



E-ISSN: 2664-603X

P-ISSN: 2664-6021

IJPSG 2024; 6(1): 379-386

[www.journalofpoliticalscience.com](http://www.journalofpoliticalscience.com)

Received: 21-01-2024

Accepted: 03-03-2024

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## Cultural fault lines in the Ukraine-Russia conflict

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.33545/26646021.2024.v6.i1e.606>

### Abstract

The Ukraine-Russia conflict, one of the most significant geopolitical crises of the 21st century, extends beyond political, economic, and strategic factors to deeper cultural, historical, and ideological divisions. This paper argues that the war is fundamentally a struggle for cultural hegemony and self-determination, shaped by issues of language, religion, historical memory, and national identity. Both nations trace their origins to Kievan Rus', yet Ukraine has long sought to distance itself from Russian influence. Ignoring these cultural dimensions marginalizes Ukraine's historical struggle for independence, reducing the conflict to mere geopolitics rather than a fight for national identity and sovereignty.

**Keywords:** Culture, language, historical memory, orthodox Christian Religion, national identity, self determination

### Introduction

As one of the most important geopolitical crises of the twenty-first century, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine has drawn international attention (Liu and Shu, 2023) <sup>[29]</sup>. It began in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea and has since increased with the ongoing battle in the Donbas region. Although a lot of analysis has concentrated on the conflict's political (Mearsheimer, 2014, Nye, 2022) <sup>[34, 39]</sup>, economic (Lawrence, 2022; Brennan, 2023), and strategic (Shaheen, 2023) <sup>[47]</sup> aspects, it is crucial to realise that the war is fundamentally based on cultural, historical, and ideological divides that have influenced the political landscapes and national identities of both Russia and Ukraine (Yekelchik, 2007) <sup>[56]</sup>.

Numerous cultural elements, including language (Hnatkevych, 1999, Shumlianskyi, 2010) <sup>[14, 51]</sup>, religion (Brylov *et al.*, 2023) <sup>[5]</sup>, historical memory (Lisova, 2006) <sup>[28]</sup>, and national identity (Szporluk, 2001, Shulman, 2004) <sup>[53, 50]</sup>, are at the heart of this dispute. By manipulating these factors to promote their positions and mobilise support, both Russia and Ukraine have transformed the war from a geographical dispute into a struggle for cultural hegemony and the right to self-determination.

Since the mediaeval Kievan Rus', which both countries claim as their cultural and historical forebear, Ukraine and Russia have had intricate and long-standing historical relations (Yakovenko, 2015) <sup>[55]</sup>. These relations have changed over the centuries, going through times of unification and separation, with Ukraine frequently stuck between more powerful nations like Russia, Poland, and the Ottoman Empire (von Hagen, 1995, Kubicek, 2008) <sup>[54, 22]</sup>.

The power struggle within the Ukrainian domestic political realm, where it seeks to eliminate Russian influence in its internal affairs, is marginalised when the cultural dimension of the war between Ukraine and Russia is ignored. While in one sense Ukraine's desire to stop Russian influence may be read as a struggle between a regional hegemon and a small power, this paper on the contrary argues that the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is a function of the cultural distinction between the Ukrainian and Russian population. In other words Ukrainian people see themselves as distinct from the Russians and therefore want to limit their influence. This claim is supported by historical research on the development of Ukrainian nationalism (Kiryukhin, 2015) <sup>[19]</sup>. Furthermore, ignoring the cultural dimensions of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict minimises the Ukrainian people's historical struggle to break free from Russian hegemony and establish themselves as a unique national entity that can exercise self-determination and independent foreign and domestic political decision-making.

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## Historical background

Early Russian and Ukrainian history is entwined, with both areas having a shared legacy that traces back to the Kievan Rus' (Yakovenko, 2015) <sup>[55]</sup>. The roots for the unique growth of both Russia and Ukraine in subsequent centuries were established during this early era. The establishment of the Kievan Rus', a loose confederation of Slavic tribes in the ninth century, marks the beginning of both Russia's and Ukraine's histories (Halperin, 2006) <sup>[13]</sup>. When Norse (Varangian) commanders like Rurik took control of the local Slavic tribes, the Kievan Rus' arose (Pritsak, 1977) <sup>[44]</sup>. The Primary Chronicle claims that after Rurik, his heir Oleg of Novgorod, relocated the capital to Kiev at the beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, establishing it as the federation's cultural and political hub (Lunt, 1988) <sup>[30]</sup>. Along the Dnieper River, Kiev grew into a strong city-state that dominated important commercial routes connecting Central Asia, Scandinavia, and the Byzantine Empire. As a result, the Kievan Rus' became a prosperous and powerful force in Eastern Europe, fostering economic development and cross-cultural interaction (Pritsak, 1977) <sup>[44]</sup>.

A significant turning point in the history of both Russia and Ukraine occurred in 988 when Grand Prince Vladimir of Kiev accepted Christianity from Byzantium (Putna, 2021) <sup>[45]</sup>. The evangelising of the Kievan Rus' established enduring connections with the Empire of Byzantium and brought its people together under a single religion. Numerous facets of Kievan culture and belief systems, were impacted by Orthodox Christianity. Additionally, it strengthened Kiev's position as one of Eastern Europe's principal Christian cities (Sevcenko, 1960) <sup>[46]</sup>.

By the 12th century, the Kievan Rus' had started to fall apart despite its early prosperity. The area experienced both external invasions, such as the Mongolian raids in the 13th century, and internal conflict, with competing rulers fighting for control (Kuznetsov, 2017) <sup>[23]</sup>. Following the Mongols' siege of Kiev in 1240, the city fell and the Kievan Rus' was dissolved. Kiev could not recover its previous position as a significant political hub, and the formerly United Kingdom it disintegrated into smaller principalities (Kuznetsov, 2017) <sup>[23]</sup>.

The Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Moscow's Ascent: The Kievan Rus' lands were split up among several regional powers following the decline of Kiev. The Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which covered a large portion of present-day Ukraine, incorporated many of the ancient Rus' territories in the west (Snyder, 2003) <sup>[52]</sup>. Up until the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Grand Duchy dominated most of Ukraine and grew to become a strong state in Eastern Europe (Snyder, 2003) <sup>[52]</sup>.

The Grand Duchy of Moscow (which would later be the Tsardom of Russia) started to gain prominence in the northeastern region of the old Kievan Rus'. Moscow grew quickly, steadily gaining control of the former Rus' lands (Kalb, 2015) <sup>[17]</sup>. Moscow had started to establish itself as the inheritor of the Kievan Rus' heritage by the middle of the fifteenth century, a move that would later help the Russian Empire grow (Kalb, 2015) <sup>[17]</sup>.

## Emergence of Ukrainian identity

Different cultural and political identities emerged in the Ukraine region throughout the Middle Ages. The Mongols, Lithuanians, Poles, and Ottomans were among the many peoples who invaded the areas that are now Ukraine (Yekelchik, 2007) <sup>[56]</sup>. Ukrainian identity, which differed from Russian identity because of various political, cultural,

and religious factors, was greatly influenced by this turbulent past (Snyder, 2003; Yekelchik, 2007) <sup>[52, 56]</sup>.

In short, the establishment of the Kievan Rus', the introduction of Christianity, and the ultimate disintegration of the state are the main themes of the common past of mediaeval Russia and Ukraine. As Russia and Ukraine evolved into separate political entities by modern times, Moscow and Lithuania would eventually play important roles in determining their futures (Yekelchik, 2007) <sup>[56]</sup>. According to Snyder (2003) <sup>[52]</sup>, the Kievan Rus' and early Slavic unity relate to a time in Eastern European history when the federation of Slavic tribes and princes known as the Kievan Rus' influenced the formation of a more cohesive political and cultural entity among the Slavic peoples. Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus eventually developed as a result of this early union.

An important early period in the history of Slavic unity was the Kievan Rus', which united several Slavic tribes under a single governmental and cultural umbrella. Through common cultural heritage, trade and religion, it promoted collaboration and integration even if it was not a centralised state in the contemporary sense (Likhachev, 1963) <sup>[27]</sup>. The cultural and theological connections between Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus are still influenced by the legacy of the Kievan Rus', which continues to be a fundamental aspect of their histories (Likhachev, 1963; Snyder, 2003; Yekelchik, 2007; Kalb, 2015) <sup>[27, 52, 56, 17]</sup>.

Ukraine claims that it is the successor state to the Kievan Rus' because of its location, cultural history, and the mediaeval state's legacy (Kalb, 2015) <sup>[17]</sup>. The subject is complicated, though, because Russia and Ukraine both claim to have descended from the Kievan Rus'. The Ukrainian viewpoint and the larger historical background are broken down as follows:

1. **Historical and geographical relations:** Ukrainians see themselves as direct successors to the Kievan Rus' because the region that was formerly the centre of the Kievan Rus' is now part of modern-day Ukraine (Yekelchik, 2007) <sup>[56]</sup>. This historical fact, where the area maintained cultural and theological ties to the former kingdom, is frequently the basis for the idea that Ukrainians are connected to the Kievan Rus' (Kalb, 2015) <sup>[17]</sup>.
2. **Religion and cultural relations:** Ukrainians place a strong emphasis on the Kievan Rus' religious and cultural continuity, especially the Grand Prince Vladimir's 988 conversion to Christianity (Mick, 2023) <sup>[36]</sup>. Even when the state broke up, the Orthodox Christian culture in Ukraine flourished because of the conversion of the Kievan Rus' (Denysenko, 2018) <sup>[10]</sup>. Ukrainian Orthodox Christianity's strong ties to the Byzantine Empire, which influenced the region's spiritual and cultural life, support the notion that Ukraine is the legitimate heir of the Kievan Rus' (Mick, 2023) <sup>[36]</sup>.
3. **Linguistic identity:** Additionally, Ukrainians contend that the history of the Kievan Rus' is the foundation of their unique cultural and linguistic identity (Mick, 2023) <sup>[36]</sup>. The Ukrainian language and identity progressively developed from this shared East Slavic history, even though the early Kievan Rus' was an ethnically diverse federation (Yekelchik, 2007) <sup>[56]</sup>. Many Ukrainians view the emergence of a distinct Ukrainian language and identity as an extension of the distinctive customs of the Kievan Rus', especially

during the times of Polish and Russian dominance (Al-Hafnawi, 2022) <sup>[1]</sup>. Ukrainian historical consciousness frequently supports the assertion by highlighting Kiev and the surrounding areas as the birthplace of East Slavic civilisation (Yekelchuk, 2007; Al-Hafnawi, 2022) <sup>[56, 1]</sup>.

4. **Russian assertion of the Kievan Rus' heritage:** Given the emergence of Moscow in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, Russia also asserts a connection to the Kievan Rus' (Halperin, 1980) <sup>[60]</sup>. The Grand Duchy of Moscow regarded itself as the heir to the Kievan Rus' and would ultimately inherit the Tsardom of Russia (Halperin, 1980) <sup>[60]</sup>. Another important player in this story was the Russian Orthodox Church, which had its headquarters in Moscow following the fall of Constantinople in 1453 (Hosking, 2021) <sup>[15]</sup>. Using the idea of the "Third Rome," Moscow presented itself as the legitimate inheritor of the political and Christian heritage of the Kievan Rus' (Cao, 2023) <sup>[6]</sup>.

### Contemporary political significance

Particularly in light of contemporary Ukrainian nationalism and its independence movement, the Ukrainian assertion to the Kievan Rus' has had political significance. The historical heritage of the Kievan Rus' was utilised to establish Ukraine's uniqueness from Russia during the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially after Ukraine attained independence in 1991 (Yekelchuk, 2007) <sup>[56]</sup>. As part of a larger Russian identity, the Russian Federation, on the other hand, has long attempted to minimise Ukrainian versions of the history of the Kievan Rus' (Mick, 2023) <sup>[36]</sup>.

Given the current conflicts between Russia and Ukraine, there is a continuing discussion on the historical significance of the Kievan Rus' (Mick, 2023) <sup>[36]</sup>. Russia frequently highlights the historical and cultural similarities between the Russian state and the Kievan Rus', contending that Ukraine's claim to this heritage is an effort to disassociate itself from Russia (Mick, 2023) <sup>[36]</sup>. However, because Kiev was the political and cultural hub of the mediaeval empire, Ukrainians claim that their nationality and ancestral roots are in the core of the Kievan Rus'.

In summary, Ukraine believes that it is the legitimate heir to the tradition of the Kievan Rus', and its claim to the region is founded on historical, cultural, and physical continuity. Russia, which also had roots in the same mediaeval state, disputes this assertion (Mick, 2023) <sup>[36]</sup>. The argument is a significant topic in current Ukrainian-Russian relations since it is closely related to national identity and the political context of the post-Soviet area (Szporluk, 2001; Mick, 2023) <sup>[53, 36]</sup>.

### Language, Russification and Ukrainisation

One of the main causes of the cultural difficulties between Russia and Ukraine has been language. Russian dominance was strengthened by the Russification policies of the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire, which aimed to repress Ukrainian culture and language (Yekelchuk, 2007) <sup>[56]</sup>. Nonetheless, Ukrainian nationalism and the Ukrainian language as a symbol of freedom were revived after the Soviet Union fell apart in 1991 (Zhurzhenko, 2002) <sup>[57]</sup>. With language policy in Ukraine turning into a hot spot in the conflict, especially in the eastern areas where Russian is the primary language, this linguistic division has further widened in recent years (Zhurzhenko, 2002) <sup>[57]</sup>.

Despite sharing historical roots and being members of the East Slavic language group, Russian and Ukrainian have notable linguistic distinctions. Although having similar East Slavic ancestry, Russian and Ukrainian have different vocabularies, sounds, grammar, and writing styles that are influenced by their own histories and cultures (Farmer, 1978) <sup>[11]</sup>. These distinctions are significant enough to make Ukrainian and Russian, particularly when spoken, understandable to one another.

As a symbol of identity, political allegiance, and regional alignment, language is vital to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine (Kubicek, 2008) <sup>[22]</sup>. Given that Ukrainian and Russian are the two primary languages spoken in Ukraine, the country's linguistic landscape is complicated, and the conflict has politicised and weaponised this complexity (Poftak and Shykula, 2022) <sup>[41]</sup>. The following are some ways that language has affected and heightened the conflict between Russia and Ukraine:

#### 1. Language use as a marker of national sovereignty:

There was an effort to restore Ukrainian as the main national language following Ukraine's 1991 independence from the Soviet Union (Kubicek, 2008) <sup>[22]</sup>. Ukrainian is a representation of Ukraine's independence as well as its historical and cultural distance from Russia (Kubicek, 2008) <sup>[22]</sup>. Promoting Ukrainian is sometimes thought to increase Ukrainian pride and lessen dependency on Russia.

On the other hand, the extensive usage of Russian, especially in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, is occasionally seen as a sign of Russian cultural influence and a holdover from Soviet administration (Poftak and Shykula, 2022) <sup>[41]</sup>. The use of Russian reminds some Ukrainians of years of forced assimilation and Russification programs under the USSR and the Russian Empire (Motyl, 2022) <sup>[38]</sup>.

#### 2. Political allegiance along the regional linguistic division:

While Kyiv and Lviv are primarily Ukrainian-speaking, the eastern and southern parts of Ukraine, which include places like Donetsk, Luhansk, and Crimea, have a sizable Russian-speaking population (Arel, 2017) <sup>[2]</sup>. Political actors have used this linguistic split to construct narratives of cultural division, frequently portraying Ukrainian speakers as more pro-EU and Russian speakers as more pro-Russian (Arel, 2017) <sup>[2]</sup>.

In Ukraine, political parties have occasionally made language a campaign issue. While some pro-Russian or neutral parties support bilingualism or more rights for Russian speakers, pro-European parties usually highlight Ukrainian as the official language (Korduban, 2012) <sup>[20]</sup>. As a result, language has become a divisive political symbol that influences party loyalty and voter choices.

#### 3. National language legislations:

Ukraine has enacted a number of language regulations in recent years to encourage the use of Ukrainian in government, media, and education (Arel, 2017) <sup>[2]</sup>. For example, a law passed in 2019 required, with limited exceptions, that Ukrainian be spoken in all public institutions, including businesses and schools (Denber, 2022) <sup>[8]</sup>. Critics say it limits the rights of individual languages and marginalises Russian speakers, while supporters say it helps preserve Ukraine's uniqueness and sovereignty (Polityuk, 2019) <sup>[42]</sup>.

In response, Russia has said that Ukraine discriminates against Russian speakers, claiming that the language restrictions are an assault on Russian heritage and culture. The Russian invasion and occupation of Crimea, where Russian is the primary language, and Russian support for separatist groups in the Donbas region have both been justified using this rhetoric (Matviyishyn, 2020) <sup>[33]</sup>. Russia now uses "protecting Russian speakers" as a major justification for its intervention in Ukraine (Matviyishyn, 2020) <sup>[33]</sup>.

#### 4. Using language as a cover for military action:

Russia's intervention in Ukraine has been justified by the defence of Russian-speaking communities. Russia specifically used this justification to back the separatist areas in the Donbas and to annex Crimea in 2014 (Matviyishyn, 2020; Motyl, 2022) <sup>[33, 38]</sup>. The Russian government asserts its right to intervene by portraying Russian speakers as an oppressed minority in Ukraine and claiming a kind of "ethnic kinship" with Ukrainians who speak Russian (Matviyishyn, 2020) <sup>[33]</sup>.

The notion that Ukrainian nationalism posed a threat to Russian speakers was one of the grounds on which Russia claimed to be "denazifying" Ukraine in its 2022 invasion (Motyl, 2022) <sup>[38]</sup>. By using language as a symbol of purported cultural persecution, the "denazification" rhetoric frames the Ukrainian government's support for the use of the Ukrainian language as fascist or extreme (Motyl, 2022) <sup>[38]</sup>.

Language serves as a sign of identity, allegiance, and resistance in the Ukraine-Russia conflict, in addition to being a tool for communication. Russian frequently denotes historical ties to Russia, but Ukrainian symbolises a dedication to national sovereignty and cultural independence. Linguistic identity continues to be crucial to the political and interpersonal aspects of the war as both sides utilise language to further their narratives.

### Religion

Another important factor in the cultural foundations of the conflict is religion. Given that both religions symbolise both national and spiritual identities, the split between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church is a reflection of larger geopolitical conflicts (Morina and Wilson, 2022) <sup>[37]</sup>. An important cultural and political event that increased relations between the two countries was the 2018 decision to grant autocephaly to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which broke away from the Moscow Patriarchate (Morina and Wilson, 2022) <sup>[37]</sup>. Despite its complexity, religion is a major factor in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. In both nations, national identity, historical narratives, and geopolitical allegiances have been intricately entwined with religious identities and institutions.

#### 1. Ukrainian religious institutions post soviet union:

Orthodox believers in Ukraine were heavily influenced by the Moscow Patriarchate until recently. As a result of Moscow's dominance in the area, the Russian Orthodox Church had authority over several Orthodox parishes in Ukraine (Mamo, 2021) <sup>[31]</sup>. In reaction to the fall of the Soviet Union and the growing desire for Ukrainian independence, an autonomous Orthodox church was founded in 1992 (Masci, 2019) <sup>[32]</sup>.

However, the Moscow Patriarchate opposed it, claiming that Ukraine was under its jurisdiction, and it was not formally recognised throughout the Orthodox Christian world (Liik *et al.*, 2019) <sup>[26]</sup>.

The Kyiv Patriarchate and other autonomous Orthodox communities were merged into the new Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) in 2019 after the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople formally acknowledged the independence, or "autocephaly," of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (Liik *et al.*, 2019) <sup>[26]</sup>. Many Ukrainians applauded this recognition as a major step in securing their national and religious independence from Russia, and it dealt a serious blow to Moscow's power over Ukraine (Liik *et al.*, 2019) <sup>[26]</sup>.

**2. Religion, identity and political allegiance:** Russian nationalism and the state have long been associated with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in Russia. The concept of a "Russian World" (Russkiy Mir), which presents Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus as culturally and spiritually unified under Orthodoxy, is frequently promoted by the ROC (Mamo, 2021) <sup>[31]</sup>. By presenting its intervention in Ukraine as a defence of Orthodox unity, this ideological framework has helped Russia justify its actions (Mamo, 2021) <sup>[31]</sup>.

Religious autonomy from Moscow is seen by many Ukrainians as a sign of their cultural and political independence. The OCU's establishment and Constantinople's acknowledgement of its independence were hailed as acts of resistance to Russian hegemony (Morina and Wilson, 2022) <sup>[37]</sup>. Instead of Moscow's geopolitical interests, Ukrainian Orthodox believers now have a church that supports their country's goals (Liik *et al.*, 2019) <sup>[26]</sup>.

**3. Russian orthodox church:** The Russian Orthodox Church frequently backs the Kremlin's policies and has a close relationship with it. The ROC's backing of Russia's actions in Ukraine, which it frames as a defence of Orthodox principles against what it calls Western moral degeneration, is indicative of this partnership (Morina and Wilson, 2022) <sup>[37]</sup>. Moscow's patriarch Kirill has even called the conflict in Ukraine a spiritual battle, arguing that it is essential to preserving Orthodox culture (Liik *et al.*, 2019) <sup>[26]</sup>.

Patriarch Kirill has backed the notion that Ukraine is a part of the "Russian World," which is a moral and cultural unity. The distinction between religious mission and political rationale is further blurred by this ideological stance, which is consistent with Putin's claims that Ukraine has historically been a part of Russia (Morina and Wilson, 2022) <sup>[37]</sup>.

#### 4. Religious differences and the Russia-Ukraine conflict:

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has exacerbated religious tensions across the country. Some Ukrainians see the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which is associated with the Moscow Patriarchate, as a tool of Russian influence, which has led to criticism and suspicion (Denysenko, 2023) <sup>[10]</sup>. Some of its dioceses have publicly supported Ukraine's resistance to the invasion, while others have announced their independence from Moscow (Denysenko, 2023) <sup>[10]</sup>.

The Ukrainian government has been putting more and more pressure on the Moscow Patriarchate's Ukrainian Orthodox Church because it believes it is encouraging pro-Russian

attitudes. Investigations have been conducted against church leaders suspected of aiding Russian invasion, and congregations have occasionally shifted their allegiance to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (Denysenko, 2023) <sup>[10]</sup>.

Religion has been a significant, albeit indirect, factor in the conflict and is ingrained in both Russia's and Ukraine's national and cultural identities. Because of its close ties to the Kremlin, the Russian Orthodox Church has been able to use the war as a religious defense of Orthodox unity and justify Russian engagement in Ukraine. On the other hand, Ukraine's pursuit of religious autonomy has coincided with its political self-determination; the establishment of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine is a notable act of resistance against Russian influence. As a result, this religious aspect has increased tensions, represented conflicting national identities, and given the conflicts nuanced reasons a moral and spiritual undertone.

### Historical memory

Another important component of the conflict's cultural underpinnings is historical memory. Both sides have cited conflicting accounts of events like the Holodomor (Kasyanov, 2010) <sup>[18]</sup>, World War II, and the Soviet legacy to buttress their claims and mobilise supporters. It is challenging to create reconciliation and mutual understanding since these historical grievances still have an impact on current cultural issues. Long-standing, opposing narratives about the Holodomor, World War II, and the legacy of the Soviet era exist between Russia and Ukraine. Below is a summary of these divergent opinions:

**1. Views on the holodomor famine:** Ukraine considers the Holodomor of 1932-1933, a terrible famine, to be a premeditated genocide organised by Joseph Stalin's regime against Ukrainians (Kasyanov, 2010) <sup>[18]</sup>. Millions perished in the famine, which left rural populations starving after a large portion of Ukraine's grain was forcibly seized and sold. According to this perspective, the goal of Soviet measures was to crush Ukrainian nationalism and any possible opposition to Soviet rule (Kasyanov, 2010) <sup>[18]</sup>. Ukraine formally declared the Holodomor to be genocide in 2006, and many other nations agree.

The idea that the Holodomor was a genocide is rejected by Russia. The Russian position on the Holodomor is clearly outlined in a letter from then-Russian President Dmitry Medvedev to Ukrainian President Viktor Andreyovich Yushchenko, which describes the Ukrainian view of the crisis as a "distortion" of historical facts (Medvedev, 2008) <sup>[35]</sup>. The Russian government acknowledges the sorrow of the famine but blames it on agricultural mismanagement and wider Soviet policies that impacted Kazakhstan and portions of Russia. Moscow contends that the famine was a result of Soviet collectivisation efforts gone awry rather than a deliberate assault against Ukrainians. According to Medvedev (2008) <sup>[35]</sup>, Russia's official position minimises any particular intention to hurt Ukrainians.

**2. Memories of World War II:** Many Ukrainians have two different perspectives on World War II (Zhurzhenko, 2011) <sup>[58]</sup>. On the one hand, millions of Ukrainians served in the Soviet Army and lost their lives during the Nazi invasion of Ukraine. On the other hand, both Nazi and Soviet troops brutally occupied

and oppressed Ukraine (Zhurzhenko, 2011) <sup>[58]</sup>. Despite their complicated and frequently contentious history, Ukrainian nationalists especially those connected to organisations like the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) are occasionally celebrated as freedom warriors who fought for liberation from both Nazi and Soviet rule (Zhurzhenko, 2011; Garner, 2022) <sup>[58, 12]</sup>. This point of view recognises the importance of Ukrainian resistance movements and emphasises the sacrifices made by Ukrainians for their independence.

A fundamental component of Russian pride and identity is the Great Patriotic War, also known as World War II (Garner, 2022) <sup>[12]</sup>. Russia celebrates the Soviet Red Army as liberators and highlights the USSR's role in defeating Nazi Germany (Osipian, 2020) <sup>[40]</sup>. Ukrainian nationalist organisations are frequently accused of war crimes against ethnic Russians and Poles by Russian authorities, who see them as Nazi collaborators. Russia's narrative minimises or denounces Ukrainian nationalist movements that opposed Soviet control, primarily presenting the USSR's actions in Ukraine as a component of a larger liberation effort (Osipian, 2020; Garner, 2022) <sup>[40, 12]</sup>.

**3. Perception on the soviet legacy:** Ukraine's wish to disassociate itself from persecution during the Soviet era has a significant influence on its post-Soviet identity (Zhurzhenko, 2011) <sup>[58]</sup>. For many Ukrainians, Soviet authority was a time of suppressed national sovereignty, forced Russification, and cultural repression. Following its independence in 1991, Ukraine has experienced a great deal of "decommunisation," which includes dismantling monuments and symbols from the Soviet era, promoting the Ukrainian language, and examining atrocities committed during that time (Shevel, 2014) <sup>[48]</sup>. Ukraine asserts its claim to an autonomous identity by framing its Soviet past as one of cultural repression and domination.

The Soviet Union is frequently portrayed in Russia's narrative as a common historical accomplishment that prioritises unification, industrial advancement, and the dissemination of socialist principles (Kramer, 2020) <sup>[21]</sup>. Decommunisation initiatives in Ukraine are criticised by Russian officials as erasing a shared past and disdaining people who helped the Soviet Union win (Chervonenko, 2022) <sup>[7]</sup>. Russia views the USSR as a stabilising influence that advanced social progress and economic growth throughout the union. Therefore, Russia's strategy is to present Soviet history in a favourable light by arguing that the USSR's actions were necessary to promote Soviet unity and modernise the area (Kramer, 2020) <sup>[21]</sup>.

The larger geopolitical conflicts between Russia and Ukraine are mostly centred on these divergent narratives. Ukraine prioritises sovereignty and historical injustices in its efforts to forge an identity free from Russian influence. In the meantime, Russia's perspective emphasises solidarity, triumph, and shared history in an effort to preserve the Soviet Union's legacy. These opposing viewpoints still influence relations between Russia and Ukraine, making diplomatic attempts more difficult and escalating the region's ongoing war.

### Conclusion

The cultural dimensions of the Ukraine-Russia relations are often overlooked by the scholars studying the ongoing

conflict between Ukraine and Russia. The difference in the cultural marker of the community highlights the Ukrainian desire to have a national future free from the influence of Russia. The cultural factors have shaped the Ukrainian identity and nationalism and, in the process, are reconstructed in a manner that is distinct from Russian culture. Ukrainian nationalism has its roots in the mid-19th century, when nationalism grew in Eastern Europe. Ukrainian nationalism has been shaped by its desire for independence, resistance to foreign domination, and relation to Russian identity (Kiryukhin, 2015) <sup>[19]</sup>. In contrast, Russian nationalism has increasingly embraced the concept of the "Russian World" (Russkiy, Mir), which views Ukraine as an integral part of a broader Russian civilisation (Jilge, 2016) <sup>[16]</sup>. These competing nationalisms have led to ideological clashes, particularly in the post-Soviet era, as Ukraine has sought closer ties with the West, while Russia has attempted to maintain its influence over its neighbour. Analysts studying the Ukraine-Russia conflict often overlook its cultural dimension. Such an analysis gives a misconstrued understanding of the conflict where the primary cause is thought to be originating externally to the parties in conflict. For instance, Western intervention in Ukrainian politics and NATO expansion has been often understood as the primary cause of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. A closer examination of the cultural factors involved however highlights the tension already prevalent in the Ukraine-Russian relation, the detest towards, and a desire of Ukraine to move out of the Russian sphere of influence. In simple words, it was not NATO or the West that created this crisis; rather, this was already in the making since the mid-nineteenth century, and Ukraine sought Western help to shed off Russian control on its politics. Therefore, even if West had not intervened Russia-Ukraine relation was already strained and a future war was inevitable.

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