

War and Identity: How the Russian-Ukrainian War Reshapes Personal and National Identity

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Abstract

War transforms personal and national identity, catalyzing psychological, cultural, and social change. This dissertation explores how the ongoing Russian–Ukrainian war reshapes identity individually and collectively. Drawing from psychological theories including Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, Erikson’s psychosocial development, Social Identity Theory, and Self-Categorization Theory—it examines how war disrupts basic psychological stability, forcing individuals to confront questions of purpose and belonging. On a personal level, the war has led many Ukrainians to reshape their beliefs and values. Psychological trauma, particularly post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), has been a key factor in reshaping emotional functioning and personality, often resulting in anger, anxiety, and shifts in interpersonal behavior. Displacement and life as a refugee make it harder for people to develop their sense of identity. They often feel a deep sense of loss for their home culture, while also struggling between adapting to a new society and holding on to their national roots. On a national level, the war has catalyzed the formation of a more unified Ukrainian identity, especially in regions previously characterized by cultural ambiguity or Russian affiliation. Shared trauma, collective memory, and civic resistance have played central roles in this transformation. Empirical data reveal a marked increase in national identification, even among Russian-speaking populations. The war has not only deepened patriotism and solidarity but also redefined what it means to be Ukrainian in the 21st century. Acts of collective resilience—from volunteer efforts to cultural expression—demonstrate how identity becomes a source of strength and moral clarity in times of existential threat. This paper illustrates that identity is not a fixed construct, but a dynamic and evolving response to social and historical forces.

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Introduction

War is one of the most powerful forces shaping both personal and national identity. The ongoing Russia's aggression against Ukraine is a powerful example of how war acts as a catalyst for redefining how individuals see themselves and their country. In times of peace, identity often forms quietly — shaped by family, culture and routine. But in the chaos of war, people, who once lived ordinary lives are now faced with extraordinary decisions: to fight, to flee, to protect, to mourn. In doing so, they discover parts of themselves they may never have encountered otherwise. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to study the impact of war on personal and national identity

Identity as a concept

What do we really mean when we talk about identity or the self? Throughout history, philosophers—from Plato to Descartes—have explored this question, though we can only briefly summarize their ideas here. Generally, there are two main perspectives on identity. The first, rooted in Aristotle's thinking, sees human beings primarily as biological organisms—living creatures shaped by physical needs and natural instincts. The second approach is based on John Locke's view, which emphasizes the psychological side of identity. This perspective sees a person as a thinking, feeling being whose sense of self may be distinct from the physical body and can, at least in theory, exist separately from it. Both of these views continue to influence how social psychology approaches the concept of identity (Monroe et al., 2000).

Most modern theories of self tend to highlight the idea that our sense of who we are begins in early childhood. From a young age, we understand ourselves as both agents who act in the world and as objects who are seen, judged, and responded to by others. This dual awareness is reflected in both Aristotelian ideas and in humanistic psychology — for example, in Maslow's belief that people have both basic physical needs (like food and rest) and social needs (such as

respect, belonging, and security) (Ventegodt et al., 2003). The Lockean idea of the self also plays a central role in modern psychology. It defines a person as a conscious, rational being who is capable of thinking about themselves across time — recognizing that they are the same individual in different situations and stages of life (Monroe et al., 2000).

Personal Versus National Identity

A person's identity is made up of multiple layers and characteristics. One important aspect is national identity, which refers to the parts of the self that are connected to belonging within a specific nation or cultural group. Therefore, national identity refers to the identity of the citizens of a country with their own country's historical and cultural traditions, moral values, ideals, beliefs, national sovereignty, and so on. It helps people feel that they are part of a larger whole, connected to others through a common heritage and collective experience (Liu & Turner, 2018).

In contrast, personal identity consists of the unique traits, experiences, and characteristics that distinguish one person from another. Erikson proposed that 'identity' was actually the clear or obscure answer to the question, 'Who am I?' In Erikson's theory of identity, identity is not only individual, but also collective and social. Identity is the difference, character and sense of belonging found in interpersonal interactions and interactions between groups (Erikson, 1959). While national identity links individuals to a broader group, personal identity highlights what makes someone an individual, such as personality, personal beliefs, and life choices. Both national and personal identity interact to shape how people see themselves and their place in the world.

Personal Identity

For many Ukrainians, the war has forced a re-evaluation of their personal beliefs, values, and sense of belonging. Before 2014, and even more so before 2022, many people in Ukraine had a complex relationship with their identity. Some saw themselves as both Ukrainian and Russian due to historical ties, shared language, and cultural connections. However, the full-scale invasion in 2022 became a turning point, pushing many to redefine who they are and where they stand.

Safety need

One of the most relevant frameworks, that explains formation of identity, is Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, a motivational theory in psychology that arranges human needs into five levels, beginning with physiological needs and moving upward to self-actualization. The second level, safety needs, encompasses personal and emotional security, stability, health, and protection from harm. War catastrophically disrupts this level by placing individuals in situations where their basic survival is threatened. In Ukraine, the constant presence of bombings, displacement, and the unpredictability of everyday life has left millions of people without a stable sense of security. According to Maslow, when these foundational needs are unmet, individuals cannot progress to higher levels of psychological growth, such as love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. This creates a psychological environment in which identity development is either stalled or radically reshaped, as the mind prioritizes survival over self-exploration and long-term goals (Ventegodt et al., 2003).

War-related PTSD

Beyond disrupted safety, the psychological trauma resulting from war is a critical factor in identity transformation. Prolonged exposure to violence, loss, and fear often results in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a mental health condition characterized by intrusive memories, emotional numbness, hyperarousal, and distorted beliefs about oneself and the world. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), PTSD can alter an individual's self-perception and interpersonal relationships, sometimes leading to identity fragmentation or loss of meaning. PTSD, particularly when triggered by war and prolonged exposure to violence, profoundly alters a person's psychological makeup, emotional functioning, and personality traits. PTSD is not merely a temporary stress response—it represents a chronic, deeply rooted shift in the way an individual experiences themselves and the world. War veterans and civilian survivors often experience heightened levels of anger, anxiety, mistrust, emotional numbness, and difficulty maintaining relationships, all of which contribute to a shift in identity and character. One of the most widely documented changes in individuals with PTSD is a significant increase in irritability and anger. According to the DSM-5, one of the diagnostic criteria for PTSD includes "irritable behavior and angry outbursts," which often manifest as aggression toward others (Blevins et al., 2015).

Anxiety is another core symptom. War survivors often develop chronic hyperarousal, where their nervous systems remain in a constant "fight-or-flight" state, even when they are no longer in immediate danger. This physiological and psychological over-activation leads to panic attacks, restlessness, sleep disturbances, and a constant feeling of being unsafe (Ray, 2015). These symptoms not only interfere with daily functioning but reshape the individual's worldview—creating a perception that danger is ever-present, which reinforces avoidance behavior and social withdrawal.

Emotional numbing is also commonly reported. Individuals with PTSD often experience a restricted range of affect, meaning they have difficulty feeling or expressing emotions like joy, love, or even sadness. This dampening of emotional responsiveness is believed to be a psychological defense mechanism—by numbing the pain, the brain also inadvertently suppresses positive emotional experiences. Over time, this leads to a form of emotional detachment, which can damage close relationships and contribute to a fragmented sense of self (Litz & Gray, 2002). There is also emerging evidence that PTSD can contribute to measurable personality changes. Longitudinal research suggests that trauma can result in reduced levels of agreeableness, extraversion, and emotional stability, and an increase in neuroticism. These changes reflect how deeply trauma embeds itself into the psyche, not only influencing mood and behavior but reshaping enduring patterns of thinking and feeling (McCrae & John, 1992).

Psychologist Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development also provides a useful lens here. Erikson argued that identity is shaped through a series of life stages, each with its own psychological crisis. For adults, war forces a confrontation with the stage of "generativity vs. stagnation" or "integrity vs. despair," while for adolescents and young adults, the identity formation stage ("identity vs. role confusion") becomes even more complex under the weight of trauma. In such conditions, identity may become entangled with victimhood, survival, or even resistance, leading to either a redefinition of self or a deep psychological rupture (Batra, 2013).

Immigration and adaptation

A particularly vulnerable group in this context are refugees—those forced to flee Ukraine due to violence, occupation, or destruction of infrastructure. The experience of displacement deeply affects personal and national identity. Research in refugee psychology shows that forced

migration results in a phenomenon called "cultural bereavement" (Eisenbruch, 1991), where individuals mourn the loss of their homeland, language, community, and social roles. This sense of loss often creates identity confusion, especially as refugees must navigate new cultural norms, languages, and expectations. In adapting to host countries, many Ukrainians face a conflict between preserving their national identity and assimilating to foreign cultures for the sake of survival and acceptance. According to acculturation theory (Berry, 1997), this can lead to four identity outcomes: integration, assimilation, separation, or marginalization—each with different psychological implications. Integration, for instance, can lead to a more stable dual identity, while marginalization often results in isolation and psychological distress.

National Identity

The war has profoundly shaped Ukraine's national identity, reinforcing the idea of Ukraine as a sovereign and independent nation. For centuries, Ukrainian identity was suppressed under Russian imperial and Soviet rule. The current war is not just about territory—it is also a battle over identity, history, and the right to self-determination.

Ethnicity

The Russian-Ukrainian war has become a powerful catalyst for redefining and consolidating Ukrainian national identity. Before the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2022 full-scale invasion, identity in Ukraine was regionally diverse and often fluid. Many Ukrainians, particularly in the east and south, identified as ethnically Russian or bilingual, embracing both Russian and Ukrainian cultural elements. The invasion created a stark "us versus them" narrative, prompting many individuals who previously identified with Russian language or

culture to consciously distance themselves from that affiliation and adopt a stronger, unified Ukrainian identity.

From a psychological perspective, this transformation can be partly understood through Social Identity Theory (SIT). According to SIT, individuals derive a significant part of their self-concept from group membership (Hornsey, 2008). In times of conflict, the boundaries between in-groups (Ukrainians) and out-groups (aggressors, in this case, Russia) become sharply defined. The need for positive distinctiveness—to see one's group in a favorable light—often intensifies in response to threat. The war, therefore, has not only united Ukrainians against a common enemy but also elevated national symbols, language, and history as central components of identity.

Empirical evidence supports this growing national consolidation. A 2023 survey by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) found that over 90% of Ukrainians now identify as ethnically and nationally Ukrainian, a stark increase from the 2012 figure of around 70% (KIIS, 2023). Even in traditionally Russian-speaking regions, support for Ukrainian sovereignty and cultural independence has surged. This reflects not just a political alignment but a deep psychological shift toward a more homogeneous and assertive national identity.

Collective trauma

Another important theoretical framework comes from the concept of collective memory, which describes how shared memories of trauma and resistance become part of a group's identity (Czaplicka, 1995). The events of the war—bombings, sieges, displacement, and heroism—are being etched into Ukraine's national narrative. These collective experiences foster a "collective trauma," which does not simply reflect shared suffering, but also the cultural processes through which societies make meaning of that suffering (Hirschberger, 2018). The defense of Kyiv, the

resistance in Mariupol, and the atrocities in Bucha have become more than tragic events—they are symbolic milestones in the redefinition of Ukrainian identity as resilient, sovereign, and morally unified.

National solidarity

Moreover, the war has fostered a remarkable sense of solidarity through mass acts of volunteering, mutual aid, and civic engagement. Millions of Ukrainians have contributed to the war effort—not only through military service but by delivering supplies, housing displaced people, creating art, raising awareness, and donating to support the military and civilians alike. These forms of prosocial behavior, often motivated by a shared sense of purpose and group identity, align with Self-Categorization Theory, which suggests that people adopt the norms and values of the group they identify with. In this case, helping behavior becomes a way of expressing national unity and moral responsibility (León, 2023).

Conclusion

The Russian-Ukrainian war has become a profound turning point in the psychological, social, and cultural evolution of identity in Ukraine. As this conflict unfolds, it continues to reshape both personal and national identity in powerful and lasting ways. On the individual level, war disrupts the basic foundations of psychological stability. Among both civilians and soldiers, it introduces changes in emotional regulation, increases in anger, anxiety, emotional numbness, and even shifts in personality traits such as higher neuroticism and decreased openness or trust. These psychological wounds influence how people perceive themselves, their relationships, and their place in the world. At the same time, transformation of Ukrainian national identity can be easily noticed. Where once there was regional ambiguity and a fluid relationship with

Russian culture and language, war has fostered a unified, assertive Ukrainian identity. Drawing from Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorization Theory, we can see how external threat fosters in-group cohesion, national pride, and shared values. The rise in Ukrainian language use, widespread civic participation, volunteerism, and cultural resistance reflect a deepening sense of belonging and solidarity. On both the micro and macro levels, Ukrainians are redefining what it means to be a person, a survivor, and a citizen. Through the lens of psychology, it becomes clear that identity is not static—it is alive, vulnerable, and, under pressure, capable of transformation. In the face of violence and displacement, identity becomes both a shield and a source of strength, a reflection of trauma and a declaration of unity.

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