Why Ukraine Fights

By Tamar Jacoby

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ONE OF THE MOST POPULAR MEMES circulating on Ukrainian social media in the past year used an image, first popularized on Russian social media, of a grotesque creature with the body of a fish and the snout of a pig—a *shvino karas,* or pig fish. "A few decades ago, almost all Ukrainian popular culture was derivative of something Russian," online meme curator and web developer Bohdan Andrieiev, 32, explained. "Before independence and for more than a decade afterward, we had no popular culture of our own." This has changed dramatically in recent years, culminating in a burst of new Ukrainian creativity since the Russian invasion in February 2022. Social media, meme culture, pop music, and viral jokes have emerged as powerful tools of national solidarity—the bottom-up, ironic Ukrainian equivalent of old-style totalitarian propaganda.

According to Andrieiev, virtually none of this new popular culture draws on Russian sources—that's now widely seen as inappropriate. "But this is an exception," he said, "because we're inverting the reference. It's like the word 'queer.' What was a slur is now a badge of pride. Russians call Ukrainians pigs and pig fish and look down on us. But if we're so pathetic, how come we're beating them on the battlefield?"

Even after a year of intensive media coverage of the war in Ukraine, it's easy to forget how new the Ukrainian nation is. In 1987, when Ronald Reagan admonished Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to "tear down this wall," Ukraine was still part of the Soviet Union—the rough political equivalent of a U.S. state. Ukrainians had their own language and folk traditions and there had been a few short-lived attempts over the years to form a Ukrainian government. But not until 1991 did Ukrainians establish an independent nation—and even then, the shadow of the Soviet Union hung heavily over the new country, both politically and culturally.

Well into the twenty-first century, many global companies seeking to reach the Ukrainian market did so from headquarters in Moscow. Most news organizations kept their bureaus in the Russian capital, traveling to Ukraine only occasionally to cover unexpected

developments. Russian publishers controlled 90 percent of the Ukrainian book market. Even a decade ago, it was all but impossible to buy a Ukrainian-language book in Kyiv. As late as 2022, virtually all the Ukrainian elite—including four of five former presidents, the top military leadership, and most of their business elites, including the richest oligarchs—used Russian as their only or primary language. The leading pop-music radio station was called Radio Russia; Kyiv had to impose quotas to ensure it played at least some Ukrainian music along with imported Russian fare. Perhaps most insidious, according to many Ukrainians, was what some call the "Russians in our heads."

"A whole generation of people had absorbed the Russian belief that Ukraine was nothing but a Russian appendage," Andrieiev explained, "a Russian province and part of the Russian cultural sphere."

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Ukrainians had been working for 30 years to unravel these colonial ties and break free of Russian influence, but the process accelerated sharply after the February invasion. Thousands of people—15 to 20 percent of the population, according to some estimates—have switched their everyday language from Russian to Ukrainian. Schools across the country have stopped teaching Russian literature. Statues of Russian writers have been toppled in hundreds of cities and towns. Ukraine's parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, passed legislation banning pro-Russian political parties. And President Volodymyr Zelensky has proposed outlawing the branch of the Orthodox Church that answers to a patriarch in Moscow.

It's hard not to be impressed by Ukrainians' patriotism and solidarity—the way millions of ordinary people have mobilized to support the war and changed even deep-seated personal habits to help forge a new national consciousness. "This year my family realized we had a choice," university student Vitalii Lylyk explained. "We could celebrate Christmas the way we and our ancestors have always celebrated it, on the Russian date in January. Or we could break away from the enemy—our old enemy—and do as Europe does, celebrating in December." According to one survey conducted just before the holiday last year, as many as four in ten Ukrainians may have celebrated Christmas in December—for Lylyk's family and others, a heartfelt nod to the West.

But other trends—laws banning books or political parties, outlawing a church—can be harder for liberal-minded outsiders to understand.

ONE OF THE WORDS that comes up most often when Ukrainians explain what's happening to their country is "decolonization."

"We need to rid ourselves of our poisonous postcolonial mentality," said one 40-something professional who asked not to be quoted by name. "Banning books—why not? What's 'too far' about that? Those books are filled with a toxic imperialist message that Ukrainians are a lesser breed."

This conversation about culture is often suffused with anger. "When people are dying every day, when cities are being leveled, [Russian writers] Pushkin and Bulgakov are not neutral anymore," historian Andrii Portnov argued. "They're part of the game. They're fair game." And although there are dissenters—Ukrainians who question or seek to slow some of the

changes under way—support for breaking with the Russian past falls somewhere between a super super-majority and universal.

"There are no debates now, no need for discussion," high school math teacher Olena Bondurchuk told me. Although raised in a Russian-speaking family and married to a Russian speaker, she says it now "disgusts" her to hear the language of her childhood. "We didn't need a parent's council to decide to ban Russian instruction in our school," she said. "Enough is enough—everybody gets it."

Gradually, then all of a sudden

WHAT USED TO BE CALLED "de-communization," now "de-russification" or sometimes "Ukrainization," isn't new.

Even after centuries of Russian and then Soviet domination, not everyone in Ukraine wanted a clean break when Kyiv declared independence from Moscow in 1991. On the contrary, the coalition that engineered the split drew more or less equally on democratic nationalists and pro-Soviet elites looking for a way to hold on to power even as the Soviet Union collapsed.

The 1991 constitution enshrined the principle of civic nationalism—that anyone who lived in Ukrainian territory could be a citizen of the new nation. "My father was born near Moscow," historian Portnov recalled. "He spoke no Ukrainian. He knew nothing about Ukraine's past or its historic longing for independence. But he lived in Dnipro—so he was automatically a citizen." Still, according to many, the split between pro-Western Ukrainians and post-Soviet Ukrainians persisted for decades.

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The decade after independence brought a first, tentative wave of de-communization. Marxist ideology was stripped out of school and university curricula. Some busts of Lenin and other Soviet leaders were removed from public spaces. But many other monuments to Russia were not dismantled, and the Russian language remained dominant in political circles. Many educated Ukrainians were functionally bilingual, using Russian and Ukrainian interchangeably as the situation required. "But for the first 15 years after independence, language remained a marker of political identity," novelist and public intellectual Oksana Forostyna recalls. "If you spoke Ukrainian, you probably opposed the [Russia-friendly] regime in Kyiv."

The pro-democracy Euromaidan protests of 2013 and 2014 brought a second burst of change. More Lenin statues were toppled. Pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovych was deposed and driven out of Ukraine. But once again, as in the 1991 constitution, the focus was on universal liberal values, not Ukrainian nationalism.

The Maidan protesters spoke both Russian and Ukrainian. The huge crowds that poured into the streets included people from every social class and every region of the country, including the eastern provinces that had historically been most loyal to Russia. Among the changes Forostyna remembers most clearly: Language was no longer a marker of political identity. The Maidan protesters, looking west and clamoring to join Europe, championed what she called a "new, liquid identity," polyglot and inclusive.

Even after Maidan and Russia's 2014 invasion of Crimea and Donbas, the two cultures, Russian and Ukrainian, remained deeply intertwined, often in complex, ambiguous ways. "There was a constant blending and blurring," Andrieiev, the blogger, explained. "You could be a Ukrainian-speaking patriot and still quote Russian writers, listen to Russian music and have friends and relatives in Russia. But already in the wake of Maidan, more and more people began searching for a more distinctly Ukrainian identity."

Fast forward to 2022, and that trickle has become a flood. What once seemed acceptable—the old cultural blending and blurring—is now seen as intolerable. The overwhelming majority of Ukrainians want to sever all ties to Russia. And as often as not, the change has been bottom-up—with the government following from behind to endorse or codify popular will.

Language

FOR MANY PEOPLE, THE FIRST STEP is language. The Russian and Ukrainian languages evolved from the same Slavonic roots, and both are written in the Cyrillic alphabet. But they are distinctly different—less than two-thirds of the two vocabularies overlap. And the language spoken in the territory that is now Ukraine has been a *casus belli* for centuries.

Russian invaders burned Ukrainian books in the 1620s. Nineteenth-century tsarist rulers banned the use of Ukrainian in print and theaters. For much of modern history, Ukrainian was a language spoken primarily in the countryside: In 1917, only one-fifth of Kyivans claimed it as their mother tongue. When the Bolsheviks arrived in 1918 and 1919, they changed Ukrainian street signs, outlawed the teaching of Ukrainian in schools and shot people heard speaking Ukrainian in the streets.

After World War II, the Soviets brought millions of ethnic Russians to Ukraine to rebuild shattered industries. Ukrainian peasants who moved to the cities in those years often adopted Russian to distance themselves from their rural roots. Even after independence, Russia remained the language of culture and official business. And many Ukrainians still remember the days when they used one language at home and another in shops and offices. Forostyna recalls being reprimanded sharply when she spoke Ukrainian in a grocery store in downtown Kyiv in the late 1990s. "Can't you speak like a normal person?" a disdainful clerk scolded her.

Yet things were gradually changing. As recently as 2012, more than 40 percent of Ukrainians told pollsters that their native language was Russian. By 2021, that number had dropped to 21 percent. In 2014, not quite half said they thought Ukrainian should be designated as the state language. By 2021, that share had grown to nearly two-thirds. Six months after the full-scale invasion, the number jumped to 85 percent, and hundreds of thousands of adults switched to speaking primarily or exclusively Ukrainian—for many, a language they had rarely used before the war.

"It's hard in the beginning, but you get used to it," explained one young professional I met in a restaurant. The friend he was dining with said just the opposite. "It was fun at first," the second man joked, "a kind of adventure. But then I realized I was making a change for the rest of my life, and I understood—the real shift won't come until the next generation."

Still, even now, even as the war rages and more and more people switch languages, most Ukrainians accept that they are a bilingual nation: Polls show that fewer than 15 percent hold negative views of their countrymen who continue to speak Russian.

Literature and monuments

KYIV SCHOOL NUMBER 157 SERVES some 1,500 elementary and high school students in the residential district of Obolon. Although many families in the neighborhood speak Russian at home, no teacher uses Russian in the school building and all instruction is in Ukrainian. Yet according to principal Tetyana Yermak, the far more important shift of the last decade has involved Russian literature. "After all," she explained, "the books children read will determine what kind of nation we are in the future."

The shift away from Russian literature began decades ago at School 157. Even before the Maidan protests, the foreign literature teacher started hearing questions from parents about why so much of her curriculum—well over half—was made up of Russian books. The school's first response was to add rather than subtract. Teachers offered extra hours of literature instruction highlighting Ukrainian writers. There were Ukrainian poetry readings and weekend festivals, then a summer camp and student clubs. But when foreign literature teachers from other schools began echoing parents' concerns, School 157 took a more decisive step: cutting Russian books out of the curriculum.

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There were a few complaints at first from parents baffled by what they saw as a rejection of classic literature. But the school moved slowly, removing just a few books a year and adding other foreign works—Shakespeare, Goethe, Mark Twain, among others, and recently, at a students' request, Harry Potter. By the time the ministry of education issued guidelines on Russian literature last summer—the government offered lists of acceptable and unacceptable works, including Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, recommended for removal because of its "praise" for the Russian army—School 157 had already excised all Russian books. "We weren't forced," principal Yermak maintains. "This was a decision by the teachers. And since the full-scale invasion, there have been no complaints from parents."

The debate about Russian literature is ongoing outside the classroom, as cities and towns across Ukraine reconsider the names of streets and remove statues from public spaces. Targets for renaming and removal include anything commemorating Russian writers— Pushkin, Lermontov, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Bulgakov, among others—but also scientists, generals, astronauts, and other Russian and Soviet heroes.

One count, last August, suggested that Kyiv alone had renamed hundreds of streets and a handful of metro stations. An expert council at the ministry of culture and information policy tries to ensure that renamings and removals are considered and aligned with official guidelines. Surveys suggest that public opinion is more favorable in some parts of the country than others. But enthusiasm for removing the traces of Russian rule runs strong nationwide—between roughly 60 and 75 percent of the public agrees with it, depending on the poll.

Surprising, perhaps, to many Westerners, writers, teachers, and public intellectuals have been among the staunchest supporters of the trend. It was the National Writers Union that launched a campaign calling for closure of the Kyiv museum dedicated to writer Mikhail Bulgakov. PEN Ukraine led the coalition of writers' groups that demanded a total boycott of Russian books—no more "online or offline distribution of books by Russian authors"—not just in Ukraine but worldwide.

I didn't know what to think of this at first, and it gave me pause. No Russian books available anywhere to anyone? No Tolstoy, no Dostoyevsky, no Chekhov even? No distinctions

between writers? But as I spoke with Ukrainians—intellectuals, teachers, students, and others—I came to feel it wasn't my place to judge. My family hadn't lived through centuries of colonial domination, and I didn't know anyone fighting on the front or struggling to survive in an occupied city.

"It's not about literature or poetry," essayist Forostyna explained. "It's about power dynamics. Why did we read Pushkin in every grade? Why is there a Pushkin statue in every Ukrainian city? It's a way of saying, 'We are here, this is Russian.' It's a symbol of who is the boss here."

Minister of culture and information policy Oleksandr Tkachenko agreed. "These statues and street names are weapons of war," he argued, "a way to mark the territory as the territory of Russia or the Soviet Union." Philosopher Volodymyr Yermolenko took the argument one step further. "If you put statues of Pushkin everywhere," he said, "you don't put local writers or local heroes. We need to do much more to shine a light on Ukrainian heroes."

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Many statue topplings go all but unnoticed except on social media. A government announcement appears on a chat channel in the morning, a small crowd gathers, and at the appointed hour, a crane pulls the monument apart to cheers and laughter from passersby. Other demolitions are more hotly debated. Among the most contested and revealing in the past year was the dismantling of the statue of Catherine the Great that once stood in the central square of Odesa.

Tsarina Catherine II—it was she who originally conquered and annexed Ukrainian territory for the Russian empire—was revered by the Russians who ruled Ukraine from the eighteenth century until the Bolshevik Revolution. Yet the Victorian statue honoring Catherine in Odesa survived less than 20 years. When the Bolsheviks took power, they replaced it with a monument to the revolutionary sailors of the battleship *Potemkin*.

After Ukrainian independence, at a peak of anti-Soviet sentiment, the city council of Odesa voted to restore the empress. The *Potemkin* monument was removed, and a replica of the old statue was erected in the square. But the protests began almost immediately—a decade of demonstrations and court cases by Ukrainians who believed that the Russian Federation would be no less a threat than Catherine the Great or the Soviet Union had been to their country. The slogan, scrawled on the statue and elsewhere across Ukraine was "Ekaterina = Putin."

The opposition finally caught fire this spring. The protests escalated. A petition to remove the statue garnered 25,000 signatures. But the rule of law held—there was no mob action.

The ministry of culture's council considered the case and then recommended that the monument be dismantled. President Zelensky weighed in last summer, appealing to the Odesa city council. But the mayor of Odesa refused, and it wasn't until the city council voted to override the mayor that the statue was removed and stored in a museum, where it awaits further deliberation about its future.

"Everything was done according to legislation and proper procedure, with robust public debate," culture minister Tkachenko emphasizes. "And the point is that more and more

Ukrainians, even in once Russian-leaning parts of the country, understand what's wrong with Russia's imperial ideology."

Recycling books

WHAT MIGHT BE the hardest step for liberal-minded Westerners to countenance is the destruction of Russian-language books now taking place across Ukraine. Schools no longer need their Russian textbooks. Libraries are removing volumes from their shelves; the public library in Dnipro has taken 20,000 Russian-language books out of circulation. And even many individuals seem moved to get the offending objects out of their homes.

Syaivo Books is an elegant old institution in downtown Kyiv, a book lovers' bookstore, with dark wooden shelves and a hushed atmosphere. Customers began calling last summer when the store reopened after the battle of Kyiv, asking what they should do with the Russian books they no longer wanted. At first, staff say, they weren't sure how to respond. They understood it could disturb some people to see a bookstore destroying books. But when they ran up a trial balloon, posting on Facebook and Instagram that they could "help customers solve a problem," the floodgates opened.

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Some people sent boxes of books by mail or package delivery service. Others drove up in taxis filled with shopping bags. Older customers often stopped by repeatedly, bringing a few books at a time. Several Kyiv businesses and a military unit sent shipments. Eventually, a humanitarian aid volunteer with a military van began driving around the city picking books up from customers' homes.

In the first six months, the shop collected nearly 3,500 Russian-language books—everything from *HTML for Dummies* to Soviet encyclopedias and well-thumbed Russian literary classics. The volunteer picks them up from the shop and transports them to a compactor, then sells the rolls of compacted pulp to local paper plants. Among the end products: cardboard boxes, egg cartons, and sometimes new books. All proceeds go to the Ukrainian military, and customers who bring in Russian books get a 10 percent discount on the purchase of new Ukrainian books.

Moscow has compared Syaivo's recycling to Nazi book burnings; bookshop staff shrug off the accusation. "We aren't forcing anyone," a spokesperson said. "We're responding to popular demand." Other Ukrainians play down the significance of the initiative. "They're recycling books," philosopher Yermolenko argues. "What's the harm? It's a normal rebalancing. Ninety percent of the books in Ukrainian homes and libraries are Russian books or Soviet books. Until recently, many Ukrainians didn't even know you could buy Ukrainian-language books."

No one I asked about the project seemed particularly concerned. "These books are full of awful ideas," a clerk in the bookstore argued, "that Russia is indivisible and Ukraine doesn't exist. We see now just where those ideas can lead—why would Ukrainians want to read those books?"

Wartime popular culture

A NEW POPULAR CULTURE has burst on the scene in Ukraine over the past year, and it is a strange mix of classic Ukrainian humor—acerbic, ironic, bittersweet—with fervent, unironic patriotism. Within weeks of the invasion, Radio Russia was renamed Radio Bayraktar—homage to the Turkish-made drones that helped Ukraine prevail in the first months of the war. There is no longer a need for quotas—no one wants to hear Russian music, and most of the new hits, all of them sung in Ukrainian, celebrate the war and the soldiers fighting on the front lines. So too the viral jokes, which seem to spread instantaneously on social media.

Some of the jokes and slogans are so well known that they've become a kind of new national folklore. The Snake Island soldier who shouted, "Russian warship, go fuck yourself," has been commemorated on a postage stamp that sold out the week it went on sale. Those who didn't get a stamp have had to make do with t-shirts emblazoned with the image, and they are everywhere. Even small children can reel off the call signs of famous martyred heroes. Young and old alike use wartime slang popularized by social media. Russians are "orcs," an explosion in Russian-controlled territory is "cotton." And virtually everyone can talk at length about the value and threat posed by a dozen different kinds of missiles.

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Other jokes are more obscure, off-color, and filled with references meaningful only to Ukrainians. Popular memes often draw on Ukrainian history. One that circulated last fall began with an innocent joke about the difference between men and women and ended, just three frames later, evoking the 1918 Battle of Kruty—a kind of Ukrainian Alamo that killed some 4,000 men who stood up to invading Bolsheviks. "We're not afraid to die for freedom," the meme text proclaims. "Long live free Ukraine and its soldiers." I asked blogger Andrieiev and his co-curator Boruh Feldman why the tragic history came coupled with a childish joke. "What you don't understand," Feldman laughed, "is that it's funny—really funny. It's the only way to get through the war—laughing in the face of death."

Also popular: traditional patriotic songs. More than 500 years of longing for an independent nation have produced a powerful repertoire known to virtually all Ukrainians, and people, young and old, don't hesitate to break into song—in bars, in their homes, and at demonstrations, including the courageous, spontaneous protests that erupted last spring in the occupied city of Kherson.

Looking into the future

MUCH OF THIS POP CULTURE is ephemeral—a mirror of a nation at war. And as the fighting continues, it's impossible to predict where current trends will lead. "Every war brings a need to rethink political culture and ideology," said historian Portnov. "We don't know how Ukraine will reimagine itself when the fighting is over."

Could the impulses shaped in the pressure cooker of war—the communal sense of sacrifice, the righteous anger, the power of a shared narrative—go too far as Ukrainians press to eliminate the "Russians in their heads"? None of the intellectuals I spoke to in Ukraine seemed worried about that prospect. On the contrary, all were confident that Ukraine could combine a patriotic push for decolonization with pluralism and inclusive civic nationalism.

Father Andrii Nahirniak, director of services at Caritas Ukraine, made an argument based on law and foreign precedent. "The changes taking place now need not interfere with pluralism," he said. "Most countries, including European countries, have an official language and an established church. Pluralism can still function within those bounds." Others made an empirical case based on demography. "Ethnic nationalism isn't on the table," Forostyna explained. "It never has been. Because of demographics—our multilingual, multicultural, multiethnic demographics."

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Philosopher Yermolenko agreed. "Pluralism is still expanding in Ukraine," he maintained. "Of course, there are limits when it involves Russia or Russians. The question is whether this nationalism with regard to Russia will open the way to a broader, far-right nationalism. But so far I don't see that—no sign at all." Indeed, the word "nationalism" seemed to rub many Ukrainians the wrong way, as if it had no positive patriotic meaning and pointed only to distasteful ethnic chauvinism, which is something most of the people I spoke with acknowledge but claimed exists only on the fringes of the Ukrainian political debate.

Nothing is certain, of course. Much will depend on how long the fighting lasts and how warmly Europe embraces Ukraine after the war. But the best hope for the future starts with Ukraine's historic national identity—an identity forged long before independence in a poor, scrappy colonial territory fighting off an authoritarian, imperialist neighbor.

The key elements of this identity are a long, albeit uneven, experience with ethnic pluralism, an ingrained egalitarianism, deep distrust of authority, and now, after 30 years of independence and a brutal war, a fierce longing to join democratic Europe. This, every bit as much as land, is what Ukrainians are fighting for.

Still, in the end, as Ukrainians know all too well from past efforts to break away from Russia, winning the peace may prove as difficult as winning the war. What kind of country will emerge in Ukraine when the fighting stops? How will the political culture and national identity be reshaped by war?

"The serious debates haven't started yet," Oksana Forostyna conceded. "This is not a good time to ask unpleasant questions. But sooner or later, we will have to."

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