



The war Russia is waging against Ukraine is not just about bombs and bullets, writes Joseph E Fallon. Words, and the images they conjure, are used by Russia to justify their aggression and Ukraine to reinforce its independence, identity and resistance.

In his May 2023 Victory Day speech, President Putin reiterated claims of the West "unleashing war against Russia" after "forgetting who defeated the Nazis" and "creating a new cult of Naziism" Russia's perspective justifies some countries in avoiding taking sides and evading or ignoring Western sanctions, reducing their effectiveness.

My enemy's enemy may be my friend. However, the narrative that Western governments and media have chosen to disseminate is often close to that propagated by some Ukrainian extreme nationalists. People in the West and elsewhere, therefore, may see the Russian-Ukrainian war "through a glass darkly" giving them "a distorted or incomplete perception of reality."

These Ukrainian ultra nationalists include admirers of Stephan Bandera and his 1940 splinter group from the 1929 Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, who were allies of Nazi Germany during World War II, including active involvement in pogroms and the Holocaust. Their call for the reconquest of Crimea and Donbass, echoed by President Zelensky, is unthinkingly accepted by many in the West, even if their Nazi symbols, Swastika, Sonnenrad, and SS insignias, are not. But for them the two, the call and the symbols, are inseparable.

On March 5, 2022, at the start of the war, NBC noted "Ukraine has a genuine Nazi problem â€" both past and present...it would be a dangerous oversight to deny Ukraine's antisemitic history and collaboration with Hitler's Nazis, as well as the latter-day embrace of neo-Nazi factions in some quarters".

As expatriate Ukrainian journalist Lev Golikin wrote in *The Nation* on February 22, 2019, since the U.S. sponsored the 2014 "Maidan Revolution" Ukraine has witnessed "...neo-Nazi pogroms against the Roma, rampant attacks on feminists and LGBT groups, book bans, and state-sponsored glorification of Nazi collaborators..."

The war has encouraged hardliners, who some believe successfully prevented President Zelensky from implementing the 2015 Minsk II peace accord with Russia up to the eve of war, to extend their influence inside his government. They openly display their ideology online without fear of reprisal from Kyiv. On April 18, 2023, actor Mark Hamill of *Star Wars* posted a video on Twitter in which he "chatted up Ukrainian soldiers without realizing that one of the groups had a Nazi flag in the background...The video was originally posted on UP24's Twitter page, which was spearheaded by President Volodymyr Zelensky as a means to capture the hearts and minds of sympathetic people around the globe".

What does history tell us?

Recent excavations north of Dnipro show that over 4,500 years ago, in the early bronze age, there were pastoral clans on the vast sparsely populated steppe, long before Ukraine and Russia existed as countries or created written languages. Nationalist activists view these kurgan burial mounds as an untouchable mark of Ukrainian identity

Often it is claimed that a Ukrainian nation state existed as far back as Kievan Rus. Flourishing from the 9th to 13th centuries AD, Kievan Rus was a vast state in Eastern Europe stretching from the White Sea in the north to the Black Sea in the south. According to Rus' Primary Chronicle compiled in 1113 AD, contrary to extremists' claims, Kievan Rus was founded by Vikings, not proto-Ukrainians. (Hence, it is argued, the name Russia)

Russia and Belarus also claim political and religious descent from Kievan Rus. Of these three states, only Russia existed before the 20th Century - from the 15th Century onward as the Grand Duchy of Moscow, then from 1721 onward as the Russian Empire.

Historically, Ukraine was the borderland of rival empires – Poles, Ottomans and Russians.

Eventually annexed by Russia, it was region in which the local population sought to maintain as much autonomy as political circumstances would allow.

As the Russian Empire was crumbling in 1917, an independent state was established in western Ukraine with the aid of Germany. Independence lasted from 1918 to 1921 when the state fell to Lenin's Red Army. Lenin then expanded Ukraine's borders to the east, incorporated Ukraine into the Soviet Union, and fostered a Ukrainian national identity, "national in form, socialist in content," for his enlarged Ukraine. Lenin promoted "a comprehensive state-sponsored programme of 'nation-building'...Nation-building consisted of assigning to each officially recognized national minority its own territory (however small), developing a unified and standardized national language whether or not one had previously existed."

With the 1939 Hitler-Stalin Pact, Stalin expanded Ukraine's borders to the west, annexing eastern Galicia and Volhynia from Poland. In 1945 he expanded the borders to the southwest annexing Transcarpathia from Czechoslovakia.

An independent Ukrainian state did not reappear again until August 24, 1991, when the Soviet Union was unravelling. But that a Ukrainian state has not existed as long as France or Russia or Sweden is irrelevant. Length of a state's existence is not a basis for political legitimacy. Nor is a claimed historical continuity with a previous state. There are countries which cannot claim a historic connection to a prior state, but are legitimate, nonetheless. At one time they did not exist, then they did. Canada did not exist as a unitary country before 1867. The United States did not exist before 1783 (and even then as a much smaller entity than it now is).

Nor is political legitimacy derived from international recognition. The Soviet Union was established in 1922 and functioned as an independent state even though it was not recognized by the United States until 1933. The Peoples Republic of China was founded in 1949 but not recognized by the United Nations until 1971; and not recognized by the United States until 1979. No country has recognized the Republic of Somaliland but it has functioned as an independent state since 1991. On the other hand, Yemen, Libya, and Haiti are all recognized as independent states although no effective governments exist in those countries.

Perhaps surprisingly, after President Xi spoke to President Zelensky, China issued a statement calling for respect for "the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of all countries, regardless of whether they are weak or strong." China does not recognise Russia's annexation of Crimea.

Political legitimacy is derived solely from the ability of a given community to establish and maintain an independent state - politically, economically, and militarily - within its claimed borders. This is something that Ukraine has manifestly managed to do over the bulk of its claimed territory.

The central issue in the Russian-Ukrainian War is not the legitimacy of a Ukrainian nation, or a Ukrainian state, but the legitimacy of that state's 1991 Soviet borders, which are the legacies of Lenin and Stalin. "Freezing in place" to resolve border disputes has been a central tenet of the European Union since its inception. This may yet be an issue for Ukraine's ambition to join the EU (in addition to its catastrophically low comparative GDP)

But as Anatol Lieven has written "Whatever happens, by far the greater part of Ukraine will now be aligned with the West and deeply hostile to Russia. This reverses the pattern of almost 400 years of Russian-Ukrainian history and represents a crushing defeat for Russia."

Societal implications

Although Ukrainian has been the sole official language of the state since 1997, there is a substantial proportion of Russian-speakers (such as in Crimea and the annexed regions of Luhansk and Donbas)

But according to detailed surveys conducted by the Institute of Political and Ethnic Studies at Ukraine's National Academy of Sciences in 2012, 2017 and 2022, there has been what is described as "a really drastic increase" of the use of Ukrainian in the previously largely Russian-speaking south and east of the country. In 2012, only about 10% of those in the south and east spoke Ukrainian as their language of convenience. By summer 2022, that had risen to more than 70%.

In 2012, more than 25% of those in the south and east of Ukraine regarded Russian as their "native" language. But now that figure is down to 6%.

With the war other extreme nationalist goals have become echoed in official state policy. On February 17, 2023, Weekly Blitz reported "Since February last year, the Ukrainian authorities have launched a broad campaign of 'de-Russification'. The Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council once again spoke out sharply against the use of the Russian language in the country, saying that it 'should disappear from the territory of Ukraine in general,' and English and Ukrainian should be mandatory."

Under the tsars, Russian was the language of officialdom, education and indeed culture. Publishing literature in Ukrainian was outlawed from the mid-19th century. But after the October revolution of 1917, a lively avant garde, Ukrainian-language literary scene sprang up in Kharkiv.

However, from 1933 onwards the novelists, poets, journalists and playwrights of this brief modernist flowering were brutally suppressed. Hundreds of writers were shot, deported, or sent to the gulag; others took their own lives. These trailblazing writers – the focus of the city's Literary Museum – are known as Ukraine's "executed renaissance".

Culture was again an early target for bombardment by Russia. In the first few weeks of the war, the theatre at Mariupol was reduced to a shell, with stark pictures circulating internationally. The attack was classified as a war crime by the Organization for Security and Co-operation and Amnesty International. Possibly in response, the Ukrainian Ministry of Culture published new guidelines advising libraries and cultural institutions to purge Russian-language books and Russian literature from their collections."

The Ukrainian language is being modified to differentiate it from Russian as much as possible to help enhance Ukraine's sense of national identity. In March 2022, Ukrainian President Zelensky asked the world to "discard the outdated Soviet spelling of our cities and adopt the correct Ukrainian form."

According to "Ukrainian language experts...distinctions between Russian and Ukrainian spellings and pronunciations, particularly of cities, are vital to recognizing the two countries as separate..."

Yet, "Vitaly Chernetsky, a Ukrainian-born professor in the Department of Slavic and Eurasian Languages and Literatures at the University of Kansas, says most Ukrainians don't mind that

Polish has its own names for cities in neighbouring countries – including Kyiv, which Poland ruled in the 16th century and which Poles still spell Kijów.

Nevertheless, the Ukrainian Government wants – and much of the international community has gone along with - "Kiev" becoming "Kyiv" "Kharkov" became "Kharkiv", "Lugansk" became "Luhansk." And "Lvov" becomes "Lviv." Until the Poles return to "Lviv," a possibility should Ukraine lose the war, and officially restore the Polish spelling "Lwow."

There is also a call to change the alphabet used for writing Ukrainian from Cyrillic to Latin script. In a 2021 interview with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, an organization funded by the U.S. Congress, the Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine, Oleksiy Danilov stated, "we need to get rid of the Cyrillic alphabet and switch to the Latin alphabet" Kazakhstan embarked on a similar 7 year programme in 2017, while Belarus has moved the other way, printing Christian books in what's called Polish Cyrillic

On February 17, 2023, a petition was registered on the Ukrainian President's website "demanding the translation of the Ukrainian alphabet from Cyrillic to Latin." The petition must garner 25,000 signatures within 90 days – the legal threshold - to be considered by the President.

There are of course states that border one another, share the same language, same alphabet and do not fear this undermines their national identities - Germany and Austria, Chile and Argentina, Ireland and the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States to name a few.

In March 2023, after another petition calling for officially renaming Russia "Muscovy" also received the required 25,000 signatures, President Zelensky instructed his Prime Minister to consider renaming Russia "Muscovy," Russian "Muscovite" and the Russian Federation "Muscovite Federation." "The change would take place in all government and educational documents."

The justification according to the petition is "the name 'Muscovy'" appeared "on many historical maps of the 16th-19th centuries". By that logic, Ukraine should be renamed "Galicia" as that is the designation for the region that appears on many 16th -18th century maps.

Changes in spelling, in alphabet must surely be the prerogative of government and people. But renaming Russia, designating Russian art as Ukrainian, banning Russian literature, music, and place names, removal of busts of Pushkin from cities, Odessa removing the statute of Catherine the Great, founder of the city; these are acts of nihilism, not nationalism.

They are examples of the "memory hole" prominent in George Orwell's dystopia, 1984 - "...changing evidence and historical facts that conflict with the Party's agenda."

They are expressions of insecurity, uncertainty and self-doubt as to the collective identity. They evoke the daily two Minute Hate session in 1984 where the public "loudly voice their hatred for the enemy...the political purpose to...allow the citizens...to vent their existential anguish."

There are fears that Ukrainian extremists have successfully applied the strategy of 20th Century Italian Marxist theorist, Antonio Gramsci. They have made "the long march through the institutions - subverting a society by infiltrating and influencing its key cultural and political institutions."

By such means, extremists attempt not just to rewrite history and change alphabets but alter demographics to ensure a permanent transformation. Proposals that a Ukrainian military victory should be followed by expulsion of Russian-speakers from Ukraine would enshrine the ultra nationalist concept of Ukrainian national identity. There's precedent - and a thirst for vengeance.

In 1944, ethnic cleansing and cultural genocide ordered by Stalin saw at least 191,044 Crimean Tartars deported, mostly to the Uzbek SSR, several thousand kilometres away.

Also in 1944, Poles were 67 percent of Lviv/Lvov/Lwow's population until expelled by the Ukrainians.

On 17 March 2023, as part of its investigation, the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for President Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova, Russian Commissioner for Children's

Rights, alleging responsibility for the unlawful deportation and transfer of children during the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Mass deportations are recognised as war crimes. Article 49, first para, 1949 Geneva Convention IV, provides "Individual or mass forcible transfers, as well as deportations of protected persons from occupied territory..... to that of any other country.....are prohibited, regardless of their motive."

So such proposals have wider consequences. If implemented without punishment, they would re-establish precedents for what actions are considered legitimate for a state to take against a defeated foe. If a victorious Ukraine can expel Russians from Ukraine; then a victorious Russia can expel Ukrainians from Ukrainian territory annexed by Russia, or validate deportations that have already happened.

Presented for the consideration of Ukrainian extreme nationalists and their Western promoters: Be careful for what you wish; you just might get it.

Just not the way you want.

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