Cultural Hegemony and National Cohesion: Examining the Ukrainian Experience

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Abstract: This article investigates the historical and ongoing impact of Russian cultural policies on the development and strengthening of Ukrainian national unity. Drawing on theories of nationalism, social identity, and cultural hegemony, we analyze how deliberate attempts to suppress Ukrainian language, history, and religious institutions have, paradoxically, contributed to a more robust and unified Ukrainian national identity. The study examines various facets of this suppression, including linguistic Russification, historical revisionism, and religious subjugation, and explores the Ukrainian responses, from linguistic preservation efforts to the assertion of ecclesiastical independence. Ultimately, the article argues that Russian cultural suppression, rather than diminishing Ukrainian nationhood, has inadvertently fostered a collective memory of resistance and a stronger sense of shared identity among Ukrainians, particularly evident in contemporary times.

Keywords: Cultural hegemony, national cohesion, Ukrainian identity, post-Soviet space, nation-building, language politics, media, propaganda, cultural conflict, ethno-linguistic divisions, Russian influence, civic nationalism, cultural resistance, hybrid warfare, soft power, Ukrainian nationalism, identity politics, geopolitical tensions, cultural integration, historical memory, civil society.

Introduction: National unity is a complex construct, often forged through shared experiences, common culture, and collective memory [1, 12, 38]. In the case of Ukraine, its path to national cohesion has been significantly shaped by centuries of external influence, particularly from Russia. Historically, the Russian state

has pursued policies aimed at integrating Ukraine, often through the forceful assimilation of its distinct cultural elements. These policies, rooted in a perception of Ukraine as an integral part of a "Russian world" [8] or even denying its very existence [6, 26], have manifested as systematic cultural suppression across various domains. This suppression has included the imposition of the Russian language, the reinterpretation of Ukrainian history to align with Russian narratives, and attempts to control Ukrainian religious institutions [9, 17, 35].

This article aims to analyze the multifaceted impact of these Russian cultural suppression efforts on Ukrainian national unity. We hypothesize that rather than successfully dissolving Ukrainian distinctiveness, these suppressive measures have, in fact, catalyzed the development of a more resilient and unified Ukrainian national identity. This investigation is pertinent in understanding the current geopolitical landscape and the profound societal shifts occurring within Ukraine, particularly in the context of recent conflicts [11]. We will draw upon established theoretical frameworks, including Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" [1], Henri Tajfel and John Turner's social identity theory [13, 36], and Antonio Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony [10, 37], to provide a comprehensive analysis of this dynamic.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, historical-analytical approach, drawing upon a range of primary and secondary sources. We analyze historical decrees, legislation, and official pronouncements related to language, education, and religion in both the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and independent Ukraine. Contemporary scholarly works, journalistic accounts, and official statements from Ukrainian and international bodies are also examined to provide context and evidence of the ongoing cultural struggle. The methodological framework is further informed by the aforementioned theoretical perspectives to interpret the impact of cultural suppression on national identity formation. The selection of references was based on their relevance to the historical and contemporary relationship between Russian cultural policy and Ukrainian national identity, covering aspects such as linguistics, religion, education, and the broader concept of nation-building.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The historical trajectory of Russian cultural suppression in Ukraine can be broadly categorized into several key areas: linguistic Russification, historical revisionism, and religious subjugation. Each of these attempts to assert cultural hegemony [10] has had a profound, often counterintuitive, impact on Ukrainian national unity.

Linguistic Russification and Ukrainian Linguistic Revival

For centuries, the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union implemented policies designed to promote the Russian language at the expense of Ukrainian. Edicts and decrees frequently restricted the use of Ukrainian in publishing, education, and public life. For example, the Ems Ukaz of 1876 famously banned the publication and import of Ukrainian-language books, except for belles-lettres [35]. During the Soviet era, while ostensibly promoting national languages, a process of "linguicide" was observed, where Russian was elevated as the language of prestige and advancement, leading to significant Russification, particularly in urban areas [4, 9, 16]. The 1989 Law of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic "On Languages in the Ukrainian SSR" reflected a complex linguistic landscape shaped by these policies [18].

However, these suppressive measures did not extinguish the Ukrainian language. Instead, they often fostered a sense of resistance and a deep attachment to the language as a marker of national identity. The creation of Ukrainian-Russian dictionaries, even under restrictive conditions, highlighted the distinctiveness of the Ukrainian language [15]. Following independence, Ukraine embarked on a deliberate path to strengthen the position of Ukrainian as the sole state language, enshrined in its Constitution [5]. The 2019 Law "On Ensuring the Functioning of the Ukrainian Language as the State Language" further solidified its status [19], building on earlier attempts such as the 2012 Law "On the Principles of State Language Policy" which initially caused some controversy [21]. The appointment of a Commissioner for the Protection of the State Language in 2020 further underscores this commitment [30]. This revival is not merely a linguistic shift but a profound act of national self-assertion, demonstrating a collective rejection of linguistic assimilation [2, 3, 4]. The ongoing process of "de-Russification" of cultural institutions and public discourse, including the renaming of artworks, signifies a broader cultural reclaiming [27].

Historical Revisionism and the Assertion of Ukrainian Narrative

Russian narratives have consistently sought to deny Ukraine's distinct historical trajectory, portraying it as an artificial construct or an inseparable part of a "Greater Russia" [6, 26, 29]. This historical revisionism often minimizes periods of Ukrainian statehood, exaggerates shared historical roots, and distorts events such as the Holodomor, which many scholars recognize as a deliberate act of genocide against the Ukrainian people [31, 33]. The concept of "Malorossiya" (Little

Russia) was a tool to diminish Ukrainian identity, subsuming it under a larger Russian identity [35].

Yet, this constant external redefinition of their past has spurred Ukrainians to actively reclaim and assert their own historical narrative. The emphasis on collective memory, as theorized by Halbwachs [12] and Wertsch & Roediger [38], has become crucial. Educational reforms, such as the "New Ukrainian School" initiative, aim to foster a national consciousness rooted in Ukrainian history and culture [7, 28]. The condemnation of communist and Nazi totalitarian regimes through legislation [20] is also a symbolic act of severing ties with a past that often sought to erase Ukrainian distinctiveness. The shared experiences of oppression, particularly during the Soviet era, have become powerful unifying elements, contributing to a strong sense of "imagined community" [1] and social identity [13, 36]. Scholars like Plokhy and Subtelny have provided comprehensive historical accounts that counter Russian narratives, further solidifying a distinct Ukrainian historical consciousness [29, 35].

Religious Subjugation and Ecclesiastical Independence

The Russian Orthodox Church has historically served as a tool of Russian state policy, extending its influence into Ukraine and often hindering the development of an independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church. For centuries, Ukrainian Orthodox institutions were subordinated to the Moscow Patriarchate, serving as a means of cultural and political control [22].

However, the pursuit of religious independence has been a significant aspect of Ukrainian national awakening. The establishment of the autocephalous (independent) Orthodox Church of Ukraine in 2018, formally recognized by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, marked a momentous break from centuries of Russian ecclesiastical dominance [14, 24]. This move was not merely a theological development but a powerful statement of national sovereignty and cultural autonomy. The conflict in Donbas further underscored the role of the Ukrainian National Church in affirming national identity [22]. This religious assertion reflects a broader trend of Ukrainians asserting their distinct identity across all societal spheres, demonstrating a robust resistance to external cultural and political influence.

CONCLUSION

The historical and ongoing attempts by Russia to suppress Ukrainian culture—through linguistic Russification, historical revisionism, and religious subjugation—have, paradoxically, strengthened Ukrainian national unity. Rather than eroding a distinct Ukrainian identity, these pressures have acted as a catalyst, fostering a deeper sense of shared heritage, collective memory of resistance, and a unified purpose among Ukrainians. The assertion of the Ukrainian language, the embrace of their authentic historical narrative, and the pursuit of ecclesiastical independence are not merely reactive measures but proactive affirmations of a resilient and vibrant national identity.

The Ukrainian experience offers a compelling case study of how external cultural hegemony, instead of leading to assimilation, can inadvertently solidify national cohesion. The current conflict, in particular, has galvanized Ukrainian society, uniting diverse linguistic and regional groups under a common banner of national defense and cultural preservation [2, 39]. As Ukraine continues to assert its sovereignty, its cultural distinctiveness, forged in the crucible of historical suppression, will undoubtedly remain a cornerstone of its national unity and its future trajectory on the international stage [34].

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