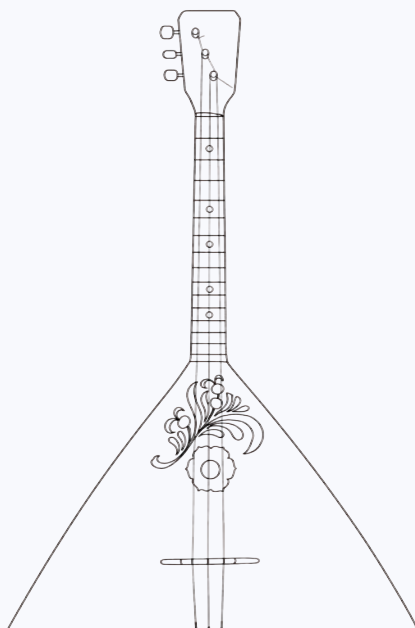
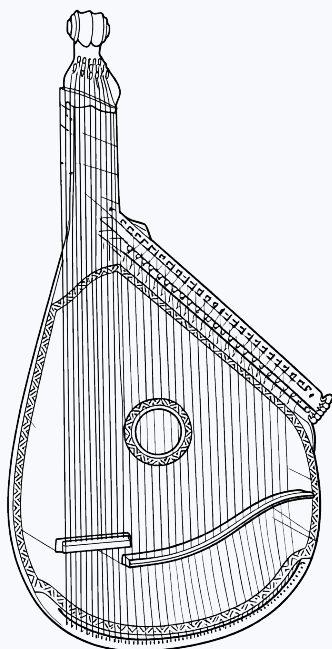


Iaroslav Petik

CULTURE WAR



An Essay on the Origins of the Russo-Ukrainian Conflict

With a foreword by Iryna Grabovska

Ukrainian Voices, vol. 112

ibidem

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Foreword

This book emerged from an attempt to answer a question that is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore: why do historical (above all military-political) conflicts continue to reappear in cultural form, even when the socio-political conditions that gave rise to them seem to have changed? Why do disputes over memory, language, symbols, religion, and identity so often become no less significant than struggles over territory, institutions, or military advantage? At the same time, it should not be forgotten that under certain conditions, such disputes can escalate into geopolitical confrontation, including ‘hot’ conflict. These questions lie at the core of what can be described as a culture war – not merely as a slogan or a metaphor of contemporary politics, but as a long-term historical process in which competing interpretations of the past shape the conflicts of the present and, no less importantly, projects of the future.

This book examines this problem through the case of Ukraine—a space where cultural, political, and civilizational tensions have intersected for centuries. Situated at the crossroads of empires, religions, and geopolitical projects, Ukraine has often been understood not only through military and diplomatic history but also through struggles over meaning. In this sense, the history of Ukraine demonstrates that culture is not secondary to power; it is one of its primary forms.

The chapters that follow consider the major periods of Ukrainian history—from early state formations and the confrontation of empires on these lands to revolutionary transformations, the Soviet experience, and contemporary ideological conflicts—as stages in a broader contest for historical narratives and cultural legitimacy. The aim of this study is not to reduce history to ideology, but rather to show that historical events themselves are often inseparable from the symbolic frameworks through which societies interpret them.

Special attention is given to the 20th century, as competing projects of modernity, nationalism, imperial construction, authoritarianism, and totalitarianism transformed the region and generated debates that remain unresolved to this day. At the same time,

the book argues that these tensions did not arise solely in the modern era. Their roots run much deeper—into earlier conflicts over political sovereignty, religious affiliation, and cultural orientation between East and West, North and South.

The title *Culture War* reflects precisely this broader understanding. It refers not only to contemporary political polarization but to a deeper struggle for the right to define history, identity, and the cultural foundations of social order.

If history can become an instrument of power, it can also serve as a field of resistance and critical reflection.

This book does not claim to offer a final resolution to these debates. Moreover, some fundamentally important problems remain beyond its scope—in particular, the role of imperial-totalitarian social mythology in attempts to erase the very concepts of Ukraine and Ukrainians from the face of the earth. This should become the subject of further research. At the same time, the book aspires to contribute to a deeper understanding of the cultural dimension of historical conflict and to demonstrate that the struggle for meaning is itself part of history, rather than something external to it. If this study encourages readers to see Ukrainian history not merely as a sequence of events, but as a complex field of conflicting trends, it will have fulfilled its purpose.

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Introduction

The history of Ukraine is often approached through the lens of political events, wars, and shifting borders. Yet such an approach, while important, remains incomplete. Beneath the visible layer of political transformations lies a deeper and more persistent dimension—culture. It is within culture that identities are formed, contested, preserved, and reinterpreted. This book is devoted to exploring that dimension, tracing how cultural processes have shaped the historical development of Ukraine and continue to influence its present. The conflict with Russia, including the current invasion, is an important context for this cultural development.

This conflict is not merely a confrontation between states over territory, resources, or geopolitical influence. Rather, it represents a clash of the global narratives and ways to interpret reality. At its core lies a long-standing tension between competing cultural paradigms, within which Ukraine has been positioned either as a peripheral extension of a broader imperial space or as a distinct cultural and historical entity with its own trajectory of development.

The formation of Ukrainian identity can be understood as a long-term process unfolding at the intersection of two major civilizational and geopolitical vectors—commonly marked as the West and the East. This position, however, is not merely geographical but deeply cultural, placing the region within a zone of constant interaction, conflict and deep influence of different political and cultural models.

From the early stages of its historical development, the territory of Ukraine functioned as a frontier space in which different systems of governance, religious traditions, and cultural norms encountered one another. The legacy of Kyivan Rus' itself reflects this dual orientation: On the one hand, connections to Byzantine Christianity and the Orthodox world; on the other, participation in broader European political and cultural processes. This duality did not produce a simple synthesis but rather established a structural tension that would continue to shape identity formation in subsequent centuries.

In the early modern period, this tension became more pronounced through the coexistence and competition between Poland and the expanding Muscovite state. These two centers represented not only different political interests but also different cultural models: one associated with Latin Christianity, legal pluralism, and certain forms of noble self-governance; the other with Orthodox tradition, centralized authority, and a distinct conception of political unity. Ukrainian lands, situated between these powers, became a space in which these models were not only imposed but also adapted, contested, and reinterpreted.

The Cossack phenomenon can be seen as one of the most significant responses to this situation. The Cossacks developed a form of social and political organization that drew elements from both spheres while simultaneously asserting a degree of autonomy. Their identity was shaped by the need to navigate between competing influences, which led to the emergence of a flexible and, at times, contradictory set of cultural orientations. This adaptability became one of the defining features of Ukrainian identity, allowing it to persist under changing political conditions.

The incorporation of Ukrainian territories into the Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires further intensified the dynamics of this in-between position. Each empire promoted its own vision of cultural and political integration, seeking to align local populations with broader imperial narratives. At the same time, these processes generated new forms of cultural self-reflection, as intellectuals and public figures began to articulate the specific context of the Ukrainian historical experience. The emergence of modern national consciousness in the 19th century can thus be seen as a response to the pressures and opportunities created by this dual orientation.

Importantly, the dichotomy of 'West' and 'East' should not be understood as a rigid opposition but as a set of interacting frameworks within which Ukrainian identity was continuously negotiated. Elements associated with both spheres were selectively appropriated, transformed, and integrated into local cultural practices. This process did not lead to a complete resolution of the underlying tensions; rather, it produced a dynamic identity capable of existence in constant evolution with the persistent pressure.

In this sense, Ukrainian identity emerged not despite its position between larger powers, but precisely because of it. The constant intersection of cultural models created a special, unique political and social context for Ukraine and the region in general. This historical experience continues to influence contemporary developments, where the interaction between different cultural vectors remains a central element of both internal dynamics and external conflicts.

Throughout history, these opposing interpretations have shaped both internal processes within Ukrainian society and its relations with neighboring powers. Cultural symbols, language, religious traditions, and historical memory have repeatedly become instruments through which political claims were articulated and justified. In this sense, the current invasion can be understood as the latest manifestation of a deeper, historically rooted struggle over meaning—a struggle in which the past is continuously reinterpreted to define the present.

The current invasion by Russia thus reveals the extent to which culture operates not only as a background for political events but as one of their driving forces. Narratives about the origins of statehood, the legacy of Kyivan Rus', the interpretation of the Soviet period, and the evaluation of key historical figures all play a decisive role in shaping collective identities and political orientations. These narratives are not neutral; they are actively constructed, disseminated, and contested in the spheres of education, media, and public discourse especially by propagandistic Russian media and cultural organizations.

At the same time, the Ukrainian cultural space itself is not homogeneous. It is characterized by internal diversity, regional differences, and the coexistence of multiple historical experiences. This complexity does not weaken the cultural foundation of the state but, on the contrary, demonstrates its dynamic and evolving nature. The interaction of these internal differences with external pressures has been one of the defining features of Ukrainian history. Just like any other country Ukraine is influenced by neighbors but Russian aggression in the information sphere is unprecedented.

By situating the current invasion within this broader cultural framework, the book seeks to move beyond simplified explanations and to provide a more nuanced understanding of the ongoing events. This attack is not isolated, but part of a longer continuum in which cultural meanings, identities, and narratives are constantly negotiated and where the resilience of the Ukrainian people can be more fully understood.

From the earliest periods of human habitation in the region to the complex ideological confrontations of the modern era, the territory of Ukraine has never existed in isolation. Over time, these processes gave rise not only to political entities but also to systems of meaning, memory, and self-identification. Understanding these systems is essential for interpreting both historical events and contemporary conflicts. Archaeological evidence demonstrates a continuous presence of human communities since the Stone Age, embedded within broader European and Eurasian developments.

It is important to emphasize that the territory of present-day Ukraine was never an isolated or marginal zone in prehistoric times. On the contrary, it functioned as an important interaction space between different ecological regions—forest, steppe, and river systems—which created favorable conditions for human settlement and mobility. These natural corridors facilitated the movement of populations, the exchange of technologies, and the diffusion of cultural practices across vast distances.

During the Paleolithic period, early human groups adapted to changing climatic conditions, including glacial and interglacial cycles, developing increasingly sophisticated tools and survival strategies. The archaeological record—stone implements, traces of dwellings, and evidence of organized hunting—suggests not only the persistence of human presence but also a gradual growth in social complexity. These communities were part of larger patterns of human development that connected the region to both Western Europe and the Eurasian steppe.

In the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods, this integration became even more pronounced. Environmental transformations led to shifts in subsistence strategies, while the emergence of early agriculture and animal domestication marked a transition toward

more stable forms of settlement. The appearance of pottery, changes in burial practices, and the development of local cultural traditions indicate that the region participated in the broader Neolithic revolution, albeit with its own specific forms of adaptation.

Importantly, the continuity of habitation challenges narratives that portray the territory as historically empty or culturally derivative. Instead, it reveals a long-term process of cultural layering, in which successive communities contributed to the formation of complex social and symbolic systems. These processes laid the groundwork for later historical developments, including the emergence of early political formations and cultural identities.

Thus, the prehistoric past of Ukraine should be understood not as a distant and disconnected prelude, but as an integral part of the wider history of human civilization. It is within this deep temporal horizon that the later cultural and historical dynamics of the region acquire their full significance.

One of the central arguments of this work is that many political struggles in Ukrainian history cannot be fully understood without recognizing their cultural foundations. The tensions between empires, the emergence of national movements, and even armed conflicts are deeply rooted in competing interpretations of identity, history, and belonging. Cultural differences, often perceived as abstract or “virtual,” have repeatedly manifested themselves in very concrete forms—from ideological disputes to open confrontation.

Cultural differences, often perceived as abstract or virtual, have repeatedly manifested themselves in very concrete forms—from ideological disputes to open confrontation. This dynamic becomes particularly visible when examined through the lens of imperialism, where cultural distinctions are not merely acknowledged but actively instrumentalized in the pursuit of political domination.

Imperial projects rarely rely on military force alone. They require a system of meanings that justifies expansion, appropriation, hierarchy, and control. In this context, cultural narratives become essential tools. Empires construct ideas of a center of civilization and a periphery of primitiveness, positioning the conquered territories within a framework that legitimizes subordination, transforming cultural difference into a rationale for political authority.

In the case of Ukraine, this process has taken multiple historical forms. Competing imperial frameworks—whether associated with the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, or other political entities—have sought to define Ukrainian culture either as a regional variation of a larger whole or as an incomplete, derivative formation lacking independent significance. These interpretations were embedded in educational systems, administrative practices, and cultural policies, gradually shaping the conditions under which identity itself could be articulated.

At the same time, cultural resistance to imperial narratives has been no less significant. Language, historical memory, religious traditions, and literary production have functioned as means of preserving alternative visions of identity. These forms of resistance did not always take overtly political shape; often, they operated within the cultural sphere, subtly contesting the imposed frameworks of meaning. However, under conditions of intensified pressure, such cultural tensions could—and often did—translate into open political conflict.

Imperialism thus reveals the material consequences of what might otherwise appear as purely symbolic differences. The struggle over how history is interpreted, how language is valued, or how cultural heritage is defined becomes inseparable from questions of power and sovereignty. When one narrative seeks to erase or absorb another, the conflict ceases to be abstract. It acquires institutional, social, and ultimately military dimensions.

The current invasion by Russia illustrates the persistence of these patterns. Competing cultural models continue to inform political claims, shaping both internal mobilization and external justification of actions. In this sense, the invasion can be understood not only as a geopolitical struggle but also as the latest phase in a longer historical process, in which cultural differences—far from being merely ‘virtual’ (not happening in the information sphere only but also in practical area)—have consistently resulted in a tangible clash of narratives, historical interpretations, and cultural models, often with dramatic consequences.

At the level of public discourse, the war is accompanied by competing explanations of its origins, legitimacy, and goals. These

explanations are not simply different perspectives on the same events; they are rooted in fundamentally different understandings of history and identity. Each side appeals to its own version of the past, constructing a narrative that frames the invasion as either a defensive necessity, a struggle for liberation, or an illegitimate act of aggression. In this way, history becomes not a neutral record of events, but a resource actively mobilized in the present.

One of the central points of contention concerns the question of historical continuity. The issue of how to interpret the legacy of Kyivan Rus', the imperial period, and the Soviet era directly influences contemporary political claims. For one narrative, Ukraine appears as an inseparable part of a broader historical and cultural space, whose separation is artificial and externally imposed. For another, it is a distinct historical community, whose trajectory has been repeatedly disrupted by imperial domination. These conflicting interpretations are not confined to academic debates; they shape collective identities and justify concrete political actions.

Language and cultural practice also play a crucial role in this confrontation. They function as visible markers of belonging, but also as symbols loaded with historical meaning. Choices related to language use, educational policy, and cultural production acquire a political dimension, as they are perceived either as expressions of sovereignty or as signs of alignment with a particular cultural sphere. In this context, everyday practice can become part of a broader symbolic struggle.

Media and information technologies further intensify this clash of narratives. The contemporary informational space allows for the rapid dissemination of interpretations, images, and symbols, transforming local events into global narratives: competing representations of the same event circulate simultaneously, each aiming to shape international opinion and domestic perception. As a result, the conflict unfolds not only on the battlefield but also in the sphere of information, where control over meaning becomes a strategic objective.

At a deeper level, the invasion reflects a confrontation between different cultural models – different ways of organizing political life, understanding authority, and relating the individual to

the state. These models are historically formed and culturally embedded, and they cannot be reduced to immediate political interests alone. The intensity of the current invasion is partly explained by the fact that it touches upon these foundational structures of meaning.

Thus, to interpret the war solely in geopolitical terms would be to overlook a crucial dimension of its nature. The armed confrontation is inseparable from an ongoing struggle over how the past is remembered, how the present is defined, and how the future is imagined. It is within this broader cultural and narrative framework that the full significance of the conflict can be understood.

Competing visions of the past are actively used to justify political positions, shape public consciousness, and define the boundaries of national identity. In this sense, what we are witnessing today can be described as a "culture war," where history itself becomes a field of struggle.

In such a context, the past is no longer treated as a completed and fixed sequence of events but as a dynamic and contested space in which different actors seek to assert their interpretations. Historical narratives are selected, emphasized, or reconfigured in accordance with present political needs. Events, figures, and entire periods of history acquire new meanings depending on how they are framed within broader ideological constructions. As a result, the struggle over territory is accompanied by a parallel struggle over memory.

This transformation of history into an arena of conflict has significant consequences for both public discourse and collective consciousness. Academic debates, which once remained within specialized circles, increasingly enter the sphere of mass communication, where they are simplified, politicized, and mobilized. Complex historiographical questions are reduced to symbolic markers that can be easily recognized and emotionally charged. In this environment, history functions less as a discipline aimed at critical inquiry and more as a source of legitimacy for political positions.

At the same time, institutions responsible for the production and dissemination of knowledge—schools, universities, media, and cultural organizations—become key participants in this process.

Educational programs, commemorative practices, and cultural policies shape the framework through which society perceives its past. The selection of which events are remembered, how they are interpreted, and which figures are celebrated or marginalized directly influences the formation of identity and political orientation.

The notion of a culture war also implies that the boundaries between different spheres of social life become increasingly blurred. Historical interpretation, political ideology, and cultural expression merge into a single field of interaction. Symbols, language, and collective memory are no longer secondary elements but central instruments in the struggle for influence. This integration of cultural and political dimensions intensifies the conflict, as it engages not only state institutions but also broader segments of society.

Furthermore, the globalized information environment amplifies these processes. Competing narratives are no longer confined to national contexts but circulate internationally, interacting with external audiences and influencing foreign perceptions. This external dimension reinforces the internal dynamics of the culture war, as international recognition or rejection of narratives becomes an additional source of validation or pressure.

Thus, the contemporary situation demonstrates that history is not merely a background to political events but an active, essential component. In this sense, the concept of a culture war reflects not only the intensity of the current confrontation but also its fundamentally symbolic and interpretative nature.

The book, therefore, combines historical analysis with a broader cultural approach. It examines key periods—from antiquity and early state formations to the revolutionary era of the early 20th century and the Soviet period—not merely as sequences of events but as stages in the development of cultural frameworks. Special attention is given to the ways in which these frameworks are constructed, contested, and instrumentalized in different historical contexts.

Such an approach presupposes a shift in perspective: instead of asking only what happened, the analysis focuses on how meaning was constructed within each historical context. Political

institutions, social structures, and economic systems are considered alongside symbolic practices, narrative forms, and mechanisms of collective memory. Each period is thus interpreted as a configuration of cultural assumptions that shaped both individual experience and collective action.

In the study of antiquity and early historical formations, attention is given to the ways in which external influences and internal developments contributed to the emergence of the region as a contact zone between different civilizational traditions. Greek colonization, interactions with nomadic societies, and the formation of early political structures are approached not simply as historical facts, but as processes that introduced competing models of social organization and cultural expression. These early encounters established patterns of interaction that would continue to influence the region in later periods.

The analysis of the early modern and imperial eras highlights the gradual institutionalization of cultural hierarchies. Administrative systems, educational policies, and religious institutions played a decisive role in shaping the boundaries of legitimate identity. Cultural frameworks during this period were often imposed from above, yet they were never fully stable; they were continuously negotiated, adapted, and resisted within local contexts.

The revolutionary period of the early 20th century is examined as a moment of intensified cultural articulation. The collapse of imperial structures created a space in which questions of identity, historical continuity, and political legitimacy could be redefined. Competing visions of the future were grounded in different interpretations of the past, and cultural symbols became central to the process of political mobilization. In this sense, the revolutionary events can be understood not only as political upheavals but also as attempts to establish new cultural frameworks.

The Soviet period represents a distinct phase in this trajectory, characterized by a systematic effort to reorganize cultural life through ideological control. Cultural production, historical interpretation, and even everyday practices were subject to regulation, forming a highly structured environment in which official narratives coexisted with alternative, often suppressed, forms of

expression. The persistence of these alternative currents demonstrates the limits of imposed cultural frameworks and the resilience of local traditions and identities.

By analyzing these periods in terms of evolving cultural frameworks, the book seeks to reveal underlying continuities that are not always visible at the level of political events alone. It shows how different historical layers interact, overlap, and sometimes contradict one another, creating a complex and dynamic cultural landscape. This perspective allows for a more comprehensive understanding of Ukrainian history as a process in which meaning, identity, and power are inseparably intertwined.

This interconnection becomes particularly evident in the ideological debates of the 20th century, especially during the Soviet period, when questions of identity and historical interpretation were not merely theoretical but deeply embedded in structures of political power. The Soviet project did not simply seek to govern territory; it aimed to reshape consciousness and to produce a specific type of historical subject whose identity would align with the ideological foundations of the state.

Within this framework, history was systematically reinterpreted in accordance with Marxist-Leninist doctrine. The past was reorganized into a teleological narrative that emphasized class struggle, the inevitability of socialist development, and the leading role of the Communist Party. Ukrainian history, in this context, was often subsumed into a broader narrative of the “fraternal unity” of Soviet peoples, in which national distinctions were acknowledged only insofar as they did not challenge the primacy of the all-union identity. This process illustrates how meaning was actively constructed and institutionalized, rather than discovered.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that these official narratives were never uncontested. Intellectuals, writers, and cultural figures engaged in ongoing, often subtle forms of resistance, preserving alternative interpretations of history and identity. These debates frequently took place within constrained conditions, where direct opposition could lead to repression. As a result, ideological confrontation often assumed indirect forms—through literature, scholarly work, or cultural expression—in which