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DIPARTIMENTO DI STUDI INTERNAZIONALI,  
GIURIDICI E STORICO-POLITICI

# NAD

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**Why Ukrainians Resist.  
Historical Memory, Civic Identity, Political  
Independence**

*A. Vitale*

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## **Why Ukrainians Resist. Historical Memory, Civic Identity, Political Independence**

*Alessandro Vitale \**

### *Abstract*

What are the motivations that support Ukrainians' strenuous and unexpected resistance to the invasion, which began in 2014, of their republic? For many political observers, journalists, researchers and scholars, the Ukrainians' tenacity, courage, and determination remain little or not fully understandable to this day. In reality, the reasons for that tenacity are many. However, the main has been and continues to be the opportunity, in the thirty years of Independence, to discover one's own history, both from the period of the Russian and the Soviet Empires. Ukraine's history has been difficult, punctuated with long denied, counterfeited, and obscured tragedies. Its discovery is the most important reason that supports the will to resist today. What is taking place today thus is the intensification of a centuries-long process of de-colonization that not only affects the ethnic Ukrainian component, but also becomes an attempt to block the way for the return of autocratic and totalitarian rule that threatens to overwhelm a fragile civic nation in the making for the past 30 years.

*Keywords:* Ukraine – Ukraine's independence – Ukraine's history - Russian invasion of 2022 – Self-government.

**SOMMARIO:** 1. Foreword. Why Ukrainians Resist. 2. An Intensifying Process of De-colonization. 3. Thirty Years of Discovering a Denied History. 4. The Discovery of Ukraine's History in the Soviet Period. 5. Conclusions.

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«The noblest of all wars is the one that a people fight on their own soil, for independence and freedom».

Carl von Clausewitz

«I admire those who resist, who made the verb “resist” their flesh, sweat, blood, and those who proved without great gestures, that it is possible to live and live standing up, even in the most difficult of times».

Luis Sepúlveda

## 1. Foreword. Why Ukrainians Resist

Several political observers, journalists, and scholars continue to wonder, more than a year after the Russian invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022, where the tenacity, courage, and strength shown by Ukrainians in fighting and dying to defend their country’s independence comes from.

Almost everyone expected a rapid territorial conquest, the dismissal of the ruling President and his escape<sup>1</sup>, the capitulation and surrender of an entire people to the dominator, stronger and armed with the “right to conquer” (of force), certainly not such, unexpected resistance. But this belief soon proved to be completely groundless. Only the lack of knowledge and reflection on Ukrainian history of the last centuries and particularly that of the last 30 years could have generated such an expectation.

A year after the invasion, nearly 90 percent of Ukrainians, most of them Russian speaking, said they would continue to fight, even in the extreme case of a nuclear attack.<sup>2</sup> That means continuing to resist *usque ad effusionem sanguinis*, without limit, to defeat and annihilate the invader. The general mobilization of all men in Ukraine seemed in the West to be an excessive prevarication, especially because of the disproportionate nature of the forces. However, the multiplication of volunteers participating in the conflict, including thousands of women not obliged to take up arms, showed that the willingness to fight and die for independence was not a product of “state” choices.

Such firm motivation is proving not only that we are not faced with a “nonexistent nation,” as the Kremlin would have it, but also that Ukraine is not that “divided country” between East and West, as has long been described by much journalism. This strong motivation, furthermore, which has forced the Russian leadership to relinquish control of most of Ukraine, cannot derive only from the desire to regain territories annexed by the neighboring power or those invaded and conquered by force<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> In Washington from the beginning the US Administration did not believe in a possible Ukrainian resistance: this is demonstrated by the immediate offer of political asylum to the Ukrainian President. Which shows, among other things, the total unreadiness of a plan to counter the possible invasion.

<sup>2</sup> *Munich Security Index in Ukraine*, 2023: <https://securityconference.org/en/publications/munich-security-report-2023/spotlight-ukraine/> See also: <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-society/3669412-almost-90-of-ukrainians-ready-to-continue-fighting-off-russian-aggression-poll.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it is nonsensical to believe that the Ukrainian President should consider, as a leader, whether to save as many Ukrainians as possible or to continue the resistance against invasion to keep as much Ukrainian territory united as possible, as on the contrary argues J. Shapiro, *L’Ucraina si prepara a una nuova partizione*, in *Domino*, No. 1, 2022, 20. It makes no sense because resistance aims to prevent first of

Although powerful, the long ties to one's homeland are not enough to explain this tremendous force of resistance, which will still have important consequences in the future as it continues to grow more powerful. There must be something much deeper, even more decisive than those motivations that had led to Ukrainian political Independence on December 1st, 1991, when more than 90 percent of the population had voted for it<sup>4</sup>.

## 2. *An Intensifying Process of De-colonization*

The invasion of independent Ukraine intensified and accelerated pushes toward the overthrow, already begun in 1991, of a centuries-long process of imperial colonization.

Both in practice and in the consciences of the Ukrainian population, the de-colonization of vast subjugated regions and assimilated populations through even violent processes of de-nationalization has now become an indispensable priority.

Imperial, Russian and Soviet colonization has long aimed not only at subjugating and erasing Ukrainian national identity (using arbitrary definitions, such as “little Russians,” – a word, however, which also possesses a more neutral administrative and religious meaning<sup>5</sup> – “inferior people,” “Ukrainian language dialect of Russian,” etc.), but also at

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all new imperial and colonial subjugation. Moreover, breaking the resistance does not mean containing losses, as research on the democides and genocides of the twentieth century committed in peacetime has clearly shown. See R. J. Rummel, *Death by Government*, Transaction Publishers, 1994; R. J. Rummel, *Statistics of democide*, School of Law, University of Virginia, Transaction Publishers, 1997. The choice to continue the struggle for territorial reasons (following a kind of “territorial trap”: J. Agnew, *The Territorial Trap: the Geographical Assumptions of International Relations Theory in Review of International Political Economy*, No. 1, 1994, 53-80) is instead apparent. In fact, reclaiming territory is instrumental: it means saving lives and population from an already known rule.

<sup>4</sup> Even Russians who were present in Ukraine in 1991 could no longer tolerate the Kremlin's policies. The Ukrainian declaration of independence on August 24, 1991, was recognized by the RSFSR. Dissident Ukrainians' relations with Russian human rights activists had lasted since the 1970s. The referendum on maintaining the Union (March 17, 1991), still used today as an example to contend with the legitimacy of the independence of the former Soviet republics, was an absolute farce, according to the testimony of the Russians themselves, who denounced it in many fora, until the August coup. All of this contrasts with Kremlin propaganda, which has sought to combat any Ukrainian motivation for political independence. A. Vitale, *The Reasons for Ukraine's Independence*, in P. Bocale, D. Brigadoi (Eds.), *Minorities in the Post-Soviet Space Thirty Years After the Dissolution of the USSR*, cit., No. 14, 284. The protection of pluralism had become evident with the recognition of Ukrainian citizenship to all residents in December 1991. The republic did not want to turn into an ethnic state that discriminated against minorities. In addition, all Ukrainian popular movements of the past three decades have been linked to a civic patriotism, citizenship, and not to an ethnic conception of the nation. A. Graziosi, *L'Ucraina e Putin, tra storia e ideologia*, Laterza, 2022, 43; G. Lami, *L'Ucraina in 100 date. Dalla Rus' di Kyiv ai nostri giorni*, Della Porta, 2022, 16. A patriotism even more stimulated today by the Russian invasion. Kremlin policy has tried in vain to divide Ukrainians along linguistic, regional, and ethnic fault lines, achieving the opposite effect. In fact, Ukrainian society in its near totality has compacted around the idea of a multilingual and multicultural nation united administratively and politically. S. Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe. A History of Ukraine*, Basic Books, 2021 (Ital. Translation, Mondadori, 2022, 478).

<sup>5</sup> «The *intelligencija* of the nineteenth century perceived more and more clearly the presence, on the fringes of the imperial territory, of various peripheries characterized by their own cultural traits, and of “exotic” spaces clearly distinguishable from the purely Great-Russian cultural milieu. In other words, Russian thought could gradually perceive the existence of various “Inner Easts.” At this stage, Russian culture, in the wake of Herderian Romanticism, was in search of folklorically intact lands: in this view, even Little-Russia represented an exotic land, the “sweet noon of Muscovy”». A. Franco, *Popolazione e colonizzazione nella Siberia in età zarista (fine Ottocento-inizio Novecento)*, in *Studi Slavistici* VIII, 2011,



preventing the formation of a “civic nation”<sup>6</sup> composed of multiple ethnic groups who now identify themselves as an integral part of the independent Ukraine.

The Ukrainian struggle for independence is now more than ever anti-colonial and anti-imperial. A civic identity – as thousands of Ukrainians who are ethnically Russian or who feel Ukrainian even though they speak Russian, exasperated by the destruction of Russian-speaking cities such as Kharkiv, which had suffered no ethnic discrimination in the past thirty years, participate in fighting the invader – emerges from the upheavals of the past and the violent aggression of the present. A multi-ethnic but increasingly “Ukrainian” civic identity, which feels endangered, as the attack is no longer just against an ethnic group, but against an entire people and its composite cultural heritage, threatened by a war of annihilation (and certainly not a war “between states”), which has targeted not just an ethnic nation but a “civic” nation as a whole (even ethnic Russians and Russian speakers who feel they are Ukrainian citizens), with atrocities and violence stemming from a continuation of the twentieth century.

The massive historical work of excavation conducted in Ukraine over the past three decades has enabled Ukrainians to learn about the most dramatic stages of their history, long deliberately concealed. Much more than had been possible in 1991, the impressive collection of data and reflection on Russian and Soviet imperial domination, as in the joining of the pieces of a puzzle that is still painfully being pieced together, over the thirty years of political independence have strengthened the determination toward decolonization, the reappropriation of their cultural heritage and the firm resistance to any attempt to return to past dominations.

In these thirty years Ukrainians have become aware that they have suffered from a history of centuries of imperial colonization, which has repeatedly attempted to subjugate or even erase them (first with the Tsarist imperial decrees and then with the *slijanje nacij*, the “fusion of nationalities” already in the very nutshell of Lenin’s political projects). The rediscovery of language, harshly persecuted for four hundred years, is only the tip of the iceberg of this anti-colonial cultural renaissance, which can no longer bear to see its own culture considered “minor” or “without history”.

Examining even just the history of the twentieth century, Ukraine suffered, much more intensely than the other former Soviet republics, an assimilationist onslaught unparalleled in human history and planned phenomena of “deportation-repopulation,” an “ethnocultural dilution” that transformed it into a new region subjected to the erosion of its original cultures. Ukrainian culture was compressed and marginalized as a result, as

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61-78.

<sup>6</sup> With Independence in 1991, a civic ideal of citizenship and a non-ethnic project of nationhood were consolidated, which entailed a progressive acceptance of diversity and a marginalization of purely ethnonational projects and aspects. A. Graziosi, *L’Ucraina e Putin, tra storia e ideologia*, cit., 28, 33). It has been significant the participation of Russian-speaking Ukrainians or Ukrainian citizen Russians in the Orange Revolution of 2004. At that time, an aggregate of people with different ethnonational characteristics recognized themselves as a “people”, endowed with constituent power and resulting from an act of breaking an existing constituted political-territorial order, regardless of whether or not they had a common history. The same occurred with the participation of Russian speakers from the Donbass in street protests in Kiev during the *Maidan Nezalezhnosti* in 2013-2014. A. Vitale, *The Geographical Problem of Political and Territorial Unity. The Reasons for Ukraine’s Independence*, in A. Rykała (Ed.), *W kręgu Geografii Politycznej i dyscyplin “okolicznych”*, cit., No. 36, 216.

well as nationality, which as it is well known, derives from the interaction between subjective elements, perceptions, and factually existing elements.

The attack on Ukrainian identity, as elsewhere, has in fact passed through impressive practices of de-nationalization, devastation, and erasure of national historical monuments, forced assimilation, cultural and linguistic, the main instrument of political domination, implemented through compulsory, homogeneous education, aimed at eradicating the memory of what of the historically occurred events is too dangerous to publicize. Ukraine has possessed its own complex ethnocultural physiognomy for centuries, characterized by pluriethnicity, acceptance and tolerance, and by a formidable coexistence<sup>7</sup>. The long rejection of compression within an imperial “Procrustean bed” is also rooted in this historical tradition.

The aspiration for independence and the tenacious struggle to regain and preserve it have always contained first and foremost manifest motivations of cultural and identity self-defense. The attack on identity has triggered the need to safeguard, by political means of protection, a threatened culture, since cultural belonging is fundamental to the lives of individuals<sup>8</sup>. Today, Ukrainian resistance has become not only a defense against the Kremlin’s genocidal projects, contained in official statements and speeches<sup>9</sup>, but also a defense of a “multi-ethnic civic nation” and the physical existence of all the peoples of Ukraine, threatened by violence that goes beyond the long colonial repression and is used in case of refusal to submit totally to the invader.

### **3. *Thirty Years of Discovering a Denied History***

Over 30 years of independence, tragic realities, facts of Ukrainian history long consigned to forced oblivion by Soviet censorship, have gradually emerged and revealed themselves in all their terrifying magnitude. Beginning in 1985, in fact, a long history of Ukrainians’ subjugation to foreign domination has re-emerged from the fogs of the past (and it has begun to be possible to speak openly about it). Studies and research appeared, based on documents and testimonies and on writings and memoirs, on the countless and often brutal prevarications suffered by Ukrainians in the Russian-Soviet period. These have been true historiographical discoveries about an unknown history.

The rediscovery of Ukrainian history began with the demystification of that of Kievan Rus’ (10th-13th centuries), used as a justification for a kind of “historical right” of Muscovite Russia and its empire over the regions and peoples of Ukraine. The intersection of peoples and cultures in that extremely fluid aggregation, typically medieval (a proto-federation composed of low-political aggregations, which was not organized on the basis of political sovereignty over a homogeneous and continuous territory, fenced by strict modern linear boundaries, and in which centralized power typical of a modern state was lacking: after all, different princes had different enemies, which negates the presence of sovereignty), neither “Russian” nor “Ukrainian” (because the modern idea of a nation did not yet exist), precludes reference to it as a political unit that was the precursor of Muscovite Russia in a political-structural sense and as the

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<sup>7</sup> G. Potašenko (Ed.), *The Peoples of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania*, Aidai, 2002. However, the internal, peasant, Cossack, and anti-nobility uprisings that marked this history cannot be forgotten.

<sup>8</sup> A. Vitale, *The Geographical Problem of Political and Territorial Unity*, cit., 204-205.

<sup>9</sup> T. Snyder, *The War in Ukraine Is a Colonial War*, in *The New Yorker*, April 28, 2022.

progenitor of the Tsarist Empire<sup>10</sup>. In fact, there was no dynastic, political, ecclesiastical continuity that would authorize Russia to attribute to itself the exclusive inheritance of Rus'<sup>11</sup> let alone a different physiognomy from the polyethnic conglomerate<sup>12</sup> that characterized it<sup>13</sup>. As is well known, the beginning of Muscovite Russia's territorial expansion dates back only to 1667, while after the end of Mongol rule only the southern territories of Ukraine belonged to Russia, excluding the rule over Smolensk and Černihiv, which dates back to the early 16th century<sup>14</sup>.

During the 30 years of independence, the discovery and deepening of the long history and legacy (in terms of culture and mentality) left in western and southern Ukraine by the Grand Duchy of Lithuania also occurred<sup>15</sup>: very different characteristics, in all respects<sup>16</sup>,

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<sup>10</sup> Kostomarov, in his nineteenth-century work, remains fundamental in pointing out the impossibility of using this proto-federation as a synonym for a pre-existing statehood considered to be the historical basis of the Moscow Empire. In fact, it was a completely different political and cultural reality that Russian historiography tried to fit into a Procrustean framework of modern state simplification. See A. Franco, *Le due nazionalità della Rus'*. *Il pensiero di Kostomarov nel dibattito ottocentesco sull'identità ucraina*, Aracne Editrice, 2016; see also, A. Vitale, *Rossijskaja gosudarstvennost' v sravnitel'noj perspektive: russkaja tradicija i zapadnaja model' stroitel'stva gosudarstva*, in *Novejšaja Istorija Rossii. Mezhdisciplinarnyj Nauchno-Teoreticheskij Zhurnal'*, No. 3, 2013, 20-36.

<sup>11</sup> G. Lepesant, *L'Ukraine dans la nouvelle Europe*, CNRS Editions, 2005, 26. On the issue of Kievan Rus' legacy, see for a quick overview A. Kappeler, *Kleine Geschichte der Ukraine*, Verlag C. H. Beck, 2009, 29-39.

<sup>12</sup> K. Boeckh., E. Völkl, *Ucraina. Dalla rivoluzione rossa alla rivoluzione arancione*, Beit, 2009, 25.

<sup>13</sup> A. Vitale, *The Geographical Problem of Political and Territorial Unity*, cit., 207.

<sup>14</sup> S. Plokhly, *The Gates of Europe. A History of Ukraine*, cit. (ital. transl., 102).

<sup>15</sup> As early as 1363, during the period of the reign of Algirdas (1363-1377), the Grand Duchy included Volynia (incorporated in 1352), Principality of Briansk (1355), Principality of Smolensk (1357), Principality of Kiev (1362), Podolia (1364) and lower Dnipro: that is, even before the Kievan Dynastic Union (1385), the beginning of four centuries of Polish-Lithuanian Confederation. From 1505 the Grand Duchy englobed almost all of present-day Ukraine, generating within it a fusion of different nobility and forms of extraordinary coexistence between different ethnic groups. See G. Potašenko (Ed.), *The Peoples of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania*, cit. See also the beautiful book in Lithuanian: Plures, *Ukraina: Lietuvos Epocha, 1320-1569, Mokslo ir enciklopedijų leidybos centras*, 2010; A. Eidintas, A. Bumblauskas, A. Kulakauskas, M. Tamošajtis, *Istorija Lityvy*, Eugrimas, 2013; A. Kappeler *Kleine Geschichte der Ukraine*, cit., 102-105. A. Vitale, *The Geographical Problem of Political and Territorial Unity*, cit., No. 13, 207-208.

<sup>16</sup> Lithuanian influences on Ruthenian, Western Ukrainian society, subject to historiographical research today, have been innumerable. The most important ones, which differentiate this region from Muscovite Russia, are those related to the influence of the Renaissance, the echo of the Reformation, Magdeburg law (foreign to Muscovite Russia), but especially to individual farms, personal ownership of land (allodial), different from the forms of land management formed in the culture of the Eastern Slavs. These aspects are still recognizable in linguistic terms: in Ukrainian we still find Lithuanian words related to the reality of individual farms. Rooted in these diversities are the distant roots of the Ukrainian peasantry's tragic struggle against Stalinist forced collectivizations and the dictator's genocidal and democidal reprisals (Holodomor), after a period of recovery that had allowed for a certain cultural and economic flourishing in agriculture. Regarding the diversity of political conceptions, the pages of the correspondence between Ivan IV and Prince Andrei Kurbsky, a refugee in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, remain emblematic. Ivan the Terrible, *Un buon governo nel regno. Carteggio con Andrej Kurbskij*. Adelphi, 2000. A conception of politics opposite to the autocratic one developed in medieval Ukraine, which also renders the popular thesis, widespread especially in the United States, of "Slavic countries congenitally devoted to autocracy and absolute power," inconsistent. L. Pauwels, T. Pauwels, *Histoire d'Ukraine. Le point de vue ukrainien*. Yoran, 2015, 164. It would be enough to think of the *veche*, a popular assembly of Ukrainian cities (the best-known case being the Republic of Novgorod), invested with supreme authority, comparable to the

than those that will be assumed by Muscovite Russia. Studies were then directed to the original historical and cultural legacy of the Cossack component, repressed for a very long time, up to the Stalinist genocide. Studies that have highlighted the originality of the free institutions of the Cossacks<sup>17</sup>, and of the *lichnaja svoboda* (individual freedom), as well as the importance of the individual, albeit embedded in the Cossack brotherhood, but above all the *federativnoe načalo* (federal principle), inherited from the political tradition of Kievan Rus', preserved for centuries in the Ukrainian political mentality. All cultural elements in sharp contrast to the autocratic principle of the Muscovite tsars, who were increasingly influenced by the model of the modern centralized unitary state, both of autocratic origin and, later, of Western origin (Prussian, French, Swedish in the bureaucratic sphere, from Peter onward)<sup>18</sup>. Ukrainians have also discovered that under the Tsarist Empire, assimilationist and homogenizing tendencies toward Ukrainians were massive and overwhelming.

As is well known, Great-Russian chauvinism, also targeted by Lenin, drastically reduced Ukrainian ethnocultural and linguistic space. Indeed, it reduced it to a peripheral, dialectal, folkloric status and considered it deprived of original and original historical-cultural connotations. Beginning in the 19th century, a genuine imperial disdain for the revival of Ukrainian national self-consciousness appeared increasingly evident, masterfully represented by Mikolai Kostomarov's literary masterpiece *Skotskij bunt (The Animal Uprising)*<sup>19</sup>.

Moreover, in the 19th century, the Czarist imperial assimilationist strategy was fully manifested, which sought to nip in the bud the development of Ukrainian peculiarities. It did so by seducing local elites, russifying wherever possible, strictly banning the use of the Ukrainian language<sup>20</sup>, suppressing cultural institutions, libraries, and independent educational institutions, national publications, excluding the local elite from schools, academies, and universities (all acts long considered by political thought to be signs of the presence of political tyranny), changing of place names, forcing demographic change in several regions, transforming the architectural heritage, introducing serfdom and suppressing the status of free peasants, taxing them to the point of exhaustion. The policies of Peter I and Catherine II suppressed a host of typical (and differentiating)

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Nordic *Thing* or the Swiss *Landsgemeinde*. As early as the 15th century, Grand Duke Alexander of Lithuania granted Kiev considerable independence, according to the principles of the Magdeburg Law, a European code of municipal self-government, on the basis of which citizens could elect their own rulers and members of the judiciary. That Law remained in force in Kiev until 1834. The list of Lithuanian influences is very long. See A. Vitale, *The Geographical Problem of Political And Territorial Unity*, cit. 208.

<sup>17</sup> K. S. Jobst, *Geschichte der Ukraine*, Philipp Reclam jun. GmbH & Co KG, 2010, 87-104; A. Kappeler, *Kleine Geschichte der Ukraine*, cit., 54-71; K. Boeckh, E. Völkl, *Ucraina. Dalla rivoluzione rossa alla rivoluzione arancione*, cit., 33-38.

<sup>18</sup> A. Vitale, *Rossijskaja gosudarstvennost' v sravnitel'noj perspektive: russkaja tradicija i zapadnaja model' stroitel'stva gosudarstva*, cit.

<sup>19</sup> M. Kostomarov, *La rivolta degli animali. Lettera di un proprietario terriero piccolo russo al suo amico di Pietroburgo*, Sellerio, 1993.

<sup>20</sup> K. S. Jobst, *Geschichte der Ukraine*, cit., 117.

features of Ukrainian culture<sup>21</sup>, starting with the freedoms of the Cossacks, in the course of the colonization of the South<sup>22</sup>.

The expansion of autocracy also brought with it a rough and primitive conception of absolute sovereignty. This was quite different from the “proto-federal” tradition inherited from Kievan Rus. It was precisely that conception of absolute sovereignty that would later create the basis (in perfect Tocquevillian continuity) for the totalitarian state, which was its consistent evolution, in terms of the concentration of political power. Of course, this was a process that lacked the Western constitutional exceptions to the “pure” model of modern state development, based on the continuous production of internal political unity and enforced homogeneity, accompanied by disregard for national particularities.

#### **4. The Discovery of Ukraine’s History in the Soviet Period**

But it is especially the discovery of what Ukrainians suffered in the Soviet period that today stimulates the spirit of resistance to the invasion and the attempt to suppress their independence. This is the case with the Bolshevik invasions of 1917, 1918 and 1919, the shelling of Kiev and repressions of that time, the annihilation of Ukrainian *intelligentsija* in 1929-1930, but especially the Holodomor of 1932-33, which resulted in about 5 million deaths from starvation<sup>23</sup>. The demonstration of the intentional and genocidal character of the Great Famine, which differentiates it from previous or subsequent famines<sup>24</sup> used to punish Ukrainian national character, has been similar in its disruptive effect to what the revelations about the Secret Protocols of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact of 1939 had provoked in the Baltic countries.

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<sup>21</sup> As early as 1720 the de-culturation that resulted from a decree of Peter I, had provided for the elimination of all Ukrainian linguistic elements from theological literature. The process of “russification” then continued under Catherine II, with an uninterrupted policy of cultural assimilation that, in addition to Livonia, Finland and many other lands, fully invested Ukraine. The suppression of the Polish-Ukrainian uprising of 1863 failed to represent, with the heavy cultural bans on Ukrainians and their culture (Valuev circular, 1863), the culmination of ethnocultural discrimination and assimilation under the Empire. S. Plokhyy, *The Gates of Europe. A History of Ukraine*, cit. (Ital. Transl., 232-233). A. Vitale, *The Reasons for Ukraine’s Independence*, cit. 280. With Alexander II’s ukaze of Ems, 1876 (kept secret from the population), the culmination of those policies was reached, with a ban on the use of the Ukrainian language, referred to as a “Russian dialect”, a ban on teaching in Ukrainian in schools, the withdrawal of all books in Ukrainian from local schools, and the deportation of recalcitrant Ukrainian teachers, who were sent to the furthest provinces of the Empire and replaced by colleagues seen as “true Russians”. Those who managed to save themselves, taking refuge in Galicia under the Habsburg Empire, helped to fuel a Ukrainian national revanchism capable of spanning the following centuries as well as preserving, by revitalizing them, the most salient features of a specific and original culture. *Ibidem*, 280-81.

<sup>22</sup> K. Boeckh., E. Völkl, *Ucraina. Dalla rivoluzione rossa alla rivoluzione arancione*, cit. 36. A. Vitale, *The Reasons for Ukraine’s Independence*, cit., 210.

<sup>23</sup> Ettore Cinnella described it as a vast operation designed to punish a people like the Ukrainians, who were rearing their heads and aspiring for independence. E. Cinnella, *Ucraina 1932-33. Il genocidio dimenticato*, Della Porta Editori, 2015, 294. Stalin’s choice to use famine against Ukrainians resulted in the death of 25 percent of Ukraine’s ethnic population and the simultaneous destruction of much of Ukraine’s political and intellectual elite in the form of genocide. A. Graziosi, *L’Urss di Lenin e Stalin. Storia dell’Unione Sovietica, 1914-1945*, Il Mulino, 2007, 361.

<sup>24</sup> R. Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow. Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine*, Oxford University Press (it. transl.: Fondazione Liberal, 2004); S. V. Kul’cyc’kyi, *The Famine of 1932-1933 in Ukraine. An Anatomy of the Holodomor*, CIUS Press, 2018.

The desperate postwar armed Ukrainian resistance against Soviet domination (1944-1950), which had been unable to signal to the world the presence of violent domination, was later explored more deeply<sup>25</sup>, revealing dark sides, great sufferings<sup>26</sup> and an immense, incalculable damage to national cultural heritage that resulted from it<sup>27</sup>. That civil war caused thousands of shootings, starvation, and more than two million Ukrainians deported to Siberian and Arctic prisons and death camps, in conditions similar to those suffered by other ethnic minorities.

Historians have often wondered about the problem of continuity between the national and cultural policy pursued by imperial Tsarist Russia and that of the Kremlin. However, it is difficult not to see the striking similarities, even if the ideological character and goals of the Soviet period reveal a decisive difference, characterized by systematic planning that ended up exacerbating the Ukrainian question<sup>28</sup>. The logic of modern state-building

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<sup>25</sup> A. Graziosi, *L'Ucraina e Putin. Tra storia e ideologia*, cit., 47-48.

<sup>26</sup> The Communist military commanders killed Ukrainian prisoners of war, forced them to defect to their side, used chemical weapons, resorted to the annihilation of the peaceful inhabitants, and cruel tortures and humiliations on a wide scale, inflicting irreparable moral and psychological damage on the nation. *Judgement of the International Public Tribunal in Vilnius*, 2000, 93-94. It is important to note that the resistance movement welcomed elements from many nationalities, religions and ethnicities into its ranks. Although the Ukrainian struggle was more against the NKVD than against the Soviet army, there was no doubt that Stalin's orders aimed at finally liquidating "the long-standing Ukrainian question." The civilian population was also subjected to harassment of all kinds (inspection of villages, destruction of houses and harvests, seizure of livestock, and deportations of farmers to Gulag) and especially the blocking of food and seed supplies to villages: a method already used in 1932, which resulted in the deaths of 10,000 more people in the postwar period. In 1945 alone, the Soviets shot and hanged 218,865 Ukrainians, including men and women. Stalin imposed an ethnically based "population exchange" (of Russification) in western Ukraine, using the technique of deportation and forced repopulation. This allowed the ties between Ukrainian partisans and the population to be broken. Soviet counterinsurgency techniques were similarly employed everywhere in the Soviet Union for the purpose of repressing any recalcitrant ethnic groups. P. Abbott, E. Pinak, *Ukrainian Armies 1914 - 1955*, Osprey Publishing, 2004; A. Rosselli, *La resistenza antisovietica e anticomunista in Europa Orientale, 1944-1956*, Settimo Sigillo, 2004; K. Bondarenko, *Istoriya, kotoruyu ne znaem ili ne khotim znat'?* In *Zerkalo nedeli*, 29 March-5, 2002; M. Buhai, *Deportatsii naseleennya z Ukrainy in Ukrains'kyi istorychnyi zhurnal*, No. 11, 1990, 21-25; D. R. Marples, *Heroes and Villains. Creating National History in Contemporary Ukraine*, Central European University Press, 2013.

<sup>27</sup> Among the first historians and political scientists to lift the veil on the reality of Soviet colonialism in Ukraine was Abdurachman Avtorchanov as early as 1990. His study *Imperija Kremlja. Sovetskij tip kolonializma*, printed in Russian first in Germany and then in Vilnius (Oformlenie Kooperativ "Spauda", Vilnius, Lithuania) in 1990, had described the reality of discrimination suffered by Ukrainians during the entire Soviet period, even at the high levels of the local Party leadership. A. Avtorchanov, *Ibidem*, 56-81. However, the problem of colonialism is very intricate, especially because of the "internal" components of the Empire: in fact, Russia and the Soviet Union are believed not to have had an Empire, but to have been an Empire. After all, already in the late nineteenth century the Russian historian Ključevskij stated, «The history of Russia is that of a country colonizing itself». V. Ključevskij, *Sočinenija v devjati tomach*, 1987, Vol. II, 49-55.

<sup>28</sup> On the Russification process of the Soviet period, see A. Kappeler, *Kleine Geschichte der Ukraine*, cit., 236-241. However, the relationship between Soviet "integral statehood" and Russification is complicated. In fact, members of national minorities also remained involved in the political practice of repression and de-nationalizing against other minorities in the Empire and participated in both the preservation of the system and the policies, planned by the Kremlin, as members of the Party, administration, and secret police. Consider, for example, the Latvians or Ukrainians involved until the end of the Soviet regime in these practices. Today, the post-independence perception is more simplified in all republics, although it is true that Ukrainians, because of the Independence immediately suppressed during the 1920s, suffered from violent de-nationalizing policies much more than the nationalities that were then able to gain Independence.

in the imperial sphere, with the consistent pursuit of political unity and internal homogeneity exploded with the engineering of nationalities and the devastating project of *slijanije nacii* (merger of nationalities)<sup>29</sup> to create the fictitious reality of the “*sovetskij narod*” (Soviet people)<sup>30</sup>. Even in 1972, at the height of neo-Stalinist restoration under Leonid Brežnev, there were frequent arrests of Ukrainian teachers, later sentenced to multiple years in prison for teaching Ukrainian in school and other subjects in his native language. The Ukrainian language was “purged” of its supposed archaisms and foreign word loan words<sup>31</sup>. The number of magazines and newspapers was drastically reduced. The Ukrainian leadership of the Party was periodically eliminated or reduced to insignificant ranks. In parallel with the attack on churches, the destruction of family, community and ethnocultural ties, the heavy invasion into Ukrainian civil society through atomization, terror<sup>32</sup> and the systematic use of divide and rule and delation, Soviet power had been unleashing for more than fifty years a planned and systematic policy of cultural eradication and of erasing historical memories and monuments of the past. As a result, Ukraine suffered a tragic cultural humiliation, based on terror (culminating in the extermination of the kulaks, who in countless cases were not rich peasants at all), aimed at producing absolute homogeneity and political integration in the Soviet state, and dependence of atomized individuals on the ruler. In part, only a few cultural forms were artfully preserved in terms of folklore - the antechamber to extinction - which, unlike political independence, never succeeded in effectively counteracting the processes of centralization of power and the extension of the latter’s control over culture in general, as well as those of progressive ethnocultural dilution<sup>33</sup>.

Of course, the most dramatic phenomenon was the physical elimination of all the intellectual strata and the country’s best and most creative elements. Added to this was the encouragement of emigration or deportation-a hemorrhage of human capital from which Ukraine has never recovered<sup>34</sup>.

In addition to this, there is today the rediscovery of the history of Eastern Ukraine, which went from tsarist Russification to the tactics of settlement of non-Ukrainian populations (and parallel deportation of Ukrainians) in the Soviet period, starting from

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<sup>29</sup> A. Avtorchanov, *Imperija Kremlja. Sovetskij tip kolonializma*, cit., 25; see also B. Nahaylo, V. Swoboda, *Soviet Disunion. A History of the Nationalities Problem in the U.S.S.R.*, The Free Press, 1990.

<sup>30</sup> The only exceptions to those policies were those of the 1920s (Boeckh, Völkl, *Ucraina. Dalla rivoluzione rossa alla rivoluzione arancione*, cit., 87-89), with the policy of *ukrainizacija* and maintaining the façade of the Soviet federal system. From the 1930s, however, began a devastating and de-nationalizing policy.

<sup>31</sup> A. Vitale, *The Reasons for Ukraine’s Independence*, in *Minorities in the Post-Soviet Space Thirty Years After the Dissolution of the USSR*, cit., 282.

<sup>32</sup> It is important to note that terror was not only used in the Stalin period. In 1965 and also later, during the “general pogrom” of 1972, thousands of Ukrainians were imprisoned in the GULag on charges of “anti-Soviet riots” or detained indefinitely in psychiatric hospitals. Some prisoners were released only in 1987.

<sup>33</sup> A. Vitale, *The Geographical Problem of Political and Territorial Unity*, cit., 213.

<sup>34</sup> Moreover, as the Soviet state controlled all properties, monuments, libraries, and artistic works, inevitably these had fallen de facto into the hands of (and into the factual ownership of) ignorant bureaucrats and Party personnel used to administer the domination, which had the sole purpose of the subjugation of the dominated. Not only were these not concerned, as bureaucrats, with the future value of those assets, but since they belonged to none other than the Soviet state, they were integrally subjected to Party decisions, which could lead to their depredation and total destruction. In the Stalin period, Party members without any culture were nearly 90 percent. Those recruited locally were often characterized by deep frustration, resentment caused by their social position, and severe psychological problems.

1927. This historical rediscovery has been one of the decisive elements for Ukrainian resistance in the Donbas, against the Kremlin's rhetoric, which was used to construct a "false secession"<sup>35</sup>, carried out with paramilitary forces.

Last but not least, historical and scientific insights on the Černobyl disaster should then be considered: a decisive turning point in the crisis of the Soviet system, that definitively highlighted how the Soviet imperial leadership treated the local population<sup>36</sup>. The delays in intervention, the lack of consideration for human lives, the population treated as inhabitants of a colony, ten thousand deaths in the first years after the disaster<sup>37</sup> are just some of the causes that would lead Ukrainian ecological movements to converge with the *Ruch* (People's Movement for Perestroika) in their claim to independence<sup>38</sup>. Ecological devastation thus added to the consequences of an "anti-economic" system that has generated widespread corruption, internal mafias that were born or thrived in symbiosis with the Party and an irresponsible and tyrannical administration. The story of this ecological devastation, in a land battered by decades of a continued "Tragedy of the Commons," had never been told<sup>39</sup>.

The geopolitical determinism in vogue today, a widespread justification for a supposedly ineluctable imperial recomposition, sounds at least as sinister in the face of all this<sup>40</sup> (and more or less self-conscious variant of the Brezhnevian doctrine of "limited sovereignty" or of the "inevitable spheres of influence") that also reinglobes Ukraine, going through those interferences that have continued throughout the post-Soviet period, with the extension of the Kremlin's *longa manus*, feeding parental kleptocracies, electoral manipulations, attacks on the legitimate president, and blackmail capable of exploiting the forced, strong and inescapable economic-industrial interdependencies that Stalin designed so that even in the future the right to become independent would remain a dead letter for the Soviet republics<sup>41</sup>.

## 5. Conclusions

Over the years, the reasons for the Ukrainians' strenuous resistance have only grown stronger. After all, political restoration in Russia has continued to manifest its obvious continuity and derivation from the Soviet period. Putin's Russia sees itself as the successor state to the Soviet Union and what is more, has continued to make open apology, of that system, that Empire, its violent abuses and autocrats (starting with Stalin). The opportunity to travel and work abroad has also enabled independent Ukrainians over the past three decades to make a comparison between their past (the long series of abuses

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<sup>35</sup> A. Vitale, *Centralismo, decentramento o autogoverno*, Tramedoro Edizioni, 2023, 36.

<sup>36</sup> On this, see the illuminating pages of Nobel Prize Svetlana Aleksievič, contained in her masterpiece *Černobyl'skaya molitva*, 2001. See in particular the testimony of Vasily B. Nesterenko, (Ital. transl.: 2002, 291-301).

<sup>37</sup> Even today, the Putin regime disputes the death figures as a result of the disaster and the wholly inadequate reactions of the Soviet system, which is to blame for the most terrible consequences of the disaster.

<sup>38</sup> L. Pauwels, T. Pauwels, *Histoire d'Ukraine. Le point de vue ukrainien*, cit., 344.

<sup>39</sup> G. Hardin, *The Tragedy of the Commons*, in *Science*, No. 3859, 1968, 1243-1248.

<sup>40</sup> Among many others, an example of what has been published in Italy along these lines, generally accepted by the public, is E. Di Rienzo, *Il conflitto russo-ucraino*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli, 2005.

<sup>41</sup> A. Vitale, *The Reasons for Ukraine's Independence*, cit., 283-284.



of power, usurpations, violence, genocide, and a long resistance to an autocratic and tyrannical power which prevented Ukrainian political, cultural, linguistic, and economic development)<sup>42</sup> and that of other countries, as well as between Russia and the West<sup>43</sup>. What is happening in the Kremlin-occupied territories (mass violence, group deportations, “re-education” of the remaining population) is reinforcing this comparison. Ukrainians’ will to resist also stems from their new relationship, intensified through the invasion war they suffered, with their own self-rule institutions. Protecting linguistic, cultural, and religious pluralism means for today’s Ukrainians to adopt a more flexible and richer conception of nationality, immersed in articulated forms of civil coexistence. Only in this way is it possible to value the culture of which individuals are bearers, but also more complex subjective parameters that contribute to identity formation. And indeed they have already adopted relative political pluralism, held back only by war, as well as the protection of diversity<sup>44</sup>. It means being able to recover and value the past, the historical memories, but also the strength of the will to “be a nation” in the present and the clearly expressed desire to continue life in common by bearers of complementary but different cultures. Above all, it means recognizing and valuing as Ukrainians people of mixed history and background, who are therefore bearers of an extraordinary cultural richness that is already part of the new nation. This means depoliticizing the abuses that can result from the use of the “state instrument” and its overemphasis on “national” character. It also means attempting a depoliticization of ethnicity—a reverse process from that instigated by the French Revolution. The result is the consequent increasing valorization of the acquisitions of other ethnic groups, through mixed marriages and a polyglot society integrated by a vehicular language and enriched by other, voluntarily acquired languages. This is especially possible in Ukraine, where the treasure of interethnic coexistence has always been invaluable. The idea of a new multiethnic and multilingual nation, of a political nation, is strengthened precisely by the lessons learned from Ukraine’s difficult and often tragic history of internal divisions and is grounded in a tradition of centuries-old coexistence of different languages, cultures, and religions<sup>45</sup>. Moreover, despite all the economic and administrative difficulties, the experience of decades of cultural, political, and civil freedom, especially of major Ukrainian cities, continues to encourage strenuous resistance to invasion. The fear of new domination has merged elements of an ethnic nationality with the evident emergence of a civic nation.

It is partially true that Ukrainians today have a perception of their own history that tends to impute all the dramatic problems they experienced to the former imperial center - a view that also influenced national historiography after 1991. But this perception now stems from the fact that the Kremlin for many years has continued to identify what the USSR did, with present-day Russia. Moreover, the Kremlin turns everything Soviet into “Russian,” even the worst and most violent things the Soviet Union did. Ukrainians have only “taken it into recognition”. Obviously, this perception has been reinforced by the present invasion itself, to an extent previously unthinkable, and it will have long-term consequences. However, it is precisely the emergence of a nation that is much more

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<sup>42</sup> L. Pauwels and T. Pauwels, *Histoire d’Ukraine. Le point de vue ukrainien*, cit., 160.

<sup>43</sup> A. Graziosi, *L’Ucraina e Putin. Tra storia e ideologia*, cit. 46.

<sup>44</sup> G. Lami, *L’Ucraina in 100 date. Dalla Rus’ di Kyiv ai nostri giorni*, cit., 16. See also G. Lami, *La questione ucraina fra Ottocento e Novecento*, Cuem, 2005.

<sup>45</sup> S. Plokhyy, *The Gates of Europe. A History of Ukraine*, cit. (Ital. transl., 2022, 478).

articulate and complex than some sort of an “ethnic” nation (on the contrary, there is an evident emergence of a new “civic” nation) that makes this new national conscience less inclined to ethnonational confrontation.

The Kremlin has paradoxically helped bring about a new Ukraine in the minds and hearts of Ukrainians, regardless of their ethnolinguistic affiliation. But this has occurred at the cost of a frightening number of casualties and immense economic and ecological damage to the country.