

# MEMORY, POWER, AND THE FORGING OF WARTIME IDENTITY: THE CASE STUDY OF RUSSIA-UKRAINIAN WAR

**Ibrahim Suleiman, PhD**

*Department of Political Science Sa'adu Zungur University Bauchi State*

## **Abstract**

*The War between Russian and Ukraine that began on February 24, 2022, represents a critical case study in the dynamic interplay between war, national identity, and collective memory. This paper argues that the conflict has functioned as a transformative crucible, forcibly accelerating the consolidation of a sovereign, civic Ukrainian national identity in direct opposition to the Kremlin's imperial narrative. Through a qualitative multi-method approach combining digital ethnography and discourse analysis of Ukrainian public spheres (August 2023 – January 2024) and focused case studies (e.g., Bucha, religious institutional change), this research examines how identity, power politics, and memory are co-constituted in wartime. Framed by constructivist and postcolonial theory, the analysis demonstrates that the shared experience of violence and resistance has rapidly dissolved pre-war regional and linguistic cleavages, fostering a new “community of fate” defined by civic values and participatory defense. Simultaneously, the war has triggered an intense process of “mnemonic decolonization,” where the immediate curation of traumatic memory (e.g., from atrocities) and the deliberate dismantling of Soviet-Russian symbols are weaponized to solidify a European-oriented historical narrative. These domestic processes are inextricably linked to global power politics, as Ukraine's skillful projection of its war as a defense of a rules-based order has reshaped international alliances and aid. The findings highlight that modern warfare is a discursive and ideological battle where the forging of identity and the weaponization of memory are as decisive as military engagements. The paper concludes with recommendations for Ukrainian policymakers to institutionalize inclusive civic identity post-conflict and for the international community to support Ukraine's “mnemonic sovereignty” through archiving and justice initiatives.*

**Keywords:** *Russia-Ukraine War, National Identity, Collective Memory, Power Politics, Digital Ethnography.*

## **Introduction**

The full-scale of Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was not merely a geopolitical conflict over territory and security architecture; it was a profound ideological and ontological clash over history, sovereignty, and the very right of a nation to exist. This war represents a stark case study of how a protracted, high-intensity conflict can act as a catalyst for the rapid and dramatic

evolution of national identity, the raw exercise of power politics, and the weaponization of collective memory. While material factors like military capacity and economic resilience are critical, the intangible dimensions how Ukrainians understand themselves as a nation, how historical narratives are mobilized for resistance, and how global power dynamics are reshaped by these narratives are equally decisive in determining the course and outcome of the war. This paper argues that the Russo-Ukrainian war has functioned as a crucible, forcibly accelerating the consolidation of a distinct, sovereign Ukrainian national identity in direct opposition to the Kremlin's imperial narrative that denies it. This process is inextricably linked to the power politics of international alignment and the deliberate, grassroots curation of a wartime collective memory. By examining the interplay between these three forces, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of modern warfare in the 21st century, where battles over identity and narrative are waged alongside those over land.

## **Literature Review**

Scholarly discourse on the war has evolved rapidly, branching into several key areas. First, analyses of Russian strategic culture and ideology provide essential context. Scholars like Tsygankov (2022) and Mearsheimer (2014) have long debated the roots of Russia's actions, with recent work focusing on Putin's instrumentalization of history. Trenin (2022) and Laruelle (2021) detail the Kremlin's "historical politics," which frames Ukraine not as a legitimate state but as "Novorossiia" (New Russia), an integral part of Russian civilizational space. This ideology, often termed the "Russian World" (Russkiy Mir), provides the discursive foundation for the war (Suslov, 2022).

Second, a rich body of work exists on Ukrainian nation-building and identity pre-2022. Historians like Plokhy (2015) and Snyder (2018) have meticulously documented Ukraine's distinct historical trajectory, challenging Russian imperial and Soviet narratives. Research by Kulyk (2018) and Zhurzhenko (2014) highlighted the complex, regionally varied nature of Ukrainian identity, particularly in the Donbas and among Russian speakers. The post-2014 "Maidan Revolution" was identified as a critical turning point, initiating a "participatory" nation-building process (Katchanovski, 2016; Onuch & Sasse, 2016).

Post-2022, scholarship has pivoted to examine the transformative impact of the full-scale invasion. Recent studies analyze the rapid dissolution of regional linguistic divides (Kulyk, 2023), the role of digital media and "participatory warfare" in shaping resistance (Makhortykh et al., 2023), and the emergence of new national symbols and memorial practices (Fedor & Lewis, 2023). The literature on memory politics has been particularly active, exploring how Ukraine is dismantling Soviet-era monuments (decommunization) while simultaneously constructing new, urgent memorials to wartime atrocities (Boyd, 2023). Finally, the global power politics dimension is addressed by scholars of international relations, examining the war as a contest over the liberal international order and the efficacy of sanctions (Allison, 2022; Charap & Shapiro, 2022). This paper seeks to synthesize these strands by placing the dynamic, wartime evolution of Ukrainian national identity at the center, examining it as both a driver and an outcome of the clash between Russian imperial power politics and Ukraine's agentive mobilization of memory.

## **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative multi-method approach, combining digital ethnography, discourse analysis, and case study research to capture the complex, real-time evolution of identity and memory. Through digital ethnography & discourse analysis the paper systematically analyzed Ukrainian digital public spheres that was conducted over a six-month period (August 2023 – January 2024). This includes source selection of official telegram channels of the President of Ukraine (@V\_Zelenskiy\_official), the Armed Forces of Ukraine, and key volunteer initiatives (e.g., Serhiy Prytula's fund). Secondly the paper look at the social media analysis by tracking of widely-shared visual symbols (e.g., the "Saint Javelin" meme, the "Russian warship, go fuck yourself" postage stamp) and hashtag campaigns (e.g., #StandWithUkraine, #УкраїнаПереможе) on Twitter/X and Instagram. The aim is to identify recurring narratives, symbols, and linguistic shifts (e.g., from "separatists" to "rashists," a term blending "Russian" and "fascist") that reflect the construction of a unified wartime identity and a distinct enemy image.

In the other hand case study analysis was employed to compliment the ethnographic section. Through the memory of politics case; the city of Bucha was selected as an in-depth case study of collective trauma and memorialization. Analysis included media reports, official investigations, statements by President Zelenskyy and foreign leaders, and the emergence of grassroots memorials documented online. Additionally, institutional identity was also used to look at the transformation of Ukraine's Orthodox religious landscape, specifically the establishment of the independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine (2019) and the ongoing response to the pro-Kremlin Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), was analyzed through official church statements and state decrees. The limitation of this study is lack of direct contact, in-person fieldwork due to security constraints. Reliance on digital sources risks missing offline or private narratives, particularly in occupied territories. Researcher positionality as an external, non-Ukrainian-speaking analyst (relying on translations) is also acknowledged.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This paper is grounded in a synthesis of constructivist and postcolonial theoretical perspectives.

**Social Constructivism (from International Relations):** This framework posits that the key structures in world politics are inter-subjective, based on shared ideas, identities, and norms rather than purely material forces (Wendt, 1992). The conflict is thus interpreted as a clash between two competing "social facts": Russia's constructed identity as a great power entitled to a sphere of influence, and Ukraine's increasingly sovereign national identity rooted in European values. The war itself is a powerful agent of social learning, actively reshaping these identities (Zehfuss, 2002).

**Postcolonial Theory;** This lens is crucial for deconstructing the Kremlin's narrative. Russian discourse framing Ukraine as "little brother," "artificial," or "historically Russian" replicates classic colonial tropes of denying the colonized subject's agency, history, and right to self-determination (Said, 1978). Ukraine's resistance, including its linguistic and cultural revival and its drive toward the EU, can be analyzed as a powerful act of decolonization, asserting epistemic and political independence from the imperial core (Kappeler, 2014; Plokhly, 2017).

Memory Studies: Theories of collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992; Assmann, 2011) inform the analysis of how the past is mobilized for present political goals. The war has created a “flashbulb” generation with intense shared trauma. The analysis focuses on how this traumatic memory is being instantly curated through digital testimony, forensic investigations of war crimes, and the removal/replacement of monuments to forge a new national narrative of victimhood, resilience, and civilizational choice.

## **Findings/Results**

The Accelerated Consolidation of a Civic Ukrainian Identity: The data reveals a dramatic erosion of pre-war regional and linguistic identity cleavages. The near-universal adoption of Ukrainian in public digital discourse, even by formerly Russian-speaking public figures, signals a profound shift. The shared experience of bombardment and resistance has superseded older divisions, fostering a “community of fate” (Kulyk, 2023). National identity is now defined less by ethnicity and more by civic values: voluntarism, commitment to democratic institutions, and a shared defiance against external aggression.

Memory as a Weapon and a Shield: The case of Bucha exemplifies the instantaneous creation of a foundational national trauma narrative. It moved swiftly from a news event to a global symbol of Russian barbarism and a core element of Ukraine’s moral claim for support. Domestically, it serves as a powerful tool for unity and motivation. Simultaneously, the accelerated de-Russification of public space renaming streets, removing Pushkin statues is a deliberate policy of “mnemonic decolonization,” physically severing ties to the imperial past to solidify a forward-looking, European identity (Fedor & Lewis, 2023).

The Reframing of Global Power Politics: Ukraine’s skillful narrative projection casting the war as a defense of a rules-based order against neo-imperial fascism has successfully shaped Western power politics. This framing has translated into unprecedented military and financial aid packages. The war has thus become a proxy identity contest between democratic and autocratic governance models, with Ukraine’s performance directly influencing the perceived legitimacy and resolve of the Western bloc.

The Digital Battlefield of Identity: Digital platforms have become the primary arena for identity performance. The viral spread of memes like “Saint Javelin” blends humor, religious iconography, and military prowess into a potent symbol of technologically savvy resistance. Soldier-led Telegram channels offer unfiltered, first-person testimony, creating an intimate, democratized form of war documentation that reinforces the narrative of a people’s army defending its homeland.

## **Recommendations**

For Ukrainian Policymakers: Institutionalize the inclusive, civic identity forged in war. Develop educational curricula and cultural programs that integrate the diverse experiences of all regions and language groups into a unified national narrative, ensuring that the post-war national project does not inadvertently create new exclusions.

For the International Community: Move beyond military aid to support Ukraine’s “mnemonic sovereignty.” Fund comprehensive digital archiving projects, witness testimony programs (in

partnership with the International Criminal Court), and memorialization initiatives. This helps Ukraine establish an incontrovertible historical record as a bulwark against future Russian disinformation.

For Future Research: Scholars should conduct longitudinal studies tracking identity and memory evolution in post-war Ukraine, especially in liberated and frontline territories. Comparative research with other post-colonial and post-conflict societies (e.g., the Balkans, South Africa) could yield valuable insights on reconciliation, justice, and the management of divisive historical narratives.

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