Reassessing the Past?
National Identity and Memory Among Ukrainian Refugees in Poland

Ivan Kozachenko

"But we are Kyivan Rus, not *them*! They are just a horde!" I heard a middle-aged Ukrainian woman exclaiming at the overcrowded Krakow Main railway station in early March 2022. Following the illegal and unprovoked Russian invasion, this station had become the key locus for Ukrainian refugees[1] on their way to the European Union. Given the circumstances, this phrase may seem absurd – why would anyone discuss distant history during a hard and chaotic journey? Surprisingly, however, this phrase makes perfect sense. The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has been driven not only by the geopolitical ambitions of the Putin regime but is also deeply embedded in the nation-building processes and memory politics of the warring countries. Never-ending debates[2] on historical events and figures, the origins and role of languages, and the demarcations of sameness and otherness have been a crucial part of life for Ukrainians and Russians since the Euromaidan Revolution of 2014. Therefore, for many people fleeing the war – one so absurd and so sudden – a conversation about history may provide an explanation of the ongoing events, a self-healing narrative, and a sense of belonging.

Through participant observation and interviews, this paper explores the following two research questions: How are refugees' narratives of the war and displacement related to Ukrainian discourses on identity and memory? And, in the

---

[1] Although called 'refugees' throughout this text, the EU has applied the Council Directive 2001/55/EC on Temporary Protection to Ukrainians fleeing the war. Thus, in contrast to the guarantees of asylum seekers, Ukrainians are normally granted a right to healthcare and work. Poland also provided new arrivals with a one-time payment and a monthly subsistence for children. See: European Commission, Migration and Home Affairs, "Temporary Protection", https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/common-european-asylum-system/temporary-protection_en [accessed: 31.07.2024].

[2] Oxana Shevel, "The Battle for Historical Memory in Postrevolutionary Ukraine", *Current History* 115/783, 2016, 258–263; and David R. Marples, "Decommunization, Memory Laws, and 'Builders of Ukraine in the 20th Century'", *Acta Slavica Iaponica (Japanese Slavic Journal)* 39, 2018, 1–22.

given situation, what are the refugees' perceptions of Russia and Poland? In this exploration, the study draws on two sets of literature. The first concerns Ukrainian national 'imagination' and the second concerns refugee identities and belonging. While Ukrainian nation-building will be discussed separately, it is necessary to point out that in refugee and migration studies, language and emotional attachment are seen as crucial for fostering a sense of belonging.[3] These can be explored at different levels, but in this study, linguistic identities and emotional attachments are investigated in relation to national identity and memory. Moreover, this study considers the cultural and communicative dimensions of memory. Jan Assmann points out that cultural memory is created by elites and passed through institutions, while communicative memory exists and is transmitted at the level of small social groups.[4]

To lay out its argument, this paper first discusses the key features of Ukrainian nation-building after 1991. Next, it outlines the research methodologies this study is based on. Third, it explores how the invasion and displacement affect refugees' sense of belonging to Ukraine. Finally, the paper investigates refugees' perceptions towards the aggressor country, Russia, and the receiving country, Poland.

National 'Imagination' and Memory in Ukraine Before the Invasion

Since its independence in 1991, Ukraine has been continuously portrayed as a 'cleft country'.[5] The divide was seen as both regional – pro-Russian Southern and Eastern Ukraine versus pro-European Western Ukraine – and symbolic, where oscillating identities are polarised between 'supranational' and 'national' projects. The former refers to the achievements of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union and can be called 'Russophile' and 'Sovietophile'. Although these can be seen as contradicting each other, earlier research has indicated that in contemporary discourses, they are combined in a postmodern fashion.[6] These narratives centre on the crucial role

---

3   Montserrat Guibernau, *Belonging: Solidarity and Division in Modern Societies*, Cambridge: Polity, 2013; and Cathrine Brun and Anita Fábos, "Making Homes in Limbo? A Conceptual Framework", *Refuge* 31/1, 2015, 5–17, here 5.

4   Jan Assmann, "Communicative and Cultural Memory", in: Peter Meusburger, Michael Heffernan, and Edgar Wunder (eds.), *Cultural Memories: The Geographical Point of View*, Dordrecht: Springer, 2011, 15–27.

5   Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996; and Ivan Katchanovski, *Cleft Countries: Regional Political Divisions and Cultures in Post-Soviet Ukraine and Moldova*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.

6   Ivan Kozachenko, "Fighting for the Soviet Union 2.0: Digital nostalgia and national belonging in the context of the Ukrainian crisis", *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 52/1, 2019, 1–10.

of the USSR in the victory in World War II, Russian Orthodox religiosity, and the Russian language. The language holds a key function, as 'Russian speakers' are often discursively equated with 'Russians'. At its extreme, this discourse denies Ukrainian agency and describes Eastern Slavs as a 'triune nation' of Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia. Vladimir Putin's oft-repeated assertion that Ukrainians and Russians are "one people" is an example of such an extreme ideology.[7] In contrast to the 'supranational' project, the 'national' one presents a different perspective.

Taras Kuzio asserts that Ukrainian 'national' identity is based on the portrayal of Ukraine as a peaceful European country that has its origins in Kyivan Rus and is an integral part of Europe.[8] Thus, this identity is also related to the supranational European project. Within this perspective, the Soviet period is portrayed as a time of repression and suffering. Here, the Holodomor – a genocidal famine of 1932/1933 – is a key symbol of Ukrainian martyrdom. In their more conservative forms, 'national' narratives pay specific attention to Ukrainian freedom fighters during WWII – the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) and the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN). Volodymyr Kulyk argues that the Russian annexation of Crimea and the aggression in the Donbas made nationalist figures of this time more attractive in Ukraine.[9] At the same time, based on an extensive empirical study, he asserts that since the Euromaidan Revolution, Ukrainian national identity has become more civic and inclusive. Overall, the events that followed the revolution and the February invasion have demonstrated that Ukraine is not as divided as previously argued. Moreover, Russian soldiers were met with fierce resistance and not with flowers, as the Kremlin seemingly anticipated. So how do displaced Ukrainians relate to these identities and memories? In exploring this question, I employed a qualitative research methodology.

Methodology and Case Selection

This analysis draws on participant observation and in-depth interviews with 12 refugees residing in the Lesser Poland, Silesian, Greater Poland, and Masovian Voivodeships provinces of Poland. The participants are from the eastern oblasts of Ukraine (Kharkiv, Dnipro, and Luhansk) and the southern ones (Kherson and Odesa), as well as from the capital city of Kyiv. I recruited them by contacting

---

7   Vladimir Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", *Presidential Library*, https://www.prlib.ru/en/article-vladimir-putin-historical-unity-russians-and-ukrainians [accessed: 31.07.2024].

8   Taras Kuzio, "National Identity and History Writing in Ukraine", *Nationalities Papers* 34/4, 2006, 407–427, here 409.

9   Volodymyr Kulyk, "National Identity in Ukraine: Impact of Euromaidan and the War", *Europe-Asia Studies* 68/4, 2016, 588–608, here 604.

refugee assistance points, administrators of free Polish language courses, and cultural event organisers (who plan fundraisers, meetings with writers and poets, charity concerts, etc.). I did so to interview people who rely on volunteer and state assistance, as well as those who apparently plan a longer stay and, thus, learn the language of the receiving country. Lastly, those people who attend cultural events can be assumed to have a more secure life situation with free time for attendance and the ability to pay for tickets or donate money to charitable causes.

I conducted five interviews in person and the rest via communication applications (Viber, WhatsApp, or Messenger). Ten of the participants were women. While this somewhat reflects the fact that men between 18 and 60 years of age are not allowed to leave Ukraine as they can be drafted into the army, I must stress that I approached many men, but almost all refused to be interviewed. This could be due to uneasiness around the circumstances through which they left Ukraine or how or why they have avoided conscription. These two factors have contributed to the gender imbalance in the sample. Moreover, many older people who rely on help from assistance points were also not eager to participate in the study. They explained that they were afraid to give a 'wrong answer' or do something that would compromise their already vulnerable position.

The interview guide included topics on the participants' biographies, the circumstances of their departure from Ukraine, their attitudes towards the countries under study, national histories, and the reasons for the Russo–Ukrainian War, as well as questions about the refugees' current life situation. For each interview, I obtained informed consent. This included a clear explanation of the research aims and objectives, the researcher's affiliation and contact details, guidelines on anonymity and confidentiality, as well as an outline of how data will be dealt with. I analysed the collected data using a framework technique[10] that allows for the identification of thematic clusters and variations within them. The results of the analysis will be presented in the following paragraphs.

Ukraine

This study reveals that the events of the war have caused a renegotiation of belonging to Ukraine among the participants. Additionally, it demonstrates that essentialist narratives play an important role in their interpretations of events. Moreover, those who previously spoke Russian have switched or are switching to Ukrainian. The data suggests that for most participants, the war and the experience of displacement have

---

10   Jane Ritchie and Liz Spencer, "Qualitative Data Analysis for Applied Policy Research", in: Michael A. Huberman and Matthew B. Miles (eds.), *The Qualitative Researcher's Companion*, Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2002, 305–329.

strengthened their sense of national belonging. Many described how proud they felt about their country, which fights a brutal and cynical aggressor so well. When asked why Ukraine performs so well, many answered that the war started in 2014, and since then, many people have realised what may be coming next. Along with mentioning effective Ukrainian policies and the importance of Western help, participants normally added that it is also due to a lasting Ukrainian military tradition. As one of the participants explained: "[in Ukrainian] You know, this line 'we are of the Cossack origin' in the Ukrainian anthem is really true. I feel proud how we are resisting the aggressor. [...] Russia will lose" (F, 32, 7 February 2023). This essentialism is manifested by a strong belief that Ukraine exists as an entity with lasting features and traits. For instance, most participants saw Ukrainians as 'naturally' free people who cannot live under oppression, and that this is something that really differentiates them from Russians. References to Cossackdom[11] often occurred in the interviews. In such cases, the direct democracy of the Cossacks is presented as further evidence of the built-in dedication of Ukrainians to this form of governance. Cossacks, indeed, elected their leader – the Hetman – at a general assembly that was a very different practice from those of the Russian Empire, where absolute monarchy took hold for a significant historical period.

The participants described how painful it was to leave Ukraine and that they never fully realised how important the country is to them. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given their experiences, their vivid descriptions of their journeys westward dominated the interviews. The pain of leaving family members behind, overcrowded train stations, crying children, stressed adults, and episodic violence are typical parts of these stories. One participant recalls her departure from one of the eastern cities in March last year:

> [in Russian] When we reached this first platform, there was just an insane amount of people. One soldier even had to shoot in the air in order to make people stop pushing [...] and people were just squeezing their children through the windows of the train, so they could leave to safety. My grandmother was in Auschwitz, and she was telling me stories [about] how they were transported by overcrowded trains. I never could imagine that something similar would happen to me [starts crying] (F, 39, 19 February 2023).

This part of the interview shows not only how stressful and traumatic the journey was but also illustrates how participants connect this experience with the communicative memory of their family. In two other interviews, the participants

---

11   TRAFO – Blog for Transregional Research, "The Cossack Myth in Eastern Europe – Interview with Denys Shatalov", 09 December 2019, https://trafo.hypotheses.org/21007 [accessed: 31.07.2024].

mentioned that their relatives were repressed by the Soviet regime and that they never had any illusions about it. They point out, however, that it was hard for them to imagine that Russia would go in the same direction and that it would be them fleeing from danger and possible persecution.

The Ukrainian language serves as a powerful symbol of national belonging. While five participants indicated that they were Ukrainian speakers, four stated that they either switched to Ukrainian or were trying to speak Ukrainian as much as possible. They also said that writing online posts or asking questions in relevant social media groups is nearly exclusively conducted in Ukrainian now, and that Russian is not tolerated by fellow Ukrainians. These narratives are deeply interconnected with perceptions of the aggressor country, Russia.

Russia

The perception of Russia among the respondents comes down to several key themes. First, there is a clear pattern that not only the Putin regime but also the Russian people are to blame for the invasion. Second, there is a distancing from the Russian language, which is related to the switch to Ukrainian. Moreover, an overwhelming majority of participants considered Russian culture and literature as something toxic for Ukraine. And third, a small group of participants who had previously held pro-Russian views has turned away from this country. This, however, has not made those participants more pro-Ukrainian. It is necessary to provide several illustrations of these findings.

The annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbas already made these participants perceive Russia as an aggressor country, but this view was mainly about the Russian state. However, a lack of resistance among Russian society to the February invasion – and even a noticeable support for it – made them see Russian people in a negative way. One participant from Southern Ukraine notes:

> [in Ukrainian] I know that Russia is a police state, and it is hard to protest over there as you can be arrested immediately. But, if they are against the war, they could just stop going to work *en masse*. Just stay at home and it would be enough; if not to stop the war, then change the situation dramatically. But they never did it. [...] After our victory, there should be a 5-metre fence between our countries, and we should forget about them (F, 35, 17 February 2023).

The distancing from the Russian language is often related to an unwillingness to be identified as Russian. These behaviours are also directly connected to the concept of social identity as a perceived membership in a certain social group: "[in Ukrainian]

I do not use Russian in public as I do not want to be identified as Russian. [...] I was at the airport recently, and there were Russian people nearby, and I felt anger and disgust" (Male, 63, 15 February 2023). Similarly, they question the value of Russian culture and literary classics for Ukraine. Many participants wonder how such a presumably great culture can have bred the people who are committing crimes in Bucha or Izium.

However, not all participants share such sentiments. Two people expressed more downbeat views. In their vision, Ukraine is a pawn in a global geopolitical game and does not have any agency. They view the Orange and Euromaidan Revolutions as American conspiracies against Russia. While they admitted that before the invasion they had quite strong pro-Russian views, the brutality of the invasion has significantly undermined these. In these cases, however, it does not mean that the participants have a stronger sense of belonging to Ukraine now. As one of the respondents explains:

> [in Russian] I used to be pro-Russian, but that is not the case anymore after everything I went through. I think that they made a huge mistake by invading Ukraine. [...] They do not have a monopoly on either the Russian language or on Soviet history. We should remember Soviet times and continue to celebrate Soviet holidays like the Day of the Motherland Defenders, which is today. [...] I think that Ukraine will lose this war. I just cannot see it winning it [...] I am not going back [to Ukraine] (M, 41, 23 February 2023).

These lapsed pro-Russian sentiments show that some people are somewhat 'lost in-between' national loyalties. This interview also shows a degree of Soviet nostalgia and the view that Soviet memory should be preserved in Ukraine. Most of the participants in this study, however, have opposite views. For them, the Russian invasion has shattered a positive cultural memory of the Soviet past. Notably, the admission of previous susceptibility to Soviet mythology is common within this group: "[in Russian] I somewhat believed in the myth of the noble Russian soldier, but what I saw were thieves and rapists" (F, 47, 11 February 2023). Notably, the perceptions of the homeland are also related to the intentions of staying abroad or returning, as those who expressed positive views towards Ukraine were more likely to stress that they would return as soon as the war ended.

Poland

The most pronounced themes in the discussion of Poland are the appreciation of help and the cultural and geographic proximity of the country, new knowledge about the country, and an admission of the hardships of living in Poland. The participants of

this study almost universally express gratitude to Poland and Polish people for their support and help.

After their hard journeys, the participants received a very warm welcome upon crossing the border. They stress that much of the help came from ordinary people who were not members of nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) or representatives of national or international organisations. A young woman from Southern Ukraine described her experience as follows:

> [in Ukrainian] We have arrived in Przemyśl. There was an ocean of people, but everything was very well organised. You could meet a volunteer every five metres, asking you what you need. There were hundreds of baby buggies waiting to be taken by those in need. We came with two cats, and the door on one carrier was broken. There was a vet inspecting animals, and she not only inspected our cats but also gave them shots, and gave us a new carrier. I am so touched by this help and will always be grateful for it (F, 35, 17 February 2023).

As mentioned earlier, the participants appreciate the cultural and geographical proximity of Poland. The ease of learning Polish along with the positive attitude contribute towards emotional dimensions of belonging, like those described by Catherine Brun and Anita Fábos.[12] Another common theme is the desire and ability to live somewhere close to Ukraine. One of the participants explains that most of her friends who have left lived in the parts of Poland that are close to Ukraine to come back quickly "when we win".

Seven out of the 12 participants had never previously visited Poland or any other country in the European Union. The participants who had never visited Poland before provided extended stories about how limited they were in their knowledge of the country. A reoccurring narrative is that they imagined Poland as not being markedly different from Ukraine, and while not having had previous contact with Polish people, they were perceived as arrogant and disdainful towards Ukrainians:

> [in Russian] I always thought of Polish people as arrogant and hostile towards Ukrainians. You know, this *Polskiy pan* [Polish master][13] sort of thing. I think that you get this sort of information from school, from literature... And it was completely wrong. Polish people are very nice and very similar to us.

---

12   Brun and Fábos, "Making Homes in Limbo?", 5.

13   This is a reference to the discrimination of Ukrainians in the Polish Commonwealth as well as the exploitation of the Ukrainian peasantry by Polish nobility after the partitions of Poland. The negative portrayal of the Polish nobility in *Taras Bulba* by Nikolai Gogol or that of the 'Polish seducer' Pan Mussyalovich in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Bratya Karamazovy* (*The Brothers Karamazov*) may serve as good examples here.

[…] Poland has an amazing history. I recently learnt that it has 402 castles. Imagine that (F, 71, 1 February 2023).

This and many other quotes point out that there were strong prejudices towards Poland and the Polish people. Thus, their help and warmth were surprising for many displaced Ukrainians. Some even go as far as saying that they previously considered Russians as 'fraternal people', but Poles better fit this description now.

There are also some negative aspects of residing in Poland for the participants. These mainly come down to the lack of state support. This is especially evident in the case of people relying on various assistance schemes. The participants explained that initially, it was easier when the Polish state was providing monetary compensation for those who hosted Ukrainians. These payments stopped in the summer of 2022, and it became significantly more difficult to find accommodation. The arrival of Ukrainians also increased rental prices across Poland, making them unaffordable for many refugees. Furthermore, there are pronounced class divisions. Ukrainians with high skills quickly found employment and took advantage of the open labour market. This is not the case for people representing the working class. Many research participants are young mothers who need flexible working schedules, which is not possible due to their lack of language skills or the professions in demand. Thus, even with the appreciation of support, for many participants, hardship is a big part of their daily routine.

Conclusions

The Russian invasion and forced displacement have significantly altered the sense of belonging among the people who participated in this study. For most of them, it strengthened their sense of belonging to Ukraine. It is evident that the invasion has dramatically weakened what can be called a pro-Russian 'supranational' identity. Participants also reported that they became more critical of the Soviet past and its mythology, which is so actively used by Russia. There is also a pronounced role of linguistic identities, where speaking or switching to Ukrainian is a crucial manifestation of national identity. The heroic resistance of Ukraine reinforces the participants' sense of pride in being Ukrainian. In describing their homeland, participants primarily rely on essentialist visions of the nation. They have also fundamentally 'reimagined' Russia and Poland, with a clear distancing from the former. Notably, their negative views are now towards both the Russian state and the Russian people. This is quite different from the case of Poland. The absolute majority of participants are deeply touched by the support of the Polish people. However, many experienced hardship while staying in Poland. As the war continues, it is hard to predict how the

Ukrainian community in Poland will look in the future. Their attitudes towards the homeland and the aggressor country, however, seem to have a lasting nature.

Bibliography

Assmann, Jan, "Communicative and Cultural Memory", in: Peter Meusburger, Michael Heffernan, and Edgar Wunder (eds.), *Cultural Memories: The Geographical Point of View*, Dordrecht: Springer, 2011, 15–27.

Brun, Cathrine, and Anita Fábos, "Making Homes in Limbo? A Conceptual Framework", *Refuge* 31/1, 2015, 5–17.

European Commission, Migration and Home Affairs, "Temporary Protection", https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/common-european-asylum-system/temporary-protection_en [accessed: 29.07.2024].

Guibernau, Montserrat, *Belonging: Solidarity and Division in Modern Societies*, Cambridge: Polity, 2013.

Huntington, Samuel P., *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.

Katchanovski, Ivan, *Cleft Countries: Regional Political Divisions and Cultures in Post-Soviet Ukraine and Moldova*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.

Kozachenko, Ivan, "Fighting for the Soviet Union 2.0: Digital nostalgia and national belonging in the context of the Ukrainian crisis", *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 52/1, 2019, 1–10.

Kulyk, Volodymyr, "National Identity in Ukraine: Impact of Euromaidan and the War", *Europe-Asia Studies* 68/4, 2016, 588–608.

Kuzio, Taras, "National Identity and History Writing in Ukraine", *Nationalities Papers* 34/4, 2006, 407–427.

Marples, David R., "Decommunization, Memory Laws, and 'Builders of Ukraine in the 20th Century'", *Acta Slavica Iaponica (Japanese Slavic Journal)* 39, 2018, 1–22.

Putin, Vladimir, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", *Presidential Library*, https://www.prlib.ru/en/article-vladimir-putin-historical-unity-russians-and-ukrainians [accessed: 29.07.2024].

Ritchie, Jane, and Liz Spencer, "Qualitative Data Analysis for Applied Policy Research", in: Michael A. Huberman and Matthew B. Miles (eds.), *The Qualitative Researcher's Companion*, Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2002, 305–329.

Shevel, Oxana, "The Battle for Historical Memory in Postrevolutionary Ukraine", *Current History* 115/783, 2016, 258–263.

TRAFO – Blog for Transregional Research, "The Cossack Myth in Eastern Europe – Interview with Denys Shatalov", 09 December 2019, https://trafo.hypotheses.org/21007 [accessed: 29.07.2024].