

UKRAINIAN CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE POST SOVIET SPACE
AND IN TIMES OF WAR

by

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Introduction

On February 24th 2022, the Russian Federation launched a full-scale invasion of the nation of Ukraine, causing one of the most significant humanitarian disasters in European history since the end of World War Two. With tens of thousands of losses on both sides, the war still rages on with no clear end in sight. As the tragedy continues to unfold, strategists, politicians, journalists, and others have pondered the future implications of the Russo-Ukrainian War and when the bloodshed will finally come to an end. The causes of the war are complex and nuanced, and their origins date back to the original Russian annexation in 2014 as well as the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. The war has created a myriad of issues ranging from destroyed infrastructure, family separation, the proliferation of dangerous unexploded ordnance, and cultural tensions. Ever since Ukraine's inception as a newly independent nation in 1991, it has faced the daunting task of creating its own sense of national identity. The creation of national identity is essential for the creation of nationhood, but political instability and war have added another layer of complexity as to how Ukrainians and ethnic Russians living in Ukraine view themselves in relation to a much larger world. The nation of Ukraine, finally receiving its independence after centuries of foreign rule suddenly finds itself in an entirely new era where it has to define its own self-identity as a nation, as a culture, and as a democracy.

There is a growing body of knowledge tackling questions surrounding what it means to be Ukrainian and ethnically Russian living in Ukraine, and how the role of ethnicity and culture play out in everyday Ukrainian life. The 2014 political crisis and the Russo-Ukrainian war have created new and interesting questions regarding how people view themselves in relation to a country torn apart by war and political stability. As of the writing of this paper, the war has

waged on for over a year, and historians, political scientists, policymakers, and others have only begun discussing the greater implications of the war. As a result, little has been written about how Ukrainians and ethnic Russians identify themselves, especially in relation to the place in which they reside. The goal of this research paper was to begin to analyze first-hand accounts from Ukrainians and ethnic Russians on the ground using interviews and other source materials to try to create a more comprehensive picture of what identity means to these individuals in a place ravaged by war. Once the war comes to an end and the dust settles, which it will, a better more comprehensive understanding of Ukrainian and ethnic Russian identity will play a pivotal role in creating a more homogeneous society with stable institutions and a place where people's voices are heard.

Russian ethnic and cultural history in Ukraine is highly complex and nuanced and research following the collapse of the Soviet Union and Ukraine's subsequent independence, has reinforced the idea that ethnicity and culture are not black and white. Since the start of the war, there have been some groups, these so-called "Pro-Russians" that have been vocal proponents of Russian intervention and further annexation. However, there are others who not only speak the Russian language but can trace their lineage to both Russia and Ukraine that do not necessarily feel the same way. Russians living in Ukraine since the fall of the Soviet Union are not a cohesive group, the same which could be said for other former Soviet republics. The extent to which they viewed Russia as their homeland or as a geographic space in which they share positive connotations of vary greatly.¹ This research will focus primarily on trying to understand what cultural identity means to both Ukrainians and ethnic Russians living in Ukraine and

¹ Laitin, D. 1998. *Identity in Formation: The Russian-speaking populations in the near abroad*. Cornell University Press. 4.

whether or not there is a linkage between the physical geographic space in which an individual resides and the identity they choose to maintain.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, much research has been undertaken in order to understand the political, social, and economic ramifications of Ukrainian independence, especially as it takes on a new identity as an independent nation for the first time in centuries. As a fledgling independent nation, the people of Ukraine had to come to grips with their place in the world without the Soviet Union, a union that had dramatically shaped the country's historical experiences, politics, and economics. One such author that wanted to explore these ramifications is Laura Eras author of *War, Identity Politics, and Attitudes Toward a Linguistic Minority: Prejudice against Russian-Speaking Ukrainians in Ukraine between 1995 and 2018*. She wrote “Among the successor states of the Soviet Union, Ukraine has the largest Russian ethnic population outside of the Russian Federation and is the European nation-state with the largest ethnic minority. After Ukrainian independence, many observers feared interethnic tensions between Russian and Ukrainian populations of the country”.² The relationship between Russia and Ukraine is like one of two brothers, both of which share a common ancestry are two separate people with their own ideologies, experiences, and of course identities. The era of the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union had only strengthened this bond with many Russians residing within Ukraine due to family ties, job prospects, and even military service. The 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea and the subsequent Russian intervention in the Donbas and Luhansk region (the text was written before the Russo-Ukrainian war of 2022) has placed severe political

² Eras, Laura. 2023. “War, Identity Politics, and Attitudes toward a Linguistic Minority: Prejudice against Russian-Speaking Ukrainians in Ukraine between 1995 and 2018.” *Nationalities Papers* 51 (1): 144.

and social strain between Ukrainians and ethnic Russians even if those ethnic Russians do not necessarily identify with their Russian heritage besides speaking the Russian language.

Ukraine as with other multiethnic states, has had an inherent disadvantage, post-independence, crafting its own sense of national identity. The lack of homogeneity within its borders presents an obvious challenge to political and social integration and cohesion. Naturally, not only does this play a significant role in discussions surrounding Russian and Ukrainian identities within Ukraine's borders, but it also represents a critical area of research. Stephen Shulman of *the Cultural Foundations of Ukrainian National Identity* contributed to this very conversation by examining intrastate and Interstate cultural relations in Ukraine. Stephen (1999) illustrated that "contrary to the expectations of many social scientists, ethnic identities have persisted and, in many cases, intensified as modernization has preceded this century. Consequently, multiethnic states today face a challenge in building political communities with a high degree of national integration".³ Although cultural and ethnic heterogeneity can represent a significant challenge to national cohesion and integration, it is not impossible as with the cases of the United States or Switzerland, both of which are highly diverse but rallied behind a central identity despite ethnic differences.⁴ Conversely, some nation-states have failed in this regard with ethnic tensions that plaguing any attempt at nation building such as the case with Iraq or Nigeria.⁵ Shulman's research showed that geography played a significant role in cultural and ethnic identity in Ukraine which has affected certain views and opinions of others as well as spaces. Ukraine is not a failed state in any meaningful sense as one might compare it to places in Africa or the Middle East. Rather, it is a nation that has struggled to craft its own national

³ Shulman, Stephen. 1999. "The Cultural Foundations of Ukrainian National Identity." *Ethnic & Racial Studies* 22 (6): 1011

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

singular identity but was still able to find some semblance of unity despite certain challenges. Unfortunately, the ghosts of the Soviet Union have continued to haunt Ukraine which has become more and more relevant since February of 2022.

The Russo-Ukrainian War of 2022 has been a seminal moment for the Ukrainian people as it represents a type of existential crisis, a time and place where the Ukrainian people must fight to defend their very existence as an independent state free of Russian influence. Since its inception as an independent nation, Ukraine has struggled to craft a singular national identity as its close neighbor Russia has continued to undermine its relatively young independence. Authors John Breuilly and Daphne Halikiopoulou in their article *Reflections on Nationalism and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine* argued that there exist competing nationalisms in the region between Russia and Ukraine where the Russian Federation sees the people of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus as a singular people with a singular history. The two authors wrote “The key debate between competing historiographies is whether there is an essential East Slavic unity that underpinned the various polities and conflicts in the region. Greater Russian national historiography argues that there was what has become Ukrainian (and to a lesser extent Belarusian) national historiography argues that there were distinct national identities”.⁶ It has been made abundantly clear since the invasion had begun in February of 2022 that the Russian Federation under the leadership of Vladimir Putin has argued that both his Russia and the nation of Ukraine are one in the same and that this serves as a cultural justification for military intervention. The competition between these two competing historiographies has only been exacerbated by the ongoing bloodshed in Ukraine.

⁶ Breuilly, John, and Daphne Halikiopoulou. 2023. “Reflections on Nationalism and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Introduction.” *Nations and Nationalism* 29 (1): 25.

Historic Background

The historiography of Ukraine is a story rich with intrigue, tragedy, chaos, and triumph, and one that spans centuries. It is a story that is not easily captured and one that definitely exceeds the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, the formulation of Russian and Ukrainian identities in what is now Ukraine is part of an old historical tradition that continues to have ramifications to this day. The word Ukraine itself means Borderlands, a space representing a buffer between two places. Ukraine represents a transition between the southeastern edge of Europe and the threshold of Asia.

⁷ There are vast tracts of land dominating the Ukrainian landscape which is characterized by soft rolling slopes, wooded plateaus, and forested plains. Except for Ukraine's western Carpathian Mountains and its vivid Crimean coastal region, Ukraine represents a near-perfect breadbasket, a place where people lived and thrived by the fruits of its soil. Author Orest Subtelny of *Ukraine: A History* wrote that "in these rolling plains and steps, Ukraine's famous and remarkably fertile black soil (Chernozem) regions are found. They encompass two-thirds of Ukraine's territory... On the whole, nature has served the land well, one may even argue that in terms of natural resources, it is the richest country in Europe."⁸ Subtelny's writings are some of the most comprehensive general surveys of Ukrainian history from early human settlement to the days following the collapse of the former Soviet Union. It is an attempt to make the complex and rich history of Ukraine accessible to the average reader. The author places a particular emphasis on social, economic, and cultural factors that help to create a sense of national identity. Additionally, the text helps to fill in the gaps within the literature where other authors tend to focus on niche areas within Ukraine's rich history or historical narratives that are often inaccessible to the average person.

⁷ Subtelny, Orest. 1988. *Ukraine: A History*. Canada: University of Toronto Press. 5.

⁸ Ibid.

The soil not only produces nourishment but is also characterized by the rich mineral deposits of coal and iron ore located to the country's southeast allowing it to later be a champion of industry in Soviet times. The Black Sea as well as its tributaries served as vital sources of water and navigation for its people. The mighty Dnieper River, which spans some 2285 kilometers separates the country in two from east to west. Generally, the climate of Ukraine is typically moderate, but left to its own devices it can produce extreme sub-zero conditions. Traditionally, notwithstanding the current Russo-Ukrainian War, Ukraine's borders encompass approximately 600,000 square kilometers, stretching 1300 kilometers east to west and 900 kilometers north to south. This makes Ukraine the second largest country in Europe after Russia.⁹

As with most places across Europe, Ukraine's earliest inhabitants were bands of hunter-gatherers who used their upright posture and enlarged craniums to learn how to dominate the landscape. These early settlers exploited Ukraine's vast natural resources learning how to obtain food, forge tools, and construct shelters out of animal skins and bones. It was believed by 5000 to 4000 BCE Ukraine's earliest settlers began to recognize the importance of the soil that lay below their feet, learning to harness its power and adapting agricultural lifestyles first appearing in the southwestern regions between the Buh and Dnister Rivers.¹⁰

As with many other places in Southern and Eastern Europe, Ukraine's cultural and ethnic history span centuries, with linguistically and culturally distinct peoples that span across time. Author Christopher Beckwith of *Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present* has documented some of these unique cultural epochs that give a far greater context to Ukraine's cultural and ethnic history from an anthropologist's perspective.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Subtelny, Ukraine, 6.

Although the text does not strictly discuss Ukraine, it helps place Ukraine in a much larger interconnected world. As he would explain, the presence of agriculture would have a remarkable effect on Ukrainian historical tradition, and by the 7th century BCE, the Scythians, as they were called, appeared as a complex and sophisticated agrarian society that would become a dominant power across the steppes, launching raids into the Caucasus mountains and even into the fringes of western Asia.¹¹ The Scythians, along with the Sarmatian culture, first appearing between the 2nd century BCE and 2nd century CE in the lower Volga region, became synonymous with the legendary classical Mediterranean and Black Sea cultures, the most notable of which are those of the Greek Isles.

With the Greeks later succumbing to Roman influence and the later fall of the Roman Empire, the continent of Europe fell into cultural darkness and the civilizations of Ukraine fell into obscurity. It was not until the 9th century AD that the great state of Kievan Rus emerged out of the shadows. It was within this Kingdom encompassing Eastern and Northern Europe where Ukraine, as well as Belarus and Russia, share common cultural ancestors.¹² The Kievan Rus' became known as the homeland of the Slavs and it was during this period that Slavic colonialization would occur throughout Southern and Eastern Europe. It was generally described as a peaceful period, but as Slavic culture radiated outward clashes with the Byzantine Empire inevitably led to violence. These Slavs were by no means homogeneous, as distinct cultures emerged within the complex geographies of the region such as the western Slavs constituting modern-day Poland, Czech Republic, and Slovakia, the southern Slavs of Bulgaria and Macedonia, Serbia and Croatia, and the eastern Slavs of Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus.

¹¹ Beckwith, Christopher I. 2009. *Empires of the Silk Road : A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present*. Princeton University Press. 11.

¹² Channon, John, and Robert Hudson. *The Penguin historical atlas of Russia*. Viking Adult, 1995.14-16.

The fall of the Kievan Rus later in the 14th century would come as a result of the increased political and military prominence of the western Slavic peoples in the regions of Poland and Lithuania. The unity of Poland-Lithuanian was organized to fight off the Mongol invaders that had been radically transforming the European landscape. The Fall of the Kievan Rus would lead to the rise of the Kingdom of Galicia-Volhynia and while under their rule political, social, and religious life would see little change for the people of Ukraine. However, the Polish-Lithuanian Union, a codification of various rules and acts between the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuanian in the late 14th century would bring about substantial changes to civil society in Ukraine as this union would forcibly remove many Ukrainians from prominent positions of power from within the kingdom. This led to an increased presence of Polish rule in Ukrainian life as Ukrainians would live at the mercy of the Polish often facing severe repression as they were forcibly integrated into Polish territory. ¹³

By 1490, Ukrainian minorities such as the Cossacks, Tartars, and Hutsuls would rise up against the Polish-Lithuanians in a series of rebellions throughout the 15th century. The Cossacks and their allies would wage a constant stream of military efforts against the Polish-Lithuanian for decades often being at odds with the Ottoman Turks to the east. As the bloody struggle against the Polish-Lithuanians waged the Cossacks looked towards the Tzar of Russia as an ally in their struggle. The Treaty of Pereyaslav in 1654 would formalize Russian protection for the Cossacks. The later Treaty of Andreusovo would then separate Ukraine from Polish-Lithuanian territory and allow Ukraine to be annexed by the Russian Empire in 1667. ¹⁴ The Annexation of Ukraine by the Russian Empire would represent a critical turning point in Ukrainian history as it would lead to a

¹³ Millar, Robert McColl. 2010. *Authority and Identity: A Sociolinguistic History of Europe before the Modern Age*. Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan. P. 184

¹⁴ Yekelchuk, Serhy. 2007. *Ukraine : Birth of a Modern Nation*. Oxford University Press.

complete transformation of the Ukrainian cultural landscape, its people, and institutions, and set the foundation for the complicated and often violent and exploitative relationship between the two nations.

The Russian Empire

Although the Russian Empire originally entered Ukraine as a protector, they would stay as a conqueror. The Partitions of Poland in 1772 would allow Ukraine to be carved up by various regional powers such as the Austrians to the west, the Ottoman Turks in parts of the south, and Hungarians to the southwest with the remaining land falling under the control of the Russian Empire. The Russian empire was one of the largest in the world and although it somewhat paled in comparison to its Western European counterparts in terms of institutions, industry, and government it still possessed an enormous bureaucracy, a large and modernizing military, and maintained absolute power on all aspects a political, economic and social life. This absolute control yielded by the Russian Tzars and other political elites extended throughout their empire including Ukraine. The era of Russian imperial rule was would signify for all Ukrainians that their history would inevitably change forever as a wave of destitution, political humiliation, and despotism would rein across the Ukrainian landscape setting the stage for later historical events. Just as in the 21st century, a political narrative as a matter of convenience and state policy was already being formed, Russian imperialists viewed Ukraine as so culturally and linguistically linked with one another that Ukraine was inherently Russian land ¹⁵ This went so far as to imply that it was the result of a historical accident or misfortune that Ukraine was ever separated from Russian lands and its influence.

¹⁵ Subtelny, Ukraine, 203.

The grand size of the imperial Russian army would be omnipresent in Ukraine symbolizing the iron fist of the Russian Tzar and despite the sometimes inconsistent quality and training of Russian troops quantity had a quality all of its own. Prince Oleksander Bezborodke, a native of Ukraine and a man who had later joined the imperial Russian service, eventually becoming the grand chancellor of the Russian empire under Catherine the Great once said that “Russia is an autocratic state. Its size, the variety of its inhabitants and customs, and the many other considerations make it the only natural form of government for Russia”.¹⁶ Between 1816 and 1821 over 500,000 Russian soldiers would be stationed in Ukraine and were ordered to establish settlements having the imperial blessing to marry any woman they chose, to father children, and control a variety of other domestic aspects of Ukrainian life. The young men of Ukraine were also forcibly conscripted into the imperial army which was often viewed as a death sentence because of the lengthy service commitment, inhumane treatment by superior officers, and recruits often being led away by force from their homes by recruiters.

The bureaucracy of the Russian empire was modeled after that of the military, a strict hierarchical structure that demanded absolute loyalty. The political machine of the empire cared little for individual rights and the personal lives of its subjects. Even those that were part of this bureaucracy as a profession were often underpaid or not paid at all which resulted in widespread corruption at all levels, a trend that would inevitably continue throughout Russian history. The Ukrainians that lived in such appalling conditions eventually began to ponder the greater context of their situation and began to ask critical often dangerous questions about their political agency, their value as people, and what it means to be Ukrainian. The 19th century was an important time

¹⁶ A. Voloshchenko, *Narysy z istorii suspilno-politychnoho rukhu na Ukraini* (Kiev: Naukova Dumka, 1974), 114-15.

in Ukrainian history not just in the country itself but across Europe as new ideologies, movements, and fractures within the age-old European dynasties began to slowly falter. The 19th century was an age of national consciousness and even if it did not ultimately result in independence it would surely inspire future Ukrainians and leaders alike to carry on that tradition.

The 19th century was rife with new and radical ideas of how to think about the world, past, present, and future. It brought about new forms of government and brought down old ones and it encouraged intellectuals to ponder ideas such as democracy, freedom of expression, liberalism, and secularism. Among one the most important, especially in a Ukrainian context is the idea of nationhood. The concept of a nation is relatively new especially when we consider that most of Europe was dominated by dynasties ruling over a feudal-like state. Today, the idea that groups of people can call the place in which they live a nation is often taken for granted; however, and it was during the 19th and early 20th centuries when intellectuals and thinkers across Europe especially in the east began discussions around nationhood that would have significant implications. Historically, ethnic considerations for how people defined space and claimed it as their own were not widely valued when it came to the formulation of a state let, alone a nation. According to Subtelny, “This is not to say that pre-modern people were oblivious to ethnic differences. People always felt a close attachment to their homeland, language, customs, and traditions. But until relatively recently, ethnicity was not considered to be a primary basis for defining group identity”.¹⁷ It was legality and socioeconomics that were the driving factors for the feudal system that dominated Europe for centuries. The Russian Empire, although dominating vast

¹⁷ Subtelny, Ukraine, 222.

expanses of land and ruling over a diverse array of subjects, maintained a feudal-like state long after many other European governments abandoned such a concept of government.

The flow of new ideas across Europe would inevitably find themselves in the East where intellectuals would ponder ideas of nationhood and ethnicity—the *intelligentsia*. The intelligentsia were educated individuals and people that were committed to deep ideological discussions about culture, society, politics, and how to improve the conditions of the peasantry. This movement occurred typically in urban centers such as Kharkiv where discussions were held in universities and other institutions of higher learning towards new ideas new ideas about politics and society that were occurring in other places throughout Europe. For well over a century Ukraine had lost much of its unique identity as it became amalgamated into the Russian Empire however discussions happening in and around urban centers spurred the growth of a national consciousness of those who wanted to recapture some of the lost elements that once made Ukraine unique. Small cliques in schools and universities focused on revitalizing Ukrainian history, folklore, the Ukrainian language, and even literature, as groups and organizations began collecting and preserving these relics of the past that once thought to be lost. Although the Russian Empire may have viewed Ukraine as an extension of itself and its history, historians throughout Ukraine began to rewrite Ukraine's historical narrative as a way to create a sense of continuity within time and space.

Ukraine's Soviet Identity

Discussions about Ukrainian culture and its importance in preserving its own unique sense of identity would culminate into ideas of nationhood and ultimately ambitions for independence by the early 20th century. The 20th century was a time of great change, chaos, and confusion. The First World War which had ravished the fields of Europe and claimed millions of

lives had dramatically changed the age-old European dynasties which believed that waging warfare would allow them to preserve the status quo and continue the prosperity of their empires. It was the opposite that was true and for the Russian Empire, it would signal an end for the Tzar and usher in a new form of government, one that was just as brutal and as autocratic as the last. The Russian Revolution would violently usurp the last Tzar of Russia Nicholas II and would implement a communist government and economy. This one-party state, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union led initially by the Bolshevik revolutionary Vladimir Lenin, would rule over many of the former Russian imperial lands. In order to maintain ideological purity with the Soviet Union's communist doctrine a variety of measures were taken in order to wipe out the imperial remnant of Russia which the Soviets viewed as the enemy of the proletariat and of the working class.

For the Ukrainian people, the transition of power from the Russian imperialists to the Soviets offered virtually little difference as the Soviets demanded absolute loyalty to the state. Any semblance of private property and individualism were seen as elements of the traitorous Russian imperialists. This did not stop, however some Ukrainians from attempting violent intervention in order to achieve some form of independence from their new Soviet rulers. From 1917 to 1920 various groups from within Ukraine attempted to break away from the chaos happening in Moscow. Some of these groups were unified in their efforts while others disagreed about what it meant to have independence from Moscow. ¹⁸ In any event, these efforts were in vain as the new Soviets were able to put down these rebellions and incorporate Ukraine into its sphere of influence. The aftermath of the First World War would further affect Ukraine as the fall of the Austrian

¹⁸ Kubicek, Paul. 2008. *The History of Ukraine. The Greenwood Histories of the Modern Nations*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Publishing Group. P. 79.

Hungarian and German Empires resulted in a radical shift of the political boundaries of Europe with portions of western Ukraine being used to create Czechoslovakia, some succeeded to Romania, and portions to the north being incorporated into the newly formed reformed Poland.¹⁹

As the interwar years between 1922 and 1939 the Soviet Union took on rapid industrialization policies to catch up with the rest of Europe. The former Russian Empire was often seen as a European backwater, a place where the legacy of European feudalism was still alive and well and paled in comparison to industrialization happening elsewhere. Under the leadership of Joseph Stalin, Ukraine would play a crucial role in the Soviet Union's industrialization and modernization plan. The lush and fertile fields of Ukraine would be used to fund various industries and help modernize the USSR. However, the policies of collective farming and increased quotas to further grain exports would result in one of the most horrific famines in European history resulting in the deaths of millions of Ukrainians known as the Holodomor. Although happening before the horrors of World War Two, the collective trauma experienced by the Ukrainians is still felt today and is remembered every November.²⁰ The power of Soviet identity comes in a variety of forms such as party principles, values, as well as art and aesthetics which helped to define much of the historical, political, and cultural experiences of many of the former Soviet republics. Despite this, Ukraine would still hold on to its own unique sense of cultural identity and individualism. Although Sovietization had taken its toll on Ukrainian society, it was never able to completely cover up Ukraine's unique language and culture. It was only a matter of time until Ukraine was fully able to capitalize on developments that had originally sprouted in the 19th and early 20th centuries and would eventually gain the agency and political independence to do so.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Fowler, Mayhil. "Soviet Ukraine in a Nutshell." Origins, Ohio State University, 1 July 1970, <https://origins.osu.edu/read/soviet-ukraine-nutshell>. Para. 7-8.

Post-Soviet Ukraine

The fall of the Soviet Union was a climatic time for Ukraine. For the first time in centuries, Ukraine would become its own independent nation having in its possession a defined territory, sovereignty, government, and agency. Although the fall of the Iron Curtain symbolized a victory for its Titanic struggle against outside influences namely from Russia, new challenges arose as Ukraine would begin to define itself as a newly independent nation with its own identity on the world stage. The centuries of control from outside states, particularly during its time as part of the Soviet Union would make this process difficult, and trying to identify what exactly is a Ukrainian identity would not be so easy of a task. In 2001 the Ukrainian government would conduct its most recent census to date where they reported approximately 77.8% of the state's population self-reporting as Ukrainian, a 7% increase from the 1989 census data which showed 72.7%. ²¹ Conversely, the census reported 17.3% of the population self-identified as Russian compared to the 22.1% in 1989, a 4.8% decrease overall. ²² In terms of languages spoken the vast majority of the population within Ukraine spoke Ukrainian primarily as their native language whereas 29.6% would speak Russian as their primary language of choice.

The geographic placement of those self-identified as either Ukrainian or Russian as well as the preferred language is also noted, while most of Ukraine's landmass is populated by self-identified Ukrainians the state statistics committee of Ukraine in 2001 showed that most Russians lived in the eastern portions of Ukraine as well as in Crimea with some exceptions to Ukraine's north. The Crimean region of Ukraine has a majority Russian population of 58.3% despite the decrease from 65.6% in 1989. Whereas ethnic Ukrainians dominate only a 24.3% margin of the

²¹ State Statistics Committee of Ukraine (2001). National Structure of Population.
<http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/eng/results/general/nationality/>

²² Ibid.

population. When we look towards the east of Ukraine such as in the Donetsk, Luhansk, and Zaporizhia, regions there exists increasing percentages of overall self-identified ethnic Russians but significantly lower compared to their Crimean counterparts. For example, in Donetsk, Russians make up 38.2% of the population whilst Ukrainians comprise the remaining 56.9%. In Zaporizhia the Ukrainian majority is 70% compared to the Russian 24.7%, and finally, in Luhansk the Ukrainian majority is 58% to the Russian 39% similar to the numbers presented in Donetsk.²³

The Ukrainian census can help us understand when, how, and where specific populations have shifted over time and how they compare to older Soviet measurements. The numbers clearly show a decrease in the overall Russian population within Ukraine's borders. This decrease could be attributed to any number of factors, the biggest being the fall of the Soviet Union which resulted in a population shift of ethnic Russians out of Ukraine. However, despite the usefulness of the 2001 Ukrainian census as a tool to gauge the composition of individuals living in Ukraine, it could not tell us why the composition looks the way it does. In addition, due to the complex situation in Ukraine as a result of the Russo-Ukrainian war, the nation's demographics have changed significantly, and conducting an accurate census in a country ravaged by war is unrealistic if not impossible. The Ukrainian census should not be a solid representation of what identities exist within Ukraine and in fact, notions of what identity is and how people self-identify can be problematic for demographers to create an accurate sense of conditions on the ground. Likewise, there is a layer of subjectivity when it comes to census data whilst the process may be seen as objective it is ultimately up to the individual being assessed that ultimately determines the results of that census.

²³ Ibid.

There is no doubt that census data is a powerful tool however, author Dominique Arel of *Interpreting Nationality and Language in the 2001 Ukrainian Census* wrote that as instruments enumerating persons, censuses are large-scale administrative operations...Censuses that are able to achieve the goal of counting everyone within a margin of error of 5% are internationally recognized as valid. However, as instruments recording the identities of persons, that is their ethnicity, language, race, or religion, censuses belong to the same species of popular consultations: elections, plebiscites, or referenda.”²⁴ In other words, there truly isn't an exact science when it comes to accurately classifying identities as they relate to ethnicity, race, or religion. A census of this purpose is almost entirely based on an individual's subjectivity, how they themselves self-identify whether they see themselves in one particular category or the other. Arel stressed the importance of social and political context as it relates to the conduct of the census and that they do not occur in a vacuum, that the Ukrainian census took place in a specific place in time to achieve particular objectives. As a new fledgling nation ostensibly free from Soviet and Russian influence Ukraine was on a journey to define its identity and the 2001 census was conducted with a specific goal in mind.

The 2001 Ukrainian census was inherently political. Just as with other nations when conducting a census its purposes were for taxation, regional development, and allocation of resources, as well as economic and political legitimacy, and of course sovereignty. The 2001 director of the Ukrainian Committee on State Statistics, Oleksandr Osaulenko, described the census as part of the national interest, a way in which Ukraine could culturally describe itself within the post-Soviet world.²⁵ The Russian Empire and former Soviet Union often used the

²⁴ Arel, Dominique. “Interpreting ‘Nationality’ and ‘Language’ in the 2001 Ukrainian Census.” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 18, no. 3 (July 2002): 214.

²⁵ S”ioma sesii Verkhovnoï Rady Ukraïny 13-oho sklykannia, Zasedannia 73 (foot note continued on next page)

census as a tool to divide and conquer, as a way to establish some semblance of political legitimacy or right to rule. For many post-Soviet states, including Ukraine, this experience was well ingrained into the Ukrainian *zeitgeist* and during the early post-Soviet years deliberate steps were taken in order to erase the damage done by their former Soviet captors. Arel emphasized the concept known as Primordialism, the idea that a nation's identity as it relates to ethnicity is something that is constant and permanent whether it's a natural or an ancient part of its history.²⁶ These notions of fixed concepts of ethnicity and identity make sense in terms of Ukraine's overarching political goals in the early post-Soviet world but it nonetheless did cause tensions with ethnic Russian counterparts in places such as Crimea and the eastern regions. In the early 2000s, there were rampant fears of undercounting especially if they were deliberate as it might devalue the presence of those who choose to self-identify as Russian as well as speak the Russian language. This problem was a particular concern in Crimea where ethnic Russians have historically dominated the peninsula's majority since Soviet times and an undercount might weaken what some might see as their right to autonomy in an ethnically Russian Crimea.²⁷

Regardless of an undercount, the 2001 Ukrainian census, the last census to date would continue to have significant implications for the future especially as it relates to the increasing tensions between Ukraine and Russia over the next 20 years. The numbers themselves show a significant shift from those identifying as Russian to then identifying as Ukrainian. However, as author Ihor Stebelsky of *Ethnic Self-Identification in Ukraine, 1989–2001: Why More Ukrainians and Fewer Russians?* Once put it “Where have all those Russians gone? They have not gone to

Session of the Supreme Council of Ukraine, 13th Convocation, Session 73), July 10, 2001

²⁶ Arel, “Interpreting ‘Nationality’ and ‘Language’”, 215.

²⁷ Arel, “Interpreting ‘Nationality’ and ‘Language’”, 232.

Russia and they have not stopped speaking Russian”.²⁸ The explanation for this phenomenon comes down to self-identification as well as Ukraine’s specific historical and political experiences while under Soviet and Imperial Russian rule. The former Russian Empire used the power of the census and discrete categorizations in order to project power and influence over the Ukrainians to the extent of creating barriers to the development of Ukrainian high culture and using the Russian language as a civilizing measure.²⁹ These experiences necessitated a certain level of integration or hybridization of two distinct identities Russian and Ukrainian which according to author Ian Bremmer of “*The Politics of Ethnicity: Russians in the New Ukraine*” resulted in multiple or hybrid identities because many Ukrainians especially in the South and the East would adopt Russian as their preferred language.³⁰ The Russian language in eastern Ukraine has become such an integral part of identity in this region that it is almost impossible to separate it.

Author Anna Fournier in her work “*Mapping Identities: Russian Resistance to Linguistic Ukrainization in Central and Eastern Ukraine*” makes the argument that there exists a significant degree of resistance from Russophone Ukrainians (Ukrainians that speak Russian) from what they perceive as Ukrainianization from the core of Ukraine outward to its periphery where Russian or hybrid Russian identities are commonplace. According to Stebelsky, this phenomenon is significant because there are clear geopolitical implications for the sudden shift in self-identification. Stebelsky wrote “For the Russian empire builders, defining identity on the basis of Russian speakers brings most of Ukraine within the orbit of Russia, leaving the Ukrainian speakers of western Ukraine as the marginalized other”.³¹ The reverse may also be true where the process

²⁸ Stebelsky, Ihor, 2009. “Ethnic Self-Identification in Ukraine, 1989-2001: Why More Ukrainians and Fewer Russians?” Canadian Slavonic Papers 51 (1).

²⁹ Stebelsky. “Ethnic Self-Identification in Ukraine. 78.

³⁰ Ian Bremmer, “The Politics of Ethnicity: Russians in the New Ukraine,” Europe-Asia Studies 46.2 (1994):262.

³¹ Stebelsky. “Ethnic Self-Identification in Ukraine.79.

of Ukrainianization and self-identifying as at least partly Ukrainian and speaking its language has the effect of legitimizing state existence as well as professing a claim upon former Soviet lands. These claims are markedly more difficult in places such as Crimea where there is a statistical Russian ethnic majority and as well as in some parts of Ukraine's eastern border. Nevertheless, outside of very calculated geopolitical objectives either from Ukraine or the Russian Federation, the close proximity of the two nations and its interlocking history created a situation where dual identities exist. According to author Andrew Wilson of "*Elements of a Theory of Ukrainian Ethno-National Identities*" a 1997 survey indicated that approximately half of ethnic Russians in Ukraine saw themselves as solely Russian whilst the other identified as Ukrainian. This distinction between the two groups according to Wilson might have been the product of intermarriage as well as ethnic national identity being assigned at birth as something other than Russian, Ukrainian, or a hybrid of the two.

In a 2003 study following the last Ukrainian census since the collapse of the Soviet Union author's Lowell W. Barrington et al in *The Motherland Is Calling: Views of Homeland among Russians in the Near Abroad* discovered that "surprisingly few Russians living outside the Russian Federation considered Russia to be their homeland: fewer than 1/4 of the ethnic Russian respondents in the four states offered (Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) see Russia as their homeland"³². The Russo-Ukrainian War has further galvanized tensions between the two nations since 2014, especially for those in the West it is simply a matter of convenience to boil the conflict down to a simple binary: Russian or Ukrainian. The reality of course is not so simple and rather than it being black and white, the cultural and ethnic landscape

³² Barrington, Lowell W., Erik S. Herron, and Brian D. Silver. "The Motherland Is Calling: Views of Homeland among Russians in the near Abroad." *World Politics* 55, no. 2 (2003): 297.

of Ukraine is characterized by shades of grey. Barrington in the 2003 survey asked respondents if they see themselves as a national minority, meaning do these citizens see themselves to have a particular set of characteristics that are essentially different than the majority and are more reflective of a different state or nation. The concept of a national minority which differs from an ethnic minority is that in some instances national minorities may see themselves desiring political control or autonomy over a geographic space such as the case in Chechnya, Abkhazia, Abkhaz, and Transdnistria.³³ According to the survey, 18.8% of ethnic Russian respondents in Ukraine answered yes as identifying as a national minority whilst a majority of 65.7% answered no.³⁴ Barrington points out that compared to other post-Soviet states like those found in Central Asia, in places such as Ukraine and even Belarus the distinction between Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian is smaller culturally compared to the cultural differences that existed in Central Asia. When it comes to day-to-day life average Ukrainian citizens, whether they are ethnically Ukrainian or Russian, do not experience such a cleavage or contrast between cultures. Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians all share deep historical ties to one another. Although the three are distinctive Slavic cultures with their own historical narratives, the legacy of the of the Kievan Rus, the Russian Empire, and the Soviet Union have linked the three countries together.

The 2003 survey also looked into the concept of homeland, whether that be an external or an internal one. Different respondents define the concept of homeland differently since an individual's homeland is usually associated with deep historical, emotional, and familial ties. Respondents born in Russia were more likely to identify with an external homeland than those who were not.³⁵ However, place of birth is not the only factor that influences this decision

³³ Barrington, Herron, and Silver. "The Motherland Is Calling" 299.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Barrington, Herron, and Silver. "The Motherland Is Calling" 303.

variables such as length of time lived in the country, age, education, urban or rural residence, and even gender play a role. Forty percent of residents born in their country of residence are more likely to identify that country as their homeland. The length of time a respondent has spent in that particular country, whether they were born there or relocated after birth, also influences this decision where the longer time spent the more likely they are to identify that country as their homeland. There also exists a correlation between different levels of education where respondents with higher levels of education were 17% more likely to identify with an external homeland than respondents with lower levels of education.³⁶ When it comes to gender, males were 7% more likely than females to select an external homeland. There also exists a discrepancy between respondents that live in urban spaces versus those in more rural locations where urban dwellers are 8% more likely than their rural counterparts to identify with an internal homeland.

The 2014 Crisis

The Russian annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, part of a larger political crisis taking place in Kyiv, helped to galvanize the social, cultural, and political cleavages that existed between Ukrainians and Russians. Although the annexation of Crimea by Russian Military Forces was relatively bloodless there were bold and often passionate displays of civil disobedience that filled the streets of Crimea and other places throughout southern and eastern Ukraine. The Crimean capital of Sevastopol was just such a place where citizens of Crimea representing both Russian and Ukrainian identities prominently displayed where they stood on the issue, firmly drawing a line in the sand whether they stood for Ukraine or for Russia. Citizens

³⁶ Barrington, Herron, and Silver. "The Motherland Is Calling" 305.

gathered with flags of their respective nations shouting and screaming often with harsh rhetoric towards their opposition. The backdrop of this display of identities was characterized by a heavily militarized police presence attempting to maintain the peace in a time of violence and upheaval. Svetlana Astakhova, a pro-Ukrainian protester was asked by Simon Strovsky of VICE News in March of 2014 why she was here today and what she was hoping to accomplish. She said passionately “We are out here because we are against Crimea joining the Russian Federation. This is our only chance to show the world that we exist, because Russian propaganda ignores our existence in Ukraine. Everyone thinks that Crimea fully supports Russia, but it is not the case, so that's why we have to go out to the streets”.³⁷ Although Crimea has historically been a predominantly ethnic Russian region, the 2014 political crisis highlighted the significant and often vocal ethnic Ukrainian minority that desperately cried out for representation and political agency in a time of great political change. The tragic irony is that if protests and other forms of civil disobedience had occurred in a place such as Moscow they would have been quickly stifled by Russian security forces as there is little tolerance for open and public displays denouncing government rhetoric and ideals. For women like Irina Antonovskysya, a fellow pro-Ukrainian protester, wasted no time utilizing this unique opportunity not afforded to those that live in places under the Russian sphere of influence. “I know that this action might be one of the last options to express my opinions because in a few days, this territory might come to Russia, and it would be illegal”.³⁸ In hindsight, the referendum held in Crimea deciding the fate of the entire peninsula whether to fall under the Russian sphere of influence or to stay with Ukraine would

³⁷ Simon Strovsky, *Pro-Russia & Pro-Ukraine Protesters Face Off: Russian Roulette in Ukraine*, (March 12, 2014: VICE News), Video. <https://youtu.be/V9Dk2emDU0o>

³⁸ *Ibid.*

end in heartbreak as the referendum sided with Russia. This move was heavily criticized by international spectators as many came to question the legitimacy of the results.

The clash of identities in places such as Crimea is more than just a simple binary between Ukrainian and Russian but rather even ethnic Russians themselves have expressed similar sentiments like those of their Ukrainian counterparts. Take Andrey Yergorov for example, a native of Solikamsk in the Ural region of Russia who took a stand alongside his Ukrainian brothers and sisters about why they feel that they should remain independent from Russia and that the referendum taking place is not only illegal but represents a travesty and a degradation of progress and democracy. He said “I want Crimea to remain with Ukraine. Crimea will not gain anything by joining Russia. No one is thinking about the repercussions. We are all afraid of war. The fact that we see their soldiers in disguise wearing uniforms without Insignia and Putin announcing on camera without any shame that those are not his troops is outrageously arrogant”.³⁹ Andrey was referring to the already violent clashes between pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian groups in eastern Ukraine where pro-Russian forces were covertly being supported by the Russian Federation. When the Crimean Peninsula was originally annexed and before the official referendum unidentified soldiers displaying no identifiable insignias or inscriptions on their uniforms entered into the Crimean Peninsula taking control of key infrastructure, government and military installations largely without incident. These soldiers, were often referred to as little green men by international spectators, were in fact, Russian soldiers. Initially, the Putin regime had denied that these men were part of the Russian military, a statement that was later retracted.

³⁹ Ibid.

On the other side of the picket line lay those who feel that the Crimean Peninsula succeeding to join the Russian Federation would be the right move for the majority of Crimeans going forward. As expected, the historic majority of ethnic Russians in the region along with the culture of the Russian language, civil society, and the legacy of both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union play a significant role in entrenching these identities into the very fabric of the peninsula itself. In the Crimean capital in March of 2014, pro-Russian protesters as well as volunteer defense forces sat on guard against what they perceived to be a potential enemy, the Ukrainians.⁴⁰ Many of these volunteer defense forces would appear to collaborate with official city police agencies carefully watching and waiting until the moment the protests went violent. When asked by reporters and protesters alike why they are here and why they display themselves with such militarism and if they were willing to kill Ukrainians the answers were simply no of course not, they were here simply to maintain the peace. One pro-Russian protester was captured saying as he pointed towards Ukrainian protestors “Just a few of them gathered up here and I’m 100% sure they are not even local. They are not from Crimea it’s a provocation. They came from Kyiv, Dnepropetrovsk, and western Ukraine. It’s a provocation! Crimea is united, Crimea is united with Russia.”⁴¹

In Ukraine's Far East, more expressions of anti-Ukraine sentiment could be heard as enclaves of pro-Russian citizens and separatists alike expressed heartfelt discontent against not only Ukraine but Western Europe as a whole. In April of 2014, BBC reporter Natalia Antelava traveled towards the Russian border in the Luhansk region speaking with those living in these enclaves during the 2014 crisis. The Luhansk region became famous during Soviet times as it

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

was a major center for industrial activity but would later develop a reputation for being a stronghold for the pro-Russian sentiment. The Pro-Russian protesters could be seen erecting makeshift barricades and barbed wire around government buildings waving the Russian flag and denouncing what they saw as fascism and totalitarianism from Ukraine and the West. Many of these demonstrators believed that there was no going back, and that the government of Ukraine and Western media have made them out to be outcasts. They no longer trusted the Ukrainian government and its narrative which according to them were nothing more than lies and that their sympathizers shouldn't be trusted either. Natalia asked one separatist, "Tell me what it is that you don't like about Europe?" The gentleman replied "The fascism, homosexual marriage, is that what we should like?"⁴² Not only did the demonstrators believe that the Ukrainian government has made them out to be outcasts, a social pariahs, but also that they were inherently dangerous and enemies of the state. "Have you watched Ukrainian TV?" A demonstrator asked Natalia, "Have you seen what they say about us? Do we look like terrorists? If we need to we'll turn into them if necessary we will."⁴³ The 2014 crisis quickly developed into a dichotomy of "us versus them", a conflict amongst sectional lines where there were out groups and in groups. To some, the differences between the two were irreconcilable to the point where one side truly believed that they were the enemy and if the Ukrainian government wanted them to be an enemy then they would be one. This type of self-fulfilling prophecy would eventually boil over when the military of the Russian Federation finally launched a full-scale assault on Ukraine attacking from the north, east, and south.

⁴² Natalia Antelava, *Why do some Ukrainians want to be part of Russia?* BBC News, (April 24, 2017, BBS News), https://youtu.be/0QGFZev_h7g

⁴³ *Ibid.*

Russo-Ukrainian War

The origins of the Russo-Ukrainian War of 2022 date back to the original political crisis that had occurred in 2014 and the subsequent annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by the armed forces of the Russian Federation. Between the years of 2014 and 2022, a small-scale, low-intensity conflict was waged by pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine battling against government forces in order to gain autonomy and independence from the Ukrainian government in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. Since the annexation, the political, military, and especially social tensions have been high between the countries of Ukraine and Russia but these tensions are especially pronounced when we begin to look at the cultural differences between ethnic Ukrainian and ethnic Russians. The Russo-Ukrainian war, represented a dramatic escalation in the already deadly conflict which has become the most devastating conflict since the end of World War Two in Europe with thousands of losses both civilian and military on both sides.

The war also represents a bit of a conundrum for ethnic Russians and Ukrainians living in Ukraine as it further complicates an already contentious situation between the two groups. Both cultural groups have strong historical, social, and even political connections with the Russian Federation and naturally, there exists some strong admiration and even loyalty toward Russia. In places such as Crimea where the majority of the citizens living there are ethnic Russians, it is difficult not to see how strong the Russian language and culture are. It is at this moment that we find ethnic Russian and Ukrainian identities caught between a conflict of loyalties where one has to decide whether their loyalties and identity lie with Russia or if they belong to the Ukrainian state. In a war that has already cost thousands of lives, it can be difficult to see the nuances that the politics of identity display. The media has played an important role in seeing the effects of this conflict since its inception. Additionally, the media has become an excellent tool for gaining

a qualitative understanding of the people that are unfortunately caught in the crossfire, average ordinary people of different identities. Through the help of various news articles and interviews, we can use these sources to gather qualitative data and begin to paint a picture of what identity means to real people in places such as Crimea, Donbas and Luhansk. The violence and destruction that the war has caused has created deep pools of isolation to where it is extremely difficult if not outright dangerous for reporters and journalists alike to gain access into the pro-Russian lines. Along with the stringent information warfare campaign waged on both sides of this war, it can be difficult to discern the truth from official narratives. Although the lived experiences and personal narratives of those behind Ukrainian lines represent a smaller subsection, there is still inherent value in their stories and the ways in which this war has affected their sense of identity.

Take Svitlana Panova for instance, who was originally from Crimea but fled during the Russian annexation in 2014 to eastern Ukraine and fled once again in February of 2022 when Russian forces cross the border into Ukraine. Her native language is Russian and for much of her life, the Russian language has been a mainstay throughout her community. However, since the escalation of hostilities even just uttering a word or phrase in Russian has become problematic. For many Ukrainians the stigma of speaking Russian is scary and they asked themselves how will others judge them based on their native tongue? Will they assume that their loyalties lie elsewhere? Panava, as with many others who have fled westward, has opted to avoid using Russian altogether. In her own words “It's hard for me to switch to Ukrainian, but I will learn it for sure.”⁴⁴ According to Levgan Afanseiv of *NPR* in their article “Ukraine agonizes over

⁴⁴ Levgan Afanseiv, “Ukraine agonizes over Russian culture and language in its social fabric” *National Public Radio*, JUN 2, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/06/02/1101712731/russia-invasion-ukraine-russian-language-culture-identity>.

Russian culture and language in its social fabric”, in Ukraine the Russian language is so commonplace that both Ukrainian and Russian languages are often spoken in combination with one another in everyday conversations.⁴⁵ Even linguistically the Russian and Ukrainian languages are similar, a testament to the strong historical connections between the two nations. As early as 2014, there has been a notable decrease in interest in speaking the Russian language in public spaces. The Ukrainian language is the official language of the state and represents a cornerstone for Ukraine as an independent self-sufficient post-Soviet state. The official state language according to some is a matter of national survival and is a critical component of nationhood in the post-Soviet era.

The view that the Ukrainian language itself is a form of national survival has never always been this way, especially during Soviet times. Irina Rodriguez, an ethnic Russian from Ukraine’s predominantly Russian-speaking city of Kharkiv expressed her frustrations fears, and disgust over the ongoing situation in Ukraine in her *Dallas Morning News* opinion piece. She wrote “I represent the population that Putin is claiming to defend from the attacks of those he claims are belligerent Ukrainian nationalists by bombing the local population and driving them to impromptu bomb shelters in the city subway”. Already using words that harshly criticized the actions of the supposed savior of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin, Irina as an ethnic Russian herself is cognizant of the separation between her own ethnic history and that of the identity that she created herself.⁴⁶ During her time growing up in the Soviet Union, it was highly frowned upon to speak the Ukrainian language as it was regarded as culturally backward and discouraged in public spaces. Although the Ukrainian language was quite familiar to both ethnic Russians and

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Irina Rodriguez, “I’m an ethnic Russian Ukrainian from Kharkiv. Putin is not defending me,” *The Dallas Morning News*, MAR 1, 2022. <https://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/commentary/2022/03/01/im-an-ethnic-russian-ukrainian-from-kharkiv-putin-is-not-defending-me/>

Ukrainians the native language of Ukrainian was almost forgotten by Irina and her family. Soviet and post-Soviet propaganda had taken its toll on how native Ukrainians would treat ethnic Russians but throughout her travels across western Ukraine and especially as the war waged, she reflected that “never in my 20 years of life during the late Soviet period in Ukraine or during the subsequent 26 years of visits there with my husband and kids who also speak Russian have I encountered attacks, insults or anything remotely resembling discrimination on the account of our linguistic skills.”⁴⁷ The overtly false Soviet and later Russian propaganda was designed to project power and cultural influence. For some this defined who they were whether they were Russian or Ukrainian. However, for Irina, just because she was born ethnically Russian and spoke the language didn't mean that this was her identity by virtue of birth. Her support for Ukraine and its war effort is a testament to how we as individuals can choose and craft our own identities. “Ukrainians are strong,” she wrote “optimistic and resilient. We have been through an artificial famine launched by Stalin that killed over 4 million people, World War Two, oppression, corruption, and multiple economic hardships. We will survive this too... as our national anthem says Ukraine’s glory will have not perished.”⁴⁸ What is particularly notable from her last statement is the word “we” meaning that she at the very least considers herself Ukrainian and a part of the Ukrainian nation.

Some ethnic Russians have been received with open arms by native Ukrainians, especially in the case of Irina, others have not received such a warm welcome. Andrey Sidorkine, a Russian living in Ukraine, does not identify with his Russian heritage and feels more Ukrainian than he does Russian. Just as with Irina, it is not so much about the culture and identity that you were

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

born into but rather the identity you chose and made for yourself. The problem, however, is that as the war wages, on tension and distrust grow. Although Andrey is Russian he expressed that he wanted to enlist in the Ukrainian military in order to fend off the Russian invaders; but even though the Ukrainian military could use all the help it could get Andrey was prevented from doing so. According to Andrey “I have already gone to the military enlistment office five times but they sent me back precisely because I have a Russian passport. I try to somehow get through in another way and I went to Azov but so far no avail”.⁴⁹ As far as the Ukrainian government is concerned allowing someone with a Russian passport to enlist in the Ukrainian military represents a security risk, one where no exceptions are made. It is for this reason that although many Russians living in Ukraine identify more with Ukraine as their homeland, a veil of loneliness, isolation, and to some extent frustration has fallen over them. “This is my home,” Andrey said to *Euronews* reports, “the people in Kyiv and I also have to and want to protect it. And besides, if this happens God forbid, that Russian troops enter here I would like to meet them with weapons in my hands and not empty-handed.”⁵⁰ Although he was unable to enlist he was still able to volunteer and help groups in Kyiv prepare for the worst such as making Molotov cocktails and making fortifications in the city.

Andrey is not alone in his frustrations, 43-year-old Maria Trouchnikova who is an English teacher who has been living in Ukraine for over 20 years is also experiencing the same identity crisis that Andrey and other Russians living in Ukraine are facing. “I feel shame, rage, pride for Ukraine, there is all of this in me,” she says sorrowfully, “I feel a terrible emptiness instead of nationality.”⁵¹ For as terrible as the war is, the tragic scenes of death and destruction as well as

⁴⁹ Euronews, “Russians living in Ukraine on their rage, shame, and terrible emptiness” *Euronews*, MAR 14th, 2022.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

thousands of civilians being displaced have represented a rallying cry for Ukrainians as well as allies from around the world. It is a time for solidarity, an episode in Ukraine's already complex history where despite superficial differences Ukrainians from all over the country have banded together for a unified cause, the defense of their very existence and they're very right to be Ukrainian. Unfortunately, these rallying cries and calls for solidarity have an exclusionary element to them, where not all are welcome even if their intentions are noble and their motivations just. This sense of emptiness is perhaps even more profound for women such as Sasha Alekseyeva who was a former IT specialist working for a Russian company. "Am I ashamed that I'm from Russia? No, I'm just sad that it's like this. I'm ashamed that I had to cooperate as an IT specialist with some Russian companies".⁵² The moment the war began Sasha came to the inevitable realization that hostilities between Ukraine and Russia created a massive fracture between herself, friends and family in Russia, and the new friends made in Ukraine. It is a constant struggle to reconcile with the fact that she herself is Russian and Russians are either seen as the enemy or people to keep a watchful eye on as if their loyalties are not entirely clear. Sasha was not alone in her sorrow, Galina Jabina another fellow Russian living in Ukraine shared that she was "ashamed to be Russian" while the ongoing invasion continues to claim innocent lives and the lives of those defending the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv where she lives.⁵³ "I was very angry, ready to throw myself on a tank with my bare hands, but there were no tanks, just air strikes... I hardly talk to anyone anymore, My friends bury their heads in the sand, my family invites me to go back to Russia and they don't understand why I don't." Sasha

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

and Galina are just two extreme examples of how this war has negatively impacted the lives of ethnic Russians in Ukraine and unfortunately, the end of this war is nowhere in sight.

Themes

So far this analysis of Ukraine's attempts at cultural revitalization since the end of the Cold War, as well as a deeper dive into the identities of ethnic Ukrainian and Russian citizens, has unearthed a variety of themes that place events into a much larger context and can be used as a lens to appreciate and understand Ukraine's complicated human and cultural geographies. There are eight distinct but interrelated themes, including 1) devotion to country, 2) self-identity, 3) historical and war trauma, 4) identities that transcend boundaries, 5) isolation, 6) cultural guilt, 7) political validation and goal setting, and 8) national imagination. Although not an exhaustive list, an analysis of both first-hand and second accounts of Ukrainian social-political developments since the end of the Cold War offer clarity into the present moment.

The Russo-Ukrainian war has galvanized Ukrainian nationalism and patriotism leading to slogans such as “Stand with Ukraine”. Even individuals such as Irina Rodriguez expressed such sentiments despite being Russian. Devotion to country means coalescing around a common idea of nationhood, a place with a common ancestry and national identity. Since the end of the Cold War, Ukraine has taken many steps to unearth this historic, and to some extent ancient historical identity, that had been concealed by external forces. Ukraine's independence in 1991 signified a moment in time when Ukraine finally had the opportunity to determine its own destiny and established itself as a nation demanding agency and a voice to be heard. Both the 2014 political crisis as well as the 2022 invasion have only strengthened the devotion of all Ukrainians across the country and the world. The protests that had erupted across the country, particularly in Crimea can be seen as defensive actions in order to defend what they see as a blatant effort to

undermine all the progress that they have made since the independence. The willingness to fight and die for the cause of Ukrainian democracy, its institutions, and its people represent the ultimate form of devotion to one's country. It serves as a rallying cry even for those that are not even Ukrainian.

A major lesson drawn from this research is that identities do not fit perfectly into arbitrary categories, whether Ukrainian or Russian. The conversations surrounding identity are not black and white and are in fact more reminiscent of shades of Grey. There are so many variables at play that determine someone's identity, whether it's familial ties, personal experiences, gender, education, urban-rural dynamics, or time. Moreover, identity is more of a category that people make for themselves and how they see themselves in relation to a much larger world around them. For instance, as discussed earlier ethnic Russians who although speaking Russian, and even originating from Russian territory no longer saw themselves as a part of Russia, and in fact saw themselves as more Ukrainian. Their lives were defined by their time in Ukraine and the friendships, families, and roots that they planted were ultimately far more valuable and important than any arbitrary category.

The creation of identities in Ukraine is heavily influenced by both historic and war trauma that has been inflicted upon the Ukrainian people for centuries. The Russo-Ukrainian war is perhaps the most obvious, where violence and destruction is so readily apparent for all to see that it continues to serve as a major impetus for forming an identity around a Titanic struggle for their very right to exist. However, this Titanic struggle against outside forces, namely Russia, has always been at play ever since Ukraine first fell under the influence of the old Russian empire. The Russian Empire helped to establish lineages and deep cultural connections between Ukraine and Russia which would eventually be used to initiate the transfer of power from one empire to

another. The process of Sovietization after the climax of the Russian Revolution in 1917 characterized Ukraine's identity for much of the 20th century. Although Moscow would have preferred to have created a Ukrainian aesthetic that appealed to Soviet and Russian sensibilities, the Ukrainian language, artistry, political consciousness, and its people never truly submitted to the power of the Soviet Union, a testament to the strength of the Ukrainian people.

Identity is not something that is static and in fact, changes over time and space. This is most evident when it comes to looking at ethnic Russians who originally started life either in the former Soviet Russia or a successor the Russian Federation. This research discussed the many variables that are at play when it comes to the creation of identity and how people determine this identity for themselves. Identity in Ukraine has a tendency to transcend boundaries, particularly political and cultural boundaries. The imaginary line that demarcates the differentiation between Ukraine and Russia often symbolically represents the contrast between the two nations where each has its own language, history, and cultural experiences. However, as much as some want to believe that this line is relatively static, freedom of movement exists whether physically or something else altogether. In much the same way that people or goods might move across borders identities do as well. This idea becomes increasingly clear when Russians start to identify more with their place in Ukraine rather than where they had come from originally. It's all about the roots that you set for yourself, and it is not so much the boundaries that separate people but rather the ability to overcome those boundaries and create something altogether new.

However, the cultural transcendence of national boundaries isn't always so simple and the war with Russia represents a significant challenge and point of friction for many ethnic Russians living in Ukraine. The Russian Federation has committed acts of atrocities in many towns and villages across the Ukrainian countryside, atrocities that continue to this day. The Russian

Federation is the enemy of Ukrainian democracy and unfortunately, it is Russian soldiers who represent the face of the enemy that wishes to destroy what Ukraine has created. For many ethnic Russians living in Ukraine they recognize this uncomfortable juxtaposition between there are cultural lineage and history which is directly connected to the Russian aggressors and the place in which they not only identify as but the place that Russia intends to destroy. This has created deep pockets of social isolation to the point of feeling great shame feeling Russian and even speaking the Russian language. This is not to say that all Ukrainians harbor serious negative opinions of Russians, in fact, the vast majority do not. However, it does not stop the minority of Ukrainians that do and it most certainly does not stop ethnic Russians in Ukraine from feeling like they do. This essentially creates a layer of cultural guilt being part of a cultural tradition that is connected to a country and a place that wishes to harm others for simply wanting the right to exist. As battles wage in the fields of Ukraine, a battle also wages in the minds of ethnic Russians who wish to find peace in a time of war.

In times of war, even the enemy gets a vote, and from the perspective of Russia, that enemy is Ukraine. Ukraine from the very start has struggled far and wide to determine its own destiny and seeks to establish a form of political validation for its right to exist and has established deliberate goals and milestones to get there. The 2001 Ukrainian census, especially as it relates to our conversation surrounding cultural identity, plays into the theme of political validation and goal setting. The Ukrainian national political consciousness wants to unearth a long-buried identity, an identity from which to build a nation. All nations rally around some semblance of national identity whether it's a language, religion, physical space, or even around commonly shared ideas and beliefs. In 2022, Ukraine continues its goal of validating its political and cultural existence, especially in the eyes of Russia. It has been practicing an ongoing national

reimagination of its former Soviet identity and breaking off the shackles that have kept it subdued for so long. This will inevitably be an ongoing process especially since the war with Russia has yet to see any significant developments towards coming to an end.

Conclusion

Ultimately the question must be asked why does this matter? Why does the impetus of Ukrainian ethnic Russian identity matter in the grand scheme of Ukrainian political and cultural geography? The answer lies in the fact that Ukraine must come to terms with the post-Soviet world and adapt to the myriad of complexities that have defined the end of the Cold War for many post-Soviet states. Unlike other post-Soviet states, Ukraine has a very complex and unfortunate relationship with its neighbor Russia. The ongoing conflict has signified that there will likely be uncomfortable political, cultural, and military tensions between the two countries for decades to come. This struggle and those that came before it is all part of the process of building a national identity. National identity is a critical component for nation-building as well as for establishing healthy and functional democracies and institutions. It is often taken for granted the sanctity of the democratic process and in fact, the principles of democracy were not created overnight. For many countries in the Western world, it took centuries to establish and refine principles of democracy and build stable institutions to create functional societies and productive nations. Without a national identity, the people of a nation have nothing to rally behind, nothing that allows them to connect with one another from disparate places and from places of unfamiliarity. In some ways, this can very well determine the success or failure of any fledgling nation.

Throughout this paper, it is hoped that a better understanding of how identity impacts all people in Ukraine can help to promote nation-building and national homogeneity to ensure that

all peoples in Ukraine have their voices heard and their issues addressed. In eastern Ukraine, this has become a major talking point for discussions around annexation and independence. Although there are pro-Russians that took radical steps to separate themselves from the Ukrainian government there are others that simply wanted their voices to be heard and tragically enough some felt like they did not matter. Homogeneity does not necessarily mean that everyone speaks the same language, was born in the same place, or even looks the same. It is more about coalescing around a set of commonly shared ideas and themes that can be used as a connection or bridge to overcome political, social, and cultural fractures that divide and separate a people.

In the end, Ukraine well has to rebuild once the war comes to its inevitable conclusion. The lessons drawn from vignettes of average Ukrainian and ethnic Russians allow us to better understand how identity is formed and will allow us to address the many political and social fractures that have plagued Ukraine since its independence. Any discussions around policymaking and nation-building must address concerns regarding cultural identity in order to create a society that is more resilient to both internal and external forces that wish to exploit weaknesses in the fabric of Ukrainian society. If one lesson can be drawn from this discussion it is that nothing is set in stone and the future has still yet to be written. The nation of Ukraine has an abundance of opportunity ahead of it but it will take determination to capitalize on those opportunities and create a better place for both Ukrainians and their ethnic Russian brothers and sisters.

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