton of sources, books, articles, scholarly papers, the whole shebang. You're really digging deep into his life and works, huh? Especially his Ukrainian heritage.
[Female AI]: Definitely. It's fascinating stuff.
[Male AI]: You know, most people just think of him as a Russian writer, right?
[Female AI]: But it's way more complicated than that.

[Male AI]: Okay, so let's break it down. We're talking about a massive multiethnic empire, right? Where the idea of Russianness was still evolving. And then Gogol bursts onto the scene with these stories steeped in Ukrainian folklore and culture bound to cause some friction, don't you think?

[Female AI]: Absolutely. You have to remember Kyivan Rus' was this powerful medieval state that existed from the 9th to the 13th centuries. It's considered the ancestor of both modern-day Ukraine and Russia.

[Male AI]: Right. Sure.

[Female AI]: So that shared heritage becomes a big point of contention as these ideas of national identity start solidifying.

[Male AI]: Got it.

[Female AI]: And many Ukrainian intellectuals back then, including Gogol, wrote in Russian but didn't necessarily see themselves as ethnically Russian. They saw themselves as part of a broader imperial culture.

[Male AI]: Okay, I'm following you. So, to start things off, let's address the elephant in the room. Was Gogol a Ukrainian writer even though he wrote in Russian? What does the research tell us?

[Female AI]: Well, that's where it gets interesting. He's usually categorized as a Russian writer, but there's no denying those Ukrainian roots. He was born and raised in Ukraine, and his love for his homeland never faded. But that simple label "Russian writer" misses a lot of the nuance.

[Male AI]: It does seem like a bit of a contradiction. Writing mostly in Russian but identifying so strongly with Ukraine. How do we make sense of that?

[Female AI]: This is where the concept of Imperial Letters comes in handy.

[Male AI]: Imperial Letters?

[Female AI]: It helps us see Gogol not just as this Russian writer, but as part of a much richer multiethnic literary world.

[Male AI]: Okay, I like where this is going.

[Female AI]: Basically, Imperial Letters refers to this diverse literary space within the Russian Empire. Different national voices, languages, cultures, all mingling together. Gogol and many other Ukrainian intellectuals were adding to this vibrant imperial culture, not just a solely Russian one.

[Male AI]: So Gogol's Ukrainian tales weren't just a phase. They were part of a bigger movement. Starting to get a sense of how crucial the historical context is here.

[Female AI]: Exactly. His early works, those filled with Ukrainian folklore and traditions, they weren't just personal expressions. They were part of a larger Ukrainian intellectual movement within the empire.

[Male AI]: Right.

[Female AI]: And that movement was challenging this very idea that literature from the empire had to be just Russian. It highlighted those unique contributions of Ukrainian culture.

[Male AI]: So, I'm guessing the reaction to his early work must have been pretty mixed. Russian and Ukrainian intellectuals probably approached it with very different expectations.

[Female AI]: You're right on the money there. Early reviews from Ukrainian critics specifically identified him as a Ukrainian writer. They saw his work as this vital part of their own cultural movement, a powerful expression of their heritage.

[Male AI]: Makes sense.

[Female AI]: But Russian critics, even while acknowledging his Ukrainian background, already started trying to claim him for themselves.

[Male AI]: Oh, wow. So that tug-of-war over his identity started early on.

[Female AI]: It did. And a great example of this is Gogol's own Latin teacher, Ivan Kulzhyns'kyi, his Latin teacher. He wrote a book called *Rural Ukraine*. Tried to blend those Ukrainian themes with Russian sensibilities.

[Male AI]: So, bridging the gap…

[Female AI]: You'd think, right? But what's interesting is both Gogol and a contemporary Ukrainian critic, Nikolai [*actually: Andrii — OSI*] Storozhenko, criticized the book.

[Male AI]: Wait, they criticized it? Why?

[Female AI]: They felt Kulzhyns'kyi had compromised Ukrainian authenticity by trying to appeal to a Russian audience. They saw it as diluting their culture.

[Male AI]: So, even among Ukrainian intellectuals, there were different views on how to present Ukrainian culture within the empire.

[Female AI]: Absolutely!

[Male AI]: So, for Gogol, it wasn't just about writing good stories. It was about carefully representing Ukrainian culture. [*Here, AI is hallucinating a bit, not quite capturing the nuances between Kulzhyns'kyi, Storozhenko, and Gogol — OSI*]

[Female AI]: Precisely. And this brings us to one of Gogol's most famous quotes. You've probably heard it before. "I myself do not know what soul I have. Ukrainian or Russian."

[Male AI]: Oh, yeah. That one stuck with me. Always found it intriguing and kind of perplexing.

[Female AI]: It's easy to take it at face value. Think he was genuinely conflicted. But to really get it, we have to understand that intense political pressure at the time.

[Male AI]: Okay, I'm listening.

[Female AI]: Conformity to a Russian identity was expected, especially if you were achieving success in the empire.

[Male AI]: That makes sense.

[Female AI]: Gogol's response was strategic, a kind of deliberate ambiguity that let him navigate a really tricky situation.

[Male AI]: So, you're saying he wasn't actually unsure about his identity. It was more of a calculated move.

[Female AI]: Exactly. Look at his personal letters. He's always emphasizing his Ukrainianness. He even calls himself a kinsman to Ukrainians, drawing a clear line between himself and Russians.

[Male AI]: So, that famous quote about not knowing his soul… That was a clever way to avoid openly defying the dominant Russian narrative.

[Female AI]: Right. It let him stay true to his Ukrainian roots.

[Male AI]: Wow. I never thought about it like that. So, he was basically playing this high-stakes game trying to make it in the Russian [*Imperial — OSI*] literary world without sacrificing his Ukrainian identity.

[Female AI]: Exactly. And he was brilliant at it. He used humor and irony, some scholars call it slyness, to challenge those Russian assumptions and stereotypes about Ukrainians.

[Male AI]: This slyness you're talking about, it's fascinating.

[Female AI]: It was a genius way to assert his identity within a pretty restrictive system.

[Male AI]: Makes you wonder how he navigated that whole pressure cooker of imperial culture where Russian and Ukrainian identities were battling it out.

[Female AI]: That's a really important point. Gogol was engaging with this idea of a supranational imperial culture, but as you said earlier, it was starting to come apart at the seams as those national identities became more assertive.

[Male AI]: So you're saying Gogol, through his success and his subtle assertions of Ukrainianness, actually helped break down this idea of a unified imperial identity.

[Female AI]: You can definitely say that. And a big part of that was that struggle over the legacy of Kyivan Rus'. We talked about how it's seen as the ancestor of both modern-day Ukraine and Russia, right? So, Ukrainians saw Kyivan Rus' as their own unique history, the basis of their cultural identity. They claimed it for themselves, using the term Rus'es [*Rus'ians — OSI*] to distinguish themselves from Russians.

[Male AI]: Okay. So, how did Russians view Kyivan Rus'?

[Female AI]: Russians tried to absorb it into a broader Russian narrative. They claimed it as the birthplace of a unified Russian nation.

[Male AI]: So you had these two competing interpretations, both vying for control over the same history. That's bound to create tension.

[Female AI]: It definitely did.

[Male AI]: So what did all-Russianness mean in this context?

[Female AI]: For Ukrainians, it meant a community of three distinct Rus' peoples. Great Russians, Little Russians, a term used for Ukrainians at the time, although considered derogatory today, and Belarusians, all sharing a heritage rooted in Kyiv. But for Russians, all-Russianness was all about creating one single Russian identity.

[Male AI]: I see.

[Female AI]: And they often brushed off Ukrainian claims to a separate culture as dangerous to that unity.

[Male AI]: So, two completely different visions of what it meant to be all-Russian. And Gogol was right in the middle of it.

[Female AI]: He was. To really grasp the depth of this divide, let's look at some specific intellectuals of the time. Yuri Venelin, a prominent Ukrainian scholar, published an article in 1847 [*written around 1832 — OSI*] addressing this very dispute over who the true heirs of Kyivan Rus' were.

[Male AI]: So directly confronting this issue.

[Female AI]: He strongly asserted the distinctiveness of Ukrainian history and culture.

[Male AI]: Wow. So Ukrainian intellectuals were pushing back against the Russian narrative.

[Female AI]: Absolutely. They were making their voices heard. But on the other side, you had Russian scholars like Alexander Pypin. He stressed the unity of Ukrainians and Russians under a common national cause and even tried to use Gogol as an example of this unity, which is kind of ironic given Gogol's own clear statements about his Ukrainian identity.

[Male AI]: Right. A bit convenient, isn't it?

[Female AI]: It is. It shows you how these arguments over history and national identity were really heating up during Gogol's time and it makes his work all the more significant.

[Male AI]: Absolutely. All of this really adds another layer to his writing. So, let's talk about his most famous work, *Taras Bulba.* This novel with its focus on Ukrainian Cossack history and his connection to Kyivan Rus' became a flashpoint in these debates. But wait a minute. *Taras Bulba* is often seen as this celebration of Russian nationalism. How does that fit with everything we've been talking about regarding Gogol's Ukrainian identity?

[Female AI]: That's a common misconception and it's one we're going to debunk right now.

[Male AI]: Okay, you've got my attention. Lay it on me.

[Female AI]: The story of *Taras Bulba* is far more complex than it appears on the surface, and it really shows off Gogol's strategic genius.

[Male AI]: Okay, I'm intrigued. Tell me more.

[Female AI]: To really understand what was going on, we need to compare the two versions of *Taras Bulba.* The original version from 1835 and the revised one he put out in 1842. The changes Gogol made in that second version are really telling.

[Male AI]: Okay, so what kind of changes are we talking about?

[Female AI]: Well, in that 1835 version, he uses the term Ukraine a lot and portrays the Cossacks as defenders of Ukrainian customs against a Polish threat. It's a very direct celebration of Ukrainian identity. But then in the 1842 version, he replaces a lot of those Ukraine references with Rus'. He also shifts the Cossack's main motivation to defending orthodoxy and emphasizes their unique qualities as part of a larger 'Russian' character. So on the surface, it looks like he's giving into pressure, aligning his novel with Russian imperial ideology to avoid trouble.

[Male AI]: So did he just cave to the censors to gain a wider audience? Did he betray his Ukrainian identity in the process?

[Female AI]: Not quite. While those revisions might seem like he's embracing Russian nationalism, they actually end up reinforcing a distinct Ukrainian identity. Remember, Gogol was a master of subtlety and working within the system.

[Male AI]: So you're saying he made it look like he was conforming, but he was actually still promoting Ukrainian identity in a more covert way.

[Female AI]: You got it. Take his use of 'Ruses' [Russian — OSI] in that revised version. Within the context of the novel, it points more towards a Ukrainian understanding of Rus' which is rooted in Cossack history and the legacy of Kyivan Rus', not that all-Russian meaning that Russians were promoting.

[Male AI]: Yeah. Wow. It's like a secret code hidden in plain sight. I never would have caught that on my own. So much for skimming SparkNotes.

[Female AI]: And it wasn't just the language. Look at how he portrays the Cossacks. Even in that revised version, he still highlights their distinct culture and traditions, which just strengthens their unique identity within the story.

[Male AI]: So, was the novel's apparent endorsement of Russian nationalism actually a clever move to get past the censors while subtly challenging those Russian assumptions about Ukrainians?

[Female AI]: It's a very compelling argument, and it's supported by the fact that critics at the time didn't really pick up on this supposed Russian nationalist message in the novel.

[Male AI]: It seems like they missed it entirely.

[Female AI]: It seems that way. That interpretation came later, maybe pushed by those who wanted to claim Gogol as a purely Russian writer.

[Male AI]: This completely changes how I see *Taras Bulba.* It's amazing how he pulled it off. But what about his later years? Did he maintain this commitment to his Ukrainian identity as he got older and more successful? *[Here, the AI misses some important nuances — OSI]*

[Female AI]: Absolutely he did. Even with all that pressure to conform and just become a Russian writer, Gogol never wavered in his Ukrainian identity. You know, it's funny how one little quote can sometimes come to define a whole person. We talked about Gogol's famous line about not knowing his own soul.

[Male AI]: Right. Right.

[Female AI]: But that whole exchange with Alexandra Smirnova was way more complex than it seems on the surface.

[Male AI]: I was actually wondering about that. You touched on it briefly, but I'd love to unpack that correspondence a bit more. What was the real deal there? Was he just trying to smooth things over with Smirnova, or is there something deeper going on?

[Female AI]: Well, you got to think about the kind of pressure Gogol was under at that time.

[Male AI]: Yeah, okay.

[Female AI]: Especially after *Dead Souls* came out.

[Male AI]: Right, of course.

[Female AI]: That satirical take on Russian society, let's just say it didn't exactly make him a lot of friends.

[Male AI]: Yeah, I bet.

[Female AI]: Some people were even accusing him of being anti-Russian.

[Male AI]: And Smirnova, being this big name in Russian society, was probably hoping he'd clear the air, maybe even pledge some allegiance to the Russian cause.

[Female AI]: Exactly. And Gogol's first response to her in a letter from October 20th, 1844 is pretty telling. He talks about his nature, saying it's always been Russo-Ukrainian... He claimed this dual nature allowed him to see and understand things from both sides.

[Male AI]: So he was acknowledging both parts of his heritage but not necessarily picking a side.

[Female AI]: Right. But then, get this, just a couple months later on Christmas Eve, he sends another letter, and that's where he drops that famous line, "I myself do not know what soul I have, Ukrainian or Russian." Talk about a total 180 from what he said earlier.

[Male AI]: It's definitely a head-scratcher. What prompted that sudden change?

[Female AI]: I think the key here is context. Remember, Gogol was getting some serious backlash for his work, right? Some folks even wanted to send him to Siberia. His reply to Smirnova wasn't really about genuine uncertainty. It was a calculated move.

[Male AI]: So, playing it safe, trying not to say anything that would piss off his critics even more.

[Female AI]: Precisely. By saying he didn't know his own soul, he could dodge that pressure to identify solely as Russian. But at the same time, he was subtly reaffirming his Ukrainian identity. It was brilliant.

[Male AI]: That's incredible. He managed to calm things down without actually going back on his beliefs.

[Male AI]: But if his whole "soul" thing was this strategic ambiguity, how did he really feel about Russia? Was he actually anti-Russian like some claimed?

[Female AI]: Well, if you look at his writing, especially *Dead Souls* and *Selected Passages*...

[Male AI]: Yeah!

[Female AI]: ...you see some pretty sharp criticism of Russian society.

[Male AI]: Like what? What kind of things was he criticizing?

[Female AI]: He takes aim at hypocrisy, corruption, moral decay. It's not exactly a glowing endorsement, is it?

[Male AI]: No, not really. It sounds like he was pretty disillusioned with what he was seeing. So, was Gogol deliberately pushing back against what people expected from a Russian writer?

[Female AI]: I think that's a great question, and I'd say the answer is a big yes. This criticism of Russian society combined with his refusal to fully embrace the label of Russian writer really frustrated a lot of Russian intellectuals, including Belinsky. They felt betrayed by him, like he wasn't playing by the rules.

[Male AI]: It's amazing how Gogol, through his writing and this whole "I don't know my soul" thing, really exposed the cracks in that idea of a unified Russian identity. Like he was poking holes in the dominant narrative, forcing people to confront the complexity and contradictions within the empire.

[Female AI]: Exactly. And this act of defiance, subtle as it was, had a huge impact on the development of Ukrainian national consciousness.

[Male AI]: How so?

[Female AI]: It gave Ukrainians this powerful voice within the empire. Here was someone who was challenging the status quo and affirming their own distinct identity.

[Male AI]: So even though he was writing in Russian, he was inadvertently paving the way for a more assertive Ukrainian cultural movement.

[Female AI]: Precisely. And that brings us to a crucial point that's often overlooked. Gogol wasn't just writing about Ukrainian themes. He was actively shaping how Ukrainian identity was perceived within the empire.

[Male AI]: Oh, interesting. Can you expand on that? How exactly was he shaping those perceptions?

[Female AI]: One of the most fascinating aspects of Gogol's work is his take on Kyivan Rus'. We've talked about those competing narratives surrounding its legacy, but Gogol took it a step further. He didn't just claim it for Ukrainians. He used it to challenge the very foundation of Russian national identity.

[Male AI]: Whoa. Okay, I'm all ears. How did he manage to do that?

[Female AI]: In his historical writings, especially "Glance at the Making of Little Russia," he emphasizes the separation between the southern and northern Rus' lands. He argues that the Mongol invasion basically cut off the south, leading to the development of a distinct Ukrainian identity, separate from the emerging Muscovite state in the north.

[Male AI]: So he was drawing a clear line between the historical paths of Ukraine and Russia, undermining that whole shared origin story.

[Female AI]: Exactly. And he goes even further, arguing that Ukraine, as the true heir to Kyivan Rus', had its own unique cultural and historical trajectory, one that was fundamentally different from Russia's.

[Male AI]: That's a bold move. It's like he's rewriting history to highlight Ukrainian distinctiveness.

[Female AI]: In a way, he is. And this reinterpretation had a huge impact. It gave Ukrainians a historical narrative to rally around, a solid foundation for their claims to a separate national identity.

[Male AI]: So even while navigating the Russian literary world, he was subtly laying the groundwork for a more assertive Ukrainian national consciousness.

[Female AI]: Exactly. His work, with its focus on Ukrainian themes, strategic ambiguity, and reinterpretation of history, played a crucial role in how Ukrainians saw themselves within the empire.

[Male AI]: This is all mind-blowing. It's incredible how much depth and complexity there is to Gogol's work when you really start digging.

[Female AI]: It is. And that complexity extends to his use of language, too. Remember, we talked about his slyness—the way he used humor and irony to challenge Russian assumptions about Ukrainians.

[Male AI]: Yeah, definitely.

[Female AI]: Well, that linguistic playfulness is another key to understanding his genius.

[Male AI]: Okay, I'm hooked. Tell me more about this linguistic playfulness.

[Female AI]: Gogol was a master at code-switching. He could move between Russian and Ukrainian elements so effortlessly.

[Male AI]: What do you mean by code-switching?

[Female AI]: He'd weave Ukrainian sayings, proverbs, even grammatical structures right into his Russian prose.

[Male AI]: Oh wow.

[Female AI]: It created this unique style that was both subversive and totally captivating.

[Male AI]: So he was sneaking in Ukrainian language and culture into his Russian writing, like a secret message for those who knew what to look for.

[Female AI]: Exactly. It was a way to quietly assert his Ukrainian identity while also challenging the dominance of Russian language and culture in the literary world.

[Male AI]: It's like he was playing a multi-layered game using language, history, strategic ambiguity—all to champion Ukrainian identity within the constraints of the Russian Empire.

[Female AI]: That's it. And this game, even though subtle, had big consequences.

[Male AI]: How so?

[Female AI]: Gogol's work, often perceived as just Russian literature, was actually a powerful force in shaping Ukrainian national consciousness.

[Male AI]: That's incredible.

[Female AI]: His intelligence, his artistry, and his unwavering commitment to his Ukrainian heritage make him a truly remarkable figure in both literary and cultural history.

[Male AI]: This deep dive has been a real eye-opener. It's amazing how Gogol's Ukrainian identity, something that's so often downplayed or completely ignored, is actually the key to understanding the full scope of his genius.

[Female AI]: It really is. And as we move on to examine his later works and the lasting impact he had on both Ukrainian and Russian culture, remember to keep this complexity in mind. Gogol's story is a reminder that the most compelling narratives are often those that defy easy categorization.

[Male AI]: Okay, that's a good point to keep in mind. But before we move on to his later works, I have another question. It's about how his work was received at the time by both Ukrainian and Russian audiences.

[Female AI]: Oh, that's a great question.

[Male AI]: Did they pick up on those subtle layers of meaning, or was he mostly speaking to those who already understood his position?

[Female AI]: That's a fantastic question, and it gets right to the heart of Gogol's legacy. His impact wasn't immediate or straightforward. It unfolded over time, and its ripple effects through both Ukrainian and Russian culture are pretty fascinating.

[Male AI]: So, how did Ukrainians view Gogol? Did they embrace him as a champion of their identity, or was there pushback against his use of Russian?

[Female AI]: Well, for Ukrainians, Gogol was a complex figure and, yeah, sometimes even controversial. His early works—the ones steeped in Ukrainian folklore and language—were celebrated for their authenticity. People saw them as a powerful expression of Ukrainian culture. But his later works, especially after that revised version of *Taras Bulba*, sparked a lot more debate.

[Male AI]: What were the sticking points? What made those later works so controversial within the Ukrainian community?

[Female AI]: Some Ukrainian intellectuals, especially those advocating for a purely Ukrainian-language literature, felt that Gogol was making concessions to the dominant culture by writing in Russian. They saw it as a betrayal of their cause.

[Male AI]: That makes sense. They wanted a literature that was undeniably, completely Ukrainian in both content and language.

[Female AI]: Right. Figures like Panteleimon Kulish, a prominent Ukrainian writer and cultural activist, argued that Gogol's use of Russian limited his ability to fully express the nuances of Ukrainian

identity. They felt that only literature written in Ukrainian could truly capture the spirit and soul of the Ukrainian people.

[Male AI]: So there was this movement toward linguistic purity within the Ukrainian cultural sphere.

[Female AI]: Absolutely. And this movement gained momentum in the latter half of the 19th century, eventually leading to a flourishing of Ukrainian-language literature.

[Male AI]: It's interesting how Gogol, despite writing in Russian, inadvertently played a role in sparking this push for a distinct Ukrainian literary tradition—like he opened the door even if he didn't walk through it himself.

[Female AI]: He did, in a way. His work, even with those perceived compromises, served as a catalyst for Ukrainian cultural expression, highlighting the importance of language and authenticity in their struggle for national recognition.

[Male AI]: But what about the Russians? How did they reconcile Gogol's Ukrainian identity with their efforts to claim him as a Russian writer?

[Female AI]: For many Russians, Gogol's Ukrainian background was a source of both fascination and frustration. On one hand, they admired his talent and saw his work as a valuable contribution to Russian literature. But on the other hand, those subtle assertions of Ukrainian identity, his critique of Russian society—it all challenged their assumptions about national unity and cultural dominance.

[Male AI]: So they wanted to have their cake and eat it too.

[Male AI]: Celebrate his genius while ignoring the parts that made them uncomfortable.

[Female AI]: You could say that. They wanted to enjoy the genius while downplaying or even erasing those aspects of his work that challenged their worldview.

[Male AI]: Did they employ any specific strategies to achieve this?

[Female AI]: Oh, they did. One common tactic was to emphasize the universal qualities of his work. They'd argue that his themes and characters transcended national boundaries, that they spoke to a broader human experience.

[Male AI]: So, trying to neutralize those Ukrainian elements by framing his work as something that belonged to all of humanity.

[Female AI]: Exactly. It was a way to shift attention away from the specific cultural and historical context that shaped his writing. Another strategy was to portray him as a divided soul, a man torn between his Ukrainian and Russian identities.

[Male AI]: I can see how that would be convenient for them. It let them dismiss his criticism of Russian society as a symptom of his internal struggle, not a deliberate act of defiance.

[Female AI]: Exactly. It fit their narrative much better. And it's interesting how this tendency to reinterpret or even misinterpret Gogol continues to this day. That debate over his legacy, his national identity, the meaning of his work—it's still a contentious issue, especially with the ongoing tensions between Ukraine and Russia.

[Male AI]: So Gogol's story isn't just some historical curiosity. It has real-world implications for how we understand national identity, cultural influence, and the power of literature to shape how we see the world.

[Female AI]: Absolutely. Gogol's work—with its layers of meaning, its deliberate ambiguity, its enduring relevance—it all challenges us to confront those uncomfortable truths, question our assumptions, and embrace the complexities of individual and collective identity.

[Male AI]: This has been an amazing deep dive. Gogol's story has totally changed how I see his work and the whole cultural landscape of 19th-century Russia. It's amazing how much more there is to discover when you start digging deeper.

[Female AI]: I'm so glad to hear that, and I hope you, the listener, feel the same way. As you revisit Gogol's work, remember to look beyond the surface. Appreciate those nuances. Consider the different perspectives that shape how we understand his legacy. He wasn't just any writer. He defied simple categories—a master of language, of subtext, a powerful voice for Ukrainian identity within the vast and often oppressive Russian Empire. His story is a reminder that even when faced with dominant narratives, individuals can challenge, provoke, and inspire us to rethink how we understand history, culture, and the very essence of identity.

[Male AI]: This deep dive has been an incredible journey into the world of Nikolai Gogol. Thanks for joining us, and until next time, keep those thoughts swirling.