

# How Identities Become Crucial in Contemporary Conflicts and Interactions

## Intangible Heritage in the Russo-Ukrainian War

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the national identities related to the Russo-Ukrainian War. The text highlights historical background information on the shared heritage of Russia and Ukraine and the gradual emergence of their distinct national identities. It explores the broader Russian objective of erasing Ukrainian cultural identity and the destruction of cultural assets as a weapon of irregular warfare. The article compared literature to convey the historical context relating to the heritage of Russia and Ukraine, tracing their origins back to Kievan Rus and the following developments, and used interview results to reflect the importance of intangible heritage in analysing the development of their national relationship.

**Keywords:** Russo-Ukrainian War, Intangible heritage, Identity, National conflict, Cultural interaction, National relationship.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the Russo-Ukrainian War is becoming the most powerful conventional military attack after World War II. In the first two months, much heritage was destroyed. Attacks carried out by the Russian army caused damage to around 300 cultural heritage sites and artefacts (Green 2022).

Kievan Rus was the first eastern Slavic nation situated in what is now contemporary Kyiv, Ukraine (Ray 2015). Considering that the Kievan state's history is shared by current Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians, their existence as distinct peoples date back to the 12th century. Following the dissolution of Kievan Rus in 1240, parts of modern Ukraine were controlled by Lithuania, Poland, and Russia from the 14th through to the 18th century. The majority of Ukraine fell under Russian control in the 18th century (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2022).

In the Soviet period, Ukraine and Russia had solid ties in food production, manufacturing, and energy. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the West and Russia have been playing a game of "influence spheres" with Kyiv in the post-soviet environment, with the latter emerging victorious. The Russian government saw the situation as a security threat and actively encouraged Crimea's secession from Ukraine and subsequent affiliation with Russia, eventually invading and annexing Crimea in 2014. This became the start of the broader Russo-Ukrainian War.

## 2. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

In the post-soviet period, former Soviet Union citizens had to reconcile their personal and national identities, which resulted in the independence of multiple regimes in Russian surroundings. National identity building is an abstract process that mobilises symbolic features of ethnicity to represent personal identities (Campana 2006). Therefore, this paper will separately examine the valuation of identities in different areas of Ukraine and their relationships with Russia. The role of intangible heritage is considerably more related to identity awareness between Russia and Ukraine, especially in the Russo-Ukraine War. In this case, this paper aims to examine identities, to understand the factors that sculpt and shape the composition of Ukrainian and Russian identities and the factors that drive cultural identity development. It also aims to understand what distinguishes such identities against the broader geopolitical backdrop of the Russo-Ukrainian war and what has underpinned the cultural identities of Russia and Ukraine.

The extent of heritage and identity is relatively difficult to measure or calculate. However, it can be described. This research will profile the heritage identity of both Russia and Ukraine by exploring the history and historic relationships between the two nations. It concludes with arguments which identify the significance of heritage in both Russia and Ukraine. To help complement the research results, an expert on post-Soviet Russia has also been interviewed.

## 3. HISTORIC REVIEW

In the 12th and 13th centuries, Kievan Rus gradually disappeared, and two centres emerged in its territory. One was the Kingdom of Galicia–Volhynia in the southwest of Rus, and the other Vladimir-Suzdal in the northeast of Rus. In the 1320s, the Mongols invaded Eastern Europe, making the Vladimir-Suzdal Principality a vassal of the Golden Horde. As a result, in continuing political and cultural traditions, the Galicia–Volhynia Principality became a direct extension of Kievan Rus. It can be argued that this period was Ukraine’s entry into a territorial-cultural divide: Western Ukraine (i.e., Galicia–Volhynia) began to differ politically and culturally from the rest of Russia and Eastern Ukraine. The eastern part was gradually influenced by the Mongol Tatars more deeply, while the western part retained much of the political culture of ancient Rus (Hosseini 2005). In 1340, Poland invaded Galicia, which gradually reduced Ukraine to part of the Polish-Lithuanian Republic. It is important to note here that, in the above process, Western Ukraine, under Polish control, was a Catholic territory, and the opposition between Orthodox and Catholicism deepened the cultural-historical differences between Eastern and Western Ukraine (Czubatyj 1946).

In the spring of 1648, Ukrainian leader Bogdan Khmelnytsky launched a great uprising against Polish rule. After years of war without victory, the Ukrainian upper echelons, headed by Khmelnytskyi, unified with Russia to eliminate the Poles. In January 1654, the two sides signed the famous “Pereiaslav Agreement”, realising the merger. Although there is currently a heated debate between Russia and Ukraine about the purpose, content and results of the Pereiaslav Agreement, the basic fact that Ukraine became a part of Russia after the agreement cannot be denied. In January 1667, the Principality of Moscow and Poland signed the “Treaty of Andrusovo”, which officially placed Ukraine west of the Dnieper under Polish rule, while the east bank was assigned to Russia (Plokhly 2001). The territorial-political division of Ukraine at this time meant Ukrainian culture lost its unifying space, and Russia and Poland influenced Eastern and Western Ukraine, respectively, resulting in more and more cultural differences between the two sides.

In 1793, Russia divided Poland for the second time, and Ukraine on the west bank of the Dnieper (now Podolia, Volyn, Bratslav and Kyiv) was included in Russia. After Poland was partitioned for the third time in 1795, Russia controlled 80% of Ukraine’s land, but most of western Ukraine (now Lviv, Ternopil, Ivano-Frankivsk, Transcarpathian and Bukovina) remained outside the territory of Russia (Cienciala 2004). After the October Revolution of 1917, Poland occupied the Volyn and Rivne areas formerly held by Tsarist Russia, while the westernmost regions of Ukraine previously occupied by Austria-Hungary were under Polish, Czech, and Romanian control. On 1 September 1939, Germany invaded Poland. In mid-September, under the “Nazi-Soviet Pact”, the Soviet Union dispatched troops

to occupy eastern Poland, the westernmost part of what is now Ukraine, including Lviv and Volyn (Ray 2022). In 1945, under party leader Nikita Khrushchev, the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic incorporated almost all ethnic Ukrainian-majority regions into it. Khrushchev achieved the Ukrainian patriots' long-standing goal of creating a united Ukraine, but he pursued cultural assimilation with Russia, not the promotion of Ukrainian autonomy (BBC 2022).

## **4. REGIONAL ARGUMENTS BETWEEN RUSSIAN AND UKRAINIAN IDENTITIES**

### **4.1. East Ukraine**

Among the more than 46 million people in Ukraine today, ethnic Russians account for 17.3%, or about 8 million people. Most of them are concentrated in eastern and southern Ukraine. If the Soviet Union had not disintegrated, the Russian-Ukrainian integration that had lasted for 300 years would have continued to develop at a higher level in the eastern and southern parts of Ukraine. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union brought this process to an abrupt end. 300 years of Russification has resulted in a 20-50% usage of Russian in eastern Ukraine, especially in some south-eastern states. In the 1988-1989 census, 73% of Ukrainians declared themselves Ukrainian with 22% declaring themselves Russian (Shkolnikov 2011). In Crimea, which was only assigned to Ukraine in 1954, the proportion of Russians is as high as 58.5% and the native Russian-speaking residents reach 77% (2001 Ukrainian census data).

After independence, the newly recognised Ukrainian government implemented a series of measures to vigorously promote the Ukrainian language whilst restricting the use of Russian, which undoubtedly weakened the influence of Russian culture. However, large swathes of Russophone populations resided within these territories. After years of Russian-speaking residents struggling, the Ukrainian parliament passed a law granting regional language status to Russia as late as July 2012. The reality shows that the cultural inclinations of Eastern Ukraine influenced the political choices of the region's inhabitants (Guarro 2014). In short, historical-cultural differences have seriously affected the political preferences of the East and West.

### **4.2. West Ukraine**

At the end of the 18th century, after Russia merged with Ukraine on the west bank of the Dnieper River (excluding Galicia), the Polish landowners still retained their estates and status, still used Polish in official institutions and even many officials were still Polish. It was not until the Polish uprising in 1830 that the Russian government realised the "dangerousness" of Polish national consciousness and began to promote Russification in Ukraine on the west bank of the Dnieper (Wade 2022). However, Polish influence in Western Ukraine was already deeply entrenched. Although Western Ukraine had been annexed to Russia for more than 50 years at that time, governance there was almost still Polish, which made the Russification of Western Ukrainians unnoticeable (Mick 2022).

At the beginning of the First World War, the Russian army invaded the westernmost part of Ukraine, destroyed the Ukrainian society and culture in Galicia and exiled many nationalists to Siberia, completely removing Western Ukrainian people's goodwill towards Russia. The two world wars and Poland's Anti-Soviet tendencies sharply increased the antipathy towards Russia among the westernmost Ukrainians, coupled with their Western cultural environment which was completely different from that of Russia. All these have made many westernmost Ukrainians today feel very strongly about the Soviet Union-Russia. (Snyder 1999). After World War II, the Galicia region was incorporated into the Soviet Union. But there were no large numbers of Russians immigrating to the region, making it the "least Soviet" and "least Russian and least Russified" region of the territory. In short, the western part of today's western Ukraine is the most Europeanised part of Ukraine and the most misaligned with Russia culturally.

## 5. METHODOLOGY

The unique national relationship, and its development over the past hundreds of years contribute to the value of this research, which is the main reason for focusing on war as a case study. This ongoing war reflects multiple variables in heritage identities, making it a potential representation of other conflicts around disagreements of common heritage. This paper consists of a qualitative study of existing research and includes an interview with a specialist on Russia and the post-Soviet space who has amassed international experience in analysing the region across the private sector, both within governmental and academic contexts. The purpose of the interview is to gain a broader perspective on relevant topics in this field, so a small number of experts were asked to participate, with only one participating due to political reasons.

### 5.1. Qualitative Research

#### 5.1.1. Interview

The interview was designed with six questions and aims to obtain a professional overview of heritage, identities and related factors observed in secondary research on the Russo-Ukraine war.

The first question (Q1) is “What are your ideas surrounding the relationship between Russia and Ukraine?”. The purpose of this question is to provide a cursory overview of the historical and current trends observed in the interaction between Russia and Ukraine at political, cultural, and linguistic levels.

The second question (Q2) is “What are your opinions on the respective heritages of Russia and Ukraine?”. The purpose of this question is to distil the key features of these respective heritages with regards to how they overlap and areas of plausible distinction.

The third question is (Q3) “What is your opinion on Ukrainian nationalism and the impacts of Russification?”. The purpose of this is to generate a summary of the development of Russian and Ukrainian national identities in the imperial, Soviet and post-Soviet contexts and to describe how Russification has subsequently affected Ukrainian nationalism.

The fourth question is (Q4) “What is the positioning of conflicting identities in the wider Ukrainian cultural landscape?”. The purpose of this is to discuss distinct, Russophone and Ukrainian, identities across the East-West divide and to highlight the population of Russophones, both Russian and Ukrainian speakers, and the impact of these competing identities on Ukrainian society: Soviet and post-Soviet contexts.

The fifth question is (Q5) “What is Russian ‘identity’?”, the purpose of which is to describe the multi-ethnic composition of Russia that has been bound by politically unifying rhetoric espoused by the Russian state under Putin.

The final question is (Q6) “How do you think conflicting identities relate to heritage in the context of Russia and Ukraine?”, the purpose of which is to retrieve a professional opinion on this topic.

#### 5.1.2. Secondary resources

Secondary research consists of data collection in two parts by gathering news, scholarly works, and political comments. Firstly, the historic background of Russia and Ukraine is reviewed to summarise the syntheses in the literature review and connect them to the current Russo-Ukraine War. Then the contemporary interactions between Russia and Ukraine were underlined because these conflicts eventually turned into the Russo-Ukraine War which reflected the significance of national identities.

## 6. FINDINGS

### 6.1. The Language, Tradition and Literature – A Shared Heritage

History, geography, and culture all interact to produce community-defined preferences in the process of shaping aspirations (Dale 2021), so politicians start to consolidate their regimes through cultural invasion. As previously mentioned, the attempts at Polonization and Russification in the west and east Ukraine respectively both included the spreading of languages, leading to the emerging national identity of Ukraine. For example, the interviewee pointed out that “public discourse since the Maidan Revolution has been dominated by the increasing popularity of transitioning to the deliberate and often artificially installed usage of Ukrainian in daily life to demonstrate a rejection of Russia and the Russian language. This movement has been pervasive amongst the youth generations, who have leveraged traditional media and social medial platforms to reinforce it. A growing societal interest in Ukrainian culture and traditions has been observed against this backdrop”. Based on the answers of the interviewee in Q2, there is only a 60-70% similarity between the language, tradition and literature of Ukraine and Russia. Even though the interviewee believes that “in the Soviet context, the conflicting identities of first language (L1) and second language (L2) Russophones in Ukraine was not necessarily a significant issue within society”, he still emphasised that “Russian was the catalyst of social mobility, politics and culture” in his answer to Q3.

It is believed that language, tradition, and literature are the key external manifestations of identities in heritage (Fichte 2015 [1808]). Leaving aside the importance that Poland and Russia have placed on the use of language by Ukrainians in history, a representative example is the “independence” of Crimea, which is the result of its remarkable Russian identity that comes from 77% of citizens being first language Russian speakers. Regarding literature, “a clear split is observed in the glorification of Alexander Pushkin, perceived as the father of Russian literature, and Taras Shevchenko, whose literary heritage is considered to be the foundation of the modern Ukrainian language and literature” (Jiang 2022). Concerning traditions, the importance of a specific group to an individual’s life and overlapping social identities are a consequence of religion, as well as being motivated by a sense of belonging to a group (Shady 2021). As a result, religious identity provides an individual with the ability to distinguish who belongs and who does not within a territorial community (such as a nation-state). Eastern Orthodox Churches on that land played a critical role in mediaeval times, and eventually became a foundation for common national traditions and forms of literature between Russia and Ukraine, which “includes customs practised in accordance with religious holidays such as the butter festival Maslenitsa or intricately painted easter eggs to more general customs, such as the celebration of education on 1 September or the presentation of bread and salt to greet the arrival of guests” (Jiang 2022).

### 6.2. Derussification and Russification – Conflicts from Distinctive Heritage

Generally, the formation of empires (like the Soviet Union) led to the incorporation of weaker state societies (like Ukraine). In these territories, for instance, Russification played an important role in establishing other values, norms, and rules. As a result, there was a greater conflict between the old culture and the new state institutions (Lapin 2020). The interviewee’s answer to Q3 also evidenced that the Soviets (now Russians) promoted “the integration of non-Russian nationalities into the governments of individual Soviet republics and local languages in a range of areas, spanning government ministries, cultural institutions, and public life”. This furthered Russification, however Russian heritage and Ukrainian heritage are similar but not the same. Thus, such actions also intensified Derussification in Ukrainian regions. Cadge and Ecklund (2007) mentioned that “civic actions are generally voluntary, not aimed at reaping an economic profit, and are often concerned with improving some version of the common good”, which is an appropriate description of the Derussification movements among Ukrainian citizens.

However, as the interviewee claimed, “on a domestic level, Ukraine is a country that has become a victim of its demography, with a particularly high concentration of ethnically Russian “Ukrainians”

situated throughout the Eastern and Southern oblasts of the country” in response to Q1. The huge difference between East and West determined Ukraine’s struggle between the impacts of two different national-level cultural heritage and the preferences behind them. This coincides with the interviewee’s answer to Q3, that “Ukraine has been a conflicted nation, pulled in opposing directions by its demography”.

### **6.3. Heritage and its Identity in the Russo-Ukraine War**

“Russian identity” is considered a principal reason for the Russo-Ukraine War from a long-term view, and the interviewee summarised that “the multi-ethnic composition of Russia has been bound by politically unifying rhetoric espoused by the Russian state under both the Soviet era and Vladimir Putin. This has been a key element, which fuelled the Chechen wars, the nationwide acceptance of the annexation of Crimea and ultimately served as justification for the launch of the Russian “special military operation”, or invasion of Ukraine”. However, the terms of “Russian identity” and “Ukrainian identity” themselves cannot respond to any specific group of people which are usually used under multiple political, historic or economic conditions. This is because “the distinct perceptions of identity and heritage are sculpted by public discourse, which is in turn driven by the state-controlled information sphere” (Q5). In this case, the best way to review identities is via the perspective of heritage. For example, many studies have proved that religion, one of the most important elements of heritage, can be related to civic identities and practices (Cadge and Ecklund 2007).

At the national level, Putin has elevated the Russian identity issue. The historical reason for the existence of Russian identities in East Ukraine was used as a tool to embellish the cultural erosion from Russia. However, the connection between contemporary Russia and Ukraine was re-created after a period of national self-determination (Milligan 2022). Considering the Ukrainian government has put much effort into Ukrainian language education as opposed to Russian identities, the biggest challenge to Ukraine is to distinguish itself from Russia to build own national identity.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

### **7.1. The Valuation of Heritage and Identity**

After 300 years ruled by Russia, east Ukraine received the most Russification, which makes residents identify with Russian heritage, especially in religion, language, tradition, literature, and other contexts. However, west Ukraine and its nationalists have preserved their heritage. They also blame Russia for stealing Ukrainian heritage. The relationship between heritage and identity is a complex and multifaceted concept that is determined by such factors as history, culture, language, religion, politics and geography. This relationship can vary significantly from one country to another, as each country has a unique history, culture and social and political systems that have shaped its sense of identity and heritage.

### **7.2. The Significance of Shared and Distinctive Heritage**

Shared heritage refers to cultural practices, traditions and artefacts that are shared among multiple communities or societies. These practices and traditions may have been shared through cultural exchange, migration, or other forms of interaction. Shared heritage can also be shaped by common historical events or shared cultural practices that have been passed down over time. Alternatively, distinctive heritage refers to cultural practices, traditions and artefacts that are unique to a particular community or society.

In the context of Ukraine and Russia, it has been discussed how shared heritage, such as the history of the Eastern Orthodox communities, has contributed to the development of common national traditions and forms of literature between the two countries. However, it also needs to be noted that the cultural gap between eastern and western Ukraine has resulted in a struggle between two different national-level cultural heritages and the preferences for different identities. This suggests that both shared and distinctive heritage can coexist in the same society and can be shaped by a variety of factors,

including history, culture, language, religion, politics, and geography. In this study, religion is found to have a great deal to do with the sense of belonging to a group and the importance of it to an individual's life. Religion and nation-state development are historically rooted in the religious-based narrative defining national identity. For example, Mediaeval Eastern Orthodox communities played a crucial role in that region, eventually establishing common national traditions and forms of literature between Russia and Ukraine.

### 7.3. The Role of Heritage and Identity in Conflicts

In some cases, heritage, tangible or otherwise, can be used to create a sense of shared identity and belonging among a group, which can be used to mobilize people to support a cause or to fight for a shared goal. Heritage can also be used to differentiate one group from another and to create a sense of us versus them, which can further fuel conflict and war.

This relates to the significance of heritage and its importance to identities in the Russo-Ukraine War. Given the fact that various Ukrainian villages and towns host museums devoted to local lore, which store artefacts and pay tribute to the region's well-known artists, intellectuals and historical figures, the destruction of such tangible heritage sites is directly related to the destruction of Ukrainian intangible heritage such as language, literature, and art. Despite these assertions, Ukrainian cultural sites are targeted, indicating an internal recognition of the strong and distinct nature of the Ukrainian identity. During the destruction, however, both Russia and Ukraine are increasingly defining themselves in opposition to each other, which threatens the cultural affinity that remains between the two.

This means, in some cases, heritage can be used to justify or legitimize certain actions, such as the occupation of land or the control of resources. For example, a group may claim that they have a right to a particular piece of land based on their cultural or historical heritage, and this claim may be used to justify military action.

### 7.4. Limitations and Future Research

In this paper, there are some limitations, such as the specific ongoing Russo-Ukraine war within the desired geographical area, which may not provide a full understanding of the broader issue, and the fact that this is a politically sensitive topic related to national relationships. A consequence of the latter is that there is limited access to data that could be relevant to this study, which could impact the accuracy or completeness of the findings. For example, some interviewees refused to be interviewed and only one interviewee attended.

This study has also provided new insights and understanding into the topics of heritage and identity of Russia and Ukraine, and their roles in the Russian-Ukrainian war. However, further research can be improved by a more adequate scope, data, and time, and by comparing this situation with others conducted in different areas. It is thus expected that future research outcomes can be applied to a general concept of heritage with the precise discovery of identities and heritage.

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