



WHAT IS UKRAINE?

It is the largest country in Europe, whose territory lies entirely within the continent. It is a state that regained its independence only thirty years ago, yet whose coat of arms bears a history stretching back a thousand years.

Ukraine is a land whose sons and daughters built the first helicopter, charted the trajectory for the flight to the Moon, and created The Black Square. It is the birthplace of world-renowned artists and innovators. Ukraine is a unique blend of tradition and modernity: a place where people take pride in wearing traditional vyshyvanka embroidery, have built the world's largest aircraft, the Mriya, and today set new benchmarks in the art of warfare. Above all, Ukraine is a country of free people.

It has a centuries-long, multifaceted history, often defined by the struggle for the right to be free. Sadly, Ukrainian lands have more than once become the stage for bloody wars and crimes against humanity. At the same time, Ukraine's history is rich with chapters of courage in defending freedom and dignity, as well as examples of humanity and compassion.

Despite the upheavals of the past, the spirit of resistance to injustice is deeply rooted in Ukrainians. It is this very spirit that makes them free, future-oriented, and determined to uphold the values of liberty and democratic choice.



Nechaeva (Hehelyna) Mohyla kurgan. Scythians, 4th century BCE. Village of Lebedynske, Dnipropetrovsk region. (Present-day appearance).



The first name under which the lands of present-day Ukraine entered written history was Scythia. This is how the ancient Greeks referred to the region two and a half thousand years ago. The Scythians were described by Herodotus, the “Father of History”, as well as by other classical authors. In their accounts, the Scythians appear as brave yet fierce warriors, known for scalping defeated enemies. Scythian archers were renowned throughout the ancient world. At the same time, in the classical tradition, the Scythian Anacharsis was traditionally regarded as one of the Seven Wise Men of Greece.

The Scythians were an ancient people who inhabited vast territories north of the Black Sea between the 7th and 3rd centuries BCE, forming a powerful political entity. Traces of Scythian influence and military campaigns can be found from the Near East to Central Europe.



Pectoral. Scythians, mid-4th century BCE. Tovsta Mohyla kurgan near the city of Pokrov, Dnipropetrovsk region. Gold, enamel. Treasury of the National Museum of the History of Ukraine.

SCYTHIA



Sculpted figurine of a boar (cup handle). Scythians, 4th century BCE. Khomyna Mohyla kurgan near the village of Nahirne, Dnipropetrovsk region. Gold. Treasury of the National Museum of the History of Ukraine.

The Scythians themselves were nomadic herders who occupied the steppe regions. To the north of the nomads lived sedentary agriculturalists-whom Herodotus referred to as Scythian ploughmen-as well as other mysterious tribes.

Numerous archaeological sites from this era have been uncovered, including impressive fortresses. The most significant among them is the fortified settlement near modern-day Bilsk, encompassing around 5,000 hectares, with a complex system of fortifications stretching nearly 37 kilometres. Many researchers associate this archaeological site with the city of Gelonus, mentioned by Herodotus.

The Scythians buried their dead beneath large burial mounds, or kurgans. The most monumental of these reached heights of over 20 meters. These royal tombs contained exquisite artifacts, masterfully crafted works of art created by artisans in the ancient cities along the Black Sea coast, such as Olbia and Chersonesus.



Rhyton with gold decoration. Scythians, late 5th century BCE. Kurgan near the village of Velyka Znamianka, Zaporizhzhia region. Treasury of the National Museum of the History of Ukraine.



Map of the settlement of Scythian tribes (Scythian ploughmen, Scythian farmers, nomadic Scythians, and Royal Scythians) and their neighbors in the 5th-4th centuries BC. Map by the National Museum of the History of Ukraine.



Prince Ihor's campaign against Constantinople in 941. A miniature from the Radziwiłł Chronicle, late 15th century.

As the brilliance of the ancient civilisations began to fade, the Slavs emerged onto the historical stage in the mid-1st millennium AD. Archaeological evidence indicates that their great migration began from the lands between the Dniester and Dnipro rivers.

Within a few centuries, the first Slavic state centres began to emerge in these territories, among them, Kyiv. According to legend, the city was founded by Prince Kyi, along with his brothers Shchek and Khoryv, and their sister Lybid. In the 9th century, Vikings reached Kyiv and established a ruling dynasty that governed the region for several centuries. The state that grew around Kyiv came to be known as Rus'.

MEDIEVAL RUS'



Plintha (brick) bearing the trident – the princely symbol of Prince Volodymyr Sviatoslavych. Kyiv, late 10th – early 11th century. National Museum of the History of Ukraine.

The most prominent ruler of Rus' was Volodymyr the Great, who accepted Christianity at the end of the 10th century. His son, Yaroslav the Wise, built Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv and founded a library. Yaroslav is also remembered as the “father-in-law of Europe”, having married off his daughters and sisters into the royal families of Byzantium, Sweden, Norway, Poland, Hungary, and France.



The Baptism of Prince Volodymyr in 988. A miniature from the Radziwiłł Chronicle, late 15th century.

Under the reigns of Volodymyr and Yaroslav, Kyivan Rus' reached its peak, extending from the Black Sea to the Baltic. Yet the heart of this state lay in the lands around Kyiv, territories that today belong to Ukraine.

However, the princes of Rus' were unable to defend their state from nomadic invasions. In the 13th century, Mongol armies invaded Rus' and sacked Kyiv.

The most powerful prince of that time was Danylo of Halych, whose domain stretched from the Carpathian Mountains and the Dniester River to the Lithuanian frontier. He received the title of King from the Pope, leading to the formation of the Kingdom of Rus'. Danylo's descendants introduced numerous European innovations in their lands, including legal privileges, guild structures, and Magdeburg rights.

A century later, Danylo's dynasty came to an end, and the Kingdom of Rus' was absorbed by the Polish and Lithuanian states. Nevertheless, the local population preserved its distinct identity and cultural uniqueness.

Rus' holds a central place in the history of Ukraine, not only as the first centralised state on these lands but also as a lasting source of national heritage. Its symbols, such as Volodymyr the Great's trident, continue to serve as state symbols of modern Ukraine.



Chernihiv (Saviour-Transfiguration Cathedral).



Mosaic depiction of Saint Demetrius of Thessaloniki from the St. Michael's Golden-Domed Cathedral in Kyiv, early 12th century. In the 1930s, the cathedral was destroyed by the communist regime, and the mosaic was taken to Moscow. Today, the appropriated mosaic remains in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow.



Monument to Cossack Hetman Petro Sahaidachny, erected in 2001 in Kyiv. Petro Sahaidachny was one of the most prominent leaders of the Zaporizhian Cossacks in the first half of the 17th century. Under his command, the Cossacks carried out a series of victorious naval campaigns against the Ottoman Empire. In 1618, Sahaidachny's troops even stormed Moscow. His greatest military achievement was the Battle of Khotyn in 1621, where the outnumbered Cossack and Polish forces successfully repelled the Ottoman army.

In the 16th century, a new socio-political phenomenon emerged on Ukrainian lands – the Zaporizhian Cossacks, a unique military and economic organisation formed by frontier settlers.

At that time, one-fifth of Ukrainian territory was known as the Wild Fields, largely unsettled steppe lands located between the territories of the Crimean Khanate and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. These vast expanses attracted all kinds of people: peasants fleeing oppressive labour duties, landowners establishing fortified outposts, adventurers, and skilled warriors. Together, they laid the foundation for what became the Cossack class.

THE ZAPORIZHIAN COSSACKS

Seal depicting the coat of arms of the Zaporizhian Cossacks – a Cossack with a musket. 17th century. Published in: Savchuk Y.K. *Kleynody of the Glorious Zaporizhian Host* (Museum Studies) – Kyiv: Institute of Ukrainian History, 2007.



Cossack powder flask, 17th century. National Museum of the History of Ukraine.



The Cossacks established their centre south of the Dnipro River rapids – the Zaporizhian Sich, which was built on principles of personal freedom and elected leadership. From there, they operated across the steppe lands of what is now southern and eastern Ukraine. They founded permanent settlements and developed the region economically, turning the once-wild steppe into cultivated land.



The famous painting "Reply of the Zaporozhian Cossacks to the Sultan of Turkey" (1890-1891) by renowned artist of Ukrainian origin, Ilya Repin, is one of the most iconic representations of the Zaporizhian Cossacks. The painting illustrates a folkloric episode in which the Cossacks, responding to the Sultan's demand for surrender, defiantly refuse and mock the Sultan and his army in a colourful and irreverent letter.

The Cossacks quickly grew into a formidable force in Eastern European history. Cossack units took part in nearly every major military conflict in the region, from naval raids against the Ottoman Empire and its vassals to campaigns against Poland, Muscovy, and Sweden. They operated both as an independent military power and as mercenaries in the service of contemporary states.

Within the Cossack elite, the idea of creating an independent state began to take shape. Their political culture was deeply influenced by the republican ideals of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth's nobility-based political system.

Today, Ukrainians are once again defending their freedom in the war against Russian aggression, drawing strength and inspiration from the legacy of their Cossack forebears.



Portrait of Prince Dmytro Vyshnevetsky, mid-1760s, unknown artist. National Museum of the History of Ukraine. Prince Dmytro Vyshnevetsky is considered one of the earliest leaders of the Cossacks. In the 1550s, he built a fortress on Khortytsia Island (now within the city of Zaporizhzhia), which is regarded as the prototype of the Zaporizhian Sich. In Ukrainian folklore, he is known as the legendary Cossack Baida.



The building of the Chernihiv Collegium, an educational institution founded in the late 17th century. Supported by Hetman Ivan Mazepa, it featured a two-tiered bell tower built at his expense. In the 18th century, the Collegium was a major cultural and educational centre of the Hetmanate.

In 1648, while the Thirty Years' War was coming to an end in Europe and civil war raged in England, a revolution erupted in Ukraine. Led by Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky, the Cossacks, together with their Crimean Tatar allies, defeated the armies of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in a series of battles. With broad support from the population of Ukrainian lands, a Ukrainian Cossack state known as the Hetmanate was established.



Late 17th-century ceremonial mace (the bulava). National Museum of the History of Ukraine. In the Hetmanate, the bulava symbolised the authority of the ruler of the Cossack state.



THE EARLY MODERN COSSACK STATE – THE HETMANATE

The royal doors of the iconostasis of the Borysohlibsky Cathedral in Chernihiv, crafted in 1702 by master Philipp Jakob Drentwett IV in Augsburg (Germany) on commission from Hetman Ivan Mazepa. The central panel features the Hetman's coat of arms and the monogram I.S.M.H.Z. – Ivan Stepanovych Mazepa, Hetman of the Zaporizhian Host. Collection of the National Architectural and Historical Reserve "Ancient Chernihiv."



However, the new state lacked the strength to withstand the Commonwealth on its own. Seeking military support, Khmelnytsky signed an alliance with the Tsar of Muscovy in 1654. The Tsar later exploited this agreement to begin absorbing the Hetmanate, and in 1667, he signed a treaty with the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to divide Ukrainian territories. Ukraine was split and weakened. This era of conflict and devastation became known as the "Ruin."



18th-century portrait of Hetman Ivan Mazepa by an unknown artist. National Museum of the History of Ukraine

In 1708, Hetman Ivan Mazepa attempted to restore unity and independence to the Ukrainian state. He formed an alliance with King Charles XII of Sweden and rose up against the Muscovite Tsar. However, the allied forces were defeated. Mazepa's dramatic defiance gained global fame, inspiring writings by Voltaire, Byron, and Victor Hugo. After Mazepa's failed uprising, the Hetmanate gradually lost its autonomy.

In 1764, Empress Catherine II of Russia forced the last Hetman, Kyrylo Rozumovsky, to resign. In 1775, Russian forces destroyed the Zaporizhian Sich. Its last leader (Koshovyi Otaman), Petro Kalnyshkevskyi, was imprisoned in the remote northern Solovetsky Monastery.

The Russian Empire destroyed the Cossack state, but it could not extinguish the Cossacks' spirit of freedom, which would later be reborn in the 20th century. The heroic era of the Hetmanate remains in the memory of Ukrainians as a proud and defining chapter of their past.



19th-century portrait of Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky by an unknown artist. National Museum of the History of Ukraine.



At the end of the 18th century, Ukrainian lands were divided between the Austrian and Russian Empires. Despite being separated by imperial borders, Ukrainians succeeded in preserving their cultural identity. Over the next century, like many peoples across Europe, Ukrainians underwent a transformation that ultimately led to the emergence of a modern nation.

The 19th century marked the rise of modern Ukrainian literature and music. It was the era of such prominent cultural figures as Taras Shevchenko, Mykhailo Drahomanov, Ivan Franko, and Lesia Ukrainka. Inspired by these leaders, Ukrainians on both sides of the Zbruch River (which once marked the imperial boundary in western Ukraine) increasingly came to see themselves as one people, united from the San River to the Don.

BETWEEN TWO EMPIRES: THE BIRTH OF A NATION



A Ukrainian peasant family in the Cherkasy region wearing festive traditional attire in the early 20th century.



The Russian authorities perceived the growing Ukrainian national movement as a threat. In response, the imperial government first restricted, then banned, the publication and distribution of books in Ukrainian, as well as the use of the language in theatre and public performances. Russian officials propagated the notion that the Ukrainian language “did not exist and could not exist.” In contrast, Ukrainians in the Austrian Empire enjoyed relatively greater freedoms, including the right to vote. In 1890, they established the first Ukrainian political party.

Despite repression, Ukrainians continued to fight for political and civil rights, founding powerful cooperatives and railway networks, opening secondary schools and hospitals, contributing to science and technology, and advancing the Ukrainian language and culture.

The second half of the 19th century saw an industrial boom in eastern and southern Ukraine. With support from European investors and specialists, major industrial enterprises were built. One of the most notable developments was led by British entrepreneur John Hughes, who established a steel plant and workers’ settlement on the site of a former Cossack village. This settlement would eventually grow into the city of Yuzivka – now known as Donetsk. Urban populations expanded rapidly: over the century, the population of Kyiv increased tenfold, and that of Odesa twentyfold.



Ukrainian poet and artist Taras Shevchenko with friends: Hryhorii Chestakhivskyy, Pavlo Yakushkin, Oleksandr and Mykhailo Lazarevsky in 1859. The poetry of Taras Shevchenko played a decisive role in shaping Ukrainian national identity. The Russian imperial government exiled him to the Aral Sea region, forbidding him from “writing or reading.”

By the dawn of the 20th century, the political demand for an independent Ukrainian state had been clearly articulated, a demand that would become central to the Ukrainian national movement throughout the 20th century.

Ukrainian demonstration in Kyiv in the spring of 1917.



At the dawn of the 20th century, millions were swept into the turmoil of the First World War. Those who survived witnessed the collapse of empires and the rise of newly independent nation-states.

Ukrainians, too, embarked on the path of building their own national state. In March 1917, the Ukrainian Central Rada (Council) was established in Kyiv. It was chaired by the prominent historian Mykhailo Hrushevskiy. Within just six months, the Rada evolved from a civic organisation into the parliament of the Ukrainian People's Republic (UPR), which was formally proclaimed in November 1917. On 22 January 1918, the UPR declared its full independence.

THE UKRAINIAN REVOLUTION OF 1917–1921

A 100-hryvnia banknote of the Ukrainian People's Republic, issued in 1918.



Fedir Artemenko, better known as Otaman Orlyk, was the leader of the Kyiv region insurgents who fought against the Bolshevik occupiers. He was captured and executed in 1922.



Later that year, in the western Ukrainian lands that had previously belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Western Ukrainian People's Republic (WUPR) was founded. Just three months later, on 22 January 1919, it united with the rest of Ukraine in an act of national consolidation.



The proclamation of the act that established the Ukrainian People's Republic, held at Sofiyska Square in Kyiv. At the center are Ukrainian leaders Mykhailo Hrushevsky and Symon Petliura, November 1917.

The aspiration for statehood was the core of the Ukrainian Revolution. During these revolutionary years, the national symbols of Ukraine were established – the blue and yellow flag, the Tryzub (trident) as the national coat of arms, and the national anthem "Shche Ne Vmerla Ukrainy". These years also saw the founding of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine and the flourishing of innovative cultural movements.

Unfortunately, from the very beginning of its existence, the young republic was forced to defend itself through armed struggle against external threats. Despite several years of resistance, Ukraine was unable to preserve its independence. Nevertheless, it was during the transformative period of 1917–1921 that the foundations of a modern Ukrainian political nation were forged.

Despite defeat and foreign occupation, Ukrainians demonstrated both the will and the capacity for national state-building. The question of Ukrainian statehood became a lasting and influential factor in the political landscape of 20th-century Eastern Europe.

The experience of resistance, particularly the legacy of the Ukrainian People's Republic and widespread partisan uprisings, compelled the Bolshevik regime, which had consolidated power across much of the former Russian Empire, to create a quasi-state formation in Ukraine: the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, with its capital in Kharkiv. This move was aimed at reinforcing their control over Ukraine while acknowledging the strength of national aspirations.



A scene from the performance "Hello on Wave 477" by the Berezil Theatre, 1929. The 1920s marked the emergence of a new, modern theatre in Ukraine. The Berezil Theatre, under the direction of the renowned stage director Les Kurbas, revolutionised theatrical art in Ukraine. "Hello on Wave 477" was Ukraine's first revue – a satirical musical performance addressing current social and political issues. The stage design was created by artist Vadym Meller. Photo: Open Kurbas website.

The term "The Executed Renaissance" refers to a vibrant period of Ukrainian cultural flourishing in the 1920s that was abruptly halted and ultimately destroyed by the repressions of the communist regime in the 1930s.

In the early 1920s, most of the territories inhabited by Ukrainians came under communist control. To consolidate power, the Soviet authorities initially promoted national cultures through a policy known as "korenizatsiya" ("indigenisation"). The goal of this policy was to strengthen the regime's authority by integrating ("taking root") within the various national groups of the USSR. Although short-lived, limited in scope, and implemented with evident hypocrisy, this policy had some positive outcomes.

"THE EXECUTED RENAISSANCE"



Self-portrait of Mykhailo Boichuk, a prominent Ukrainian monumental artist. Photo: <https://www.wikiart.org/>.

During this brief window of relative creative freedom, a new generation of innovative Ukrainian cultural figures emerged, writers, visual artists, and theatre professionals, whose work reflected a renaissance of Ukrainian cultural life. In Ukraine, the korenizatsiya policy quickly expanded beyond the confines of the Communist Party's intentions. Inspired by the Ukrainian Revolution of 1917–1921, cultural life in Ukraine continued to thrive, giving rise to a European-style renaissance. Ukrainian intellectuals and artists began shaping cultural traditions distinct from Russian ones, oriented instead toward European models. A national education system was developed, and economic concepts were articulated that envisioned Ukraine as an autonomous economic entity.

Alla Herbut-Johansen – artist, writer, and wife of writer Maik Yohansen – near the writers' cooperative building "Slovo". At the end of 1929, a cooperative apartment building was constructed in Kharkiv, then the capital of the Ukrainian SSR, and was inhabited exclusively by artists, the vast majority of whom were writers. This was a rare case when a significant part of the country's cultural elite lived under one roof. Photo: ProSlovo website.

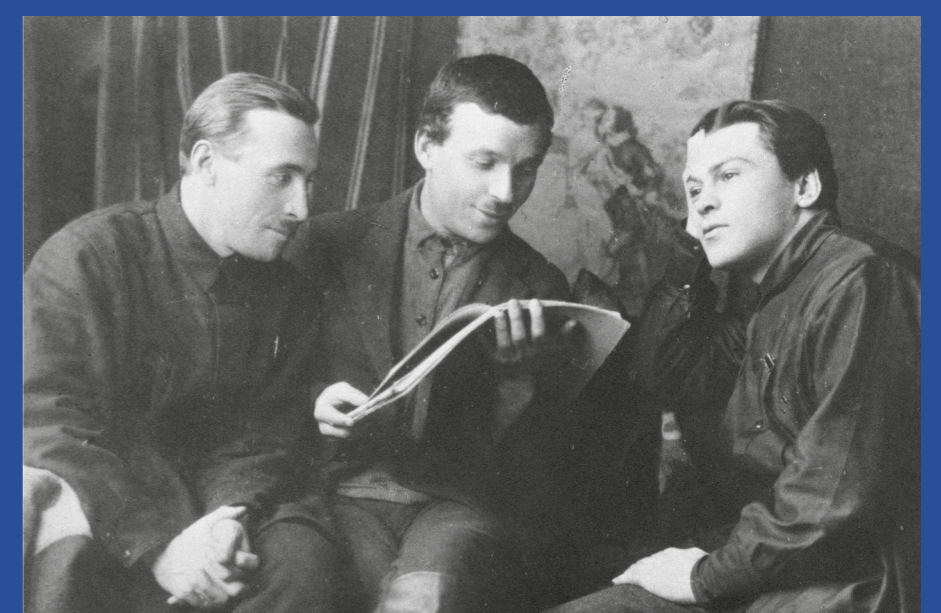


A book cover designed by artist Vasyl Krychevskiy for Oleksa Slisarenko's Black Angel, 1929. Book design in the 1920s and early 1930s was a distinctive phenomenon. This was a time of bold experimentation in both literary and visual arts, marked by elegant and visually striking book layouts. Renowned artists, such as Vasyl Krychevskiy, often contributed to cover designs. Photo: collections of the Kharkiv Literary Museum.



However, by 1932–1933, the policy of "Ukrainisation" was decisively reversed. The brief period of encouragement for Ukrainian culture gave way to a brutal campaign of repression against its creators. Many of the most talented artists and intellectuals were executed or broken spiritually, and their works, ideas, and voices were either banned or lost forever.

Mykola Kulish, the most prominent Ukrainian playwright of the 1920s and early 1930s, reading to fellow writers Ivan Dniprovskiy and Arkadii Liubchenko. Photo: collections of the Kharkiv Literary Museum.



Les Kurbas, an innovative theatre director. Photo: Open Kurbas website.

Bells removed from churches in the Zaporizhzhia region. The Communist regime carried out a systematic anti-religious policy, which targeted clergy of all faiths.



In the early 1920s, the young Ukrainian state, the Ukrainian People's Republic, suffered a military defeat, and lands inhabited by Ukrainians were divided among various states. The western part of the Ukrainian territories came under the control of Poland, Romania, and Czechoslovakia. The majority of Ukraine's territory, however, was occupied by the new rulers in Moscow—the communist dictatorship. Over the following seventy years of communist rule, the fate of these territories proved particularly tragic.

The Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, established by the communists, had no genuine sovereignty over its territory. Furthermore, Ukraine, having experienced independence and possessing an intellectual and cultural elite oriented towards

THE HOLODOMOR AND THE GRIP OF TOTALITARIANISM



Academician Serhii Yefremov was accused in 1929 of establishing the fabricated "Union for the Liberation of Ukraine" and sentenced to long-term imprisonment. He died in custody in 1939. Central State Audiovisual and Electronic Archives.



Vasyl Ivchuk, a school principal in the Kyiv region, saved his students from starvation in 1933. In 1938, he was arrested and executed. In 2008, he was posthumously awarded the title Hero of Ukraine.



People who died of starvation on the streets of Kharkiv in the summer of 1933. Photograph by Alexander Wienerberger. Central State Audiovisual and Electronic Archives.

Europe, was regarded as a particular threat by the regime. As a result, even the slightest signs of dissent or attempts to assert Ukrainian dignity were labelled as manifestations of "Ukrainian nationalism" and faced harsh persecution.

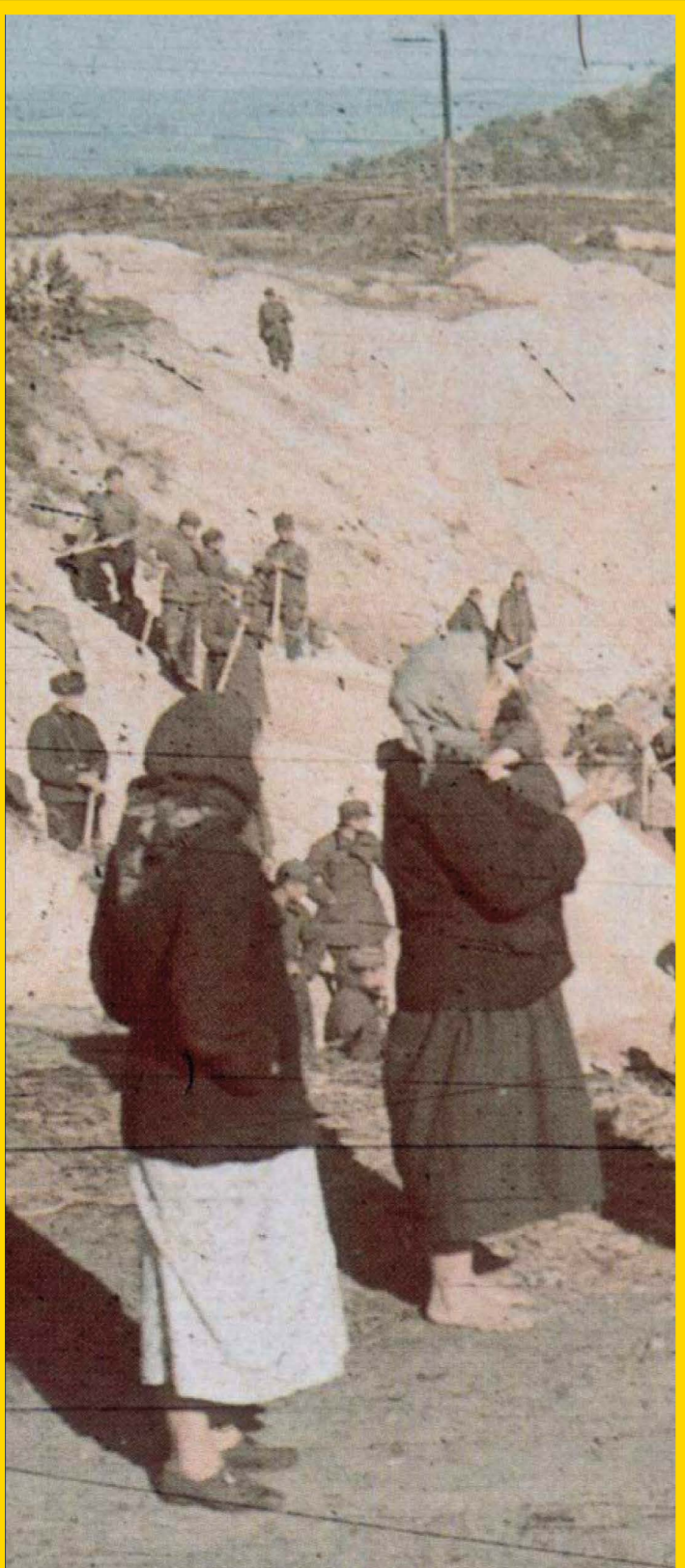
By the late 1920s, the communist regime began to fabricate criminal cases against fictitious Ukrainian organisations, leading to the arrest, imprisonment, or execution of tens of thousands of Ukrainian intellectuals, artists, educators, and professionals. These repressions culminated in 1937–1938 during what became known as the "Great Terror." Hundreds of thousands of people in Ukraine were arrested under false accusations, many were summarily executed, while others were sent to labour camps that later became known as the GULAG.

The most horrific crime of the totalitarian regime against the Ukrainian people was the Holodomor of 1932–1933. This was a genocide. The weapon was an artificially induced famine. In the autumn and winter of 1932, food supplies were forcibly confiscated from the majority of Ukrainian villages. As a result, millions of Ukrainians died of starvation.

Yet, neither the repressions nor the Holodomor were able to erase Ukrainian identity. Despite the overwhelming terror of the totalitarian regime, Ukrainians continued to preserve, and in many cases, seek to enrich their culture.



Operatives of the Communist security services with grain confiscated from Ukrainian farmers, October 1932. Photo courtesy of the State Archive of Kherson Region.



In the Babyn Yar ravine in Kyiv, over 100,000 people, Jews, Roma, Soviet POWs, and resistance fighters, were executed during the German occupation.

The Second World War was one of the largest armed conflicts in human history, engulfing Europe, East Asia, Africa, the Middle East, the Atlantic, and the Pacific. At its heart were the Ukrainian lands, home to the largest stateless nation in Europe at the time.

The war began on September 1, 1939, with Nazi Germany's invasion of Poland. It immediately affected parts of Ukraine that were then part of the Second Polish Republic. On June 22, 1941, following the invasion of the Soviet Union by Germany and its allies, the entire territory of Ukraine became a battleground. By the summer of 1942, Nazi Germany had occupied all of Ukraine.

UKRAINE IN THE FIRE OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR



General Guderian and Brigade Commander Kryvoshein in Brest-Litovsk (1939): Nazi General Heinz Guderian and Soviet brigade commander Semyon Kryvoshein at a joint parade during the handover of Brest-Litovsk (Belarus) to the Red Army in September 1939. The war began after Nazi Germany and the Communist USSR signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact on August 23, 1939. This non-aggression agreement led to the joint invasion of Poland and the division of spheres of influence in Eastern Europe. The Hitler-Stalin alliance lasted until June 22, 1941.

Nazi "eastern policy" envisioned Ukraine as a colony meant to serve the German war economy, supplying food, raw materials, and human labour.

Babyn Yar in Kyiv became a mass grave of over 100,000 civilians and prisoners of war. It is now a powerful symbol of the Holocaust in Ukraine. Nearly 1.5 million Jews were murdered in Nazi-occupied Ukrainian territory. Civilian losses in Ukraine during the war exceeded five million.

Ukraine was one of the primary theatres of military operations and the site of immense and bloody battles. The front line passed through Ukraine twice, leaving destruction and death in its wake. Both the Nazi and Soviet forces employed scorched-earth tactics when retreating and indiscriminate shelling and bombing during offensives.

Soviet troops engage in combat in a Ukrainian village in 1944.



A German army unit having a meal in a Ukrainian village in 1944.



Ukrainian families evacuate ahead of advancing forces. Millions of Ukrainians became refugees during the war.

Ukrainians made a significant contribution to the victory over Nazism. They showed extraordinary bravery, heroism, and sacrifice on many fronts and within various Allied armies. Millions fought in regular armed forces; hundreds of thousands joined underground and resistance movements. Over three million Ukrainians gave their lives in the fight against Nazism.



"Boryviter" Mosaic: Created by prominent Sixtiers-era artist Alla Horska in Mariupol in the 1960s. In 1970, Horska was murdered—Soviet secret services are suspected. Her mosaic was later destroyed by Russian forces during the siege of Mariupol in March 2022.

In the 1960s and 1970s, a unique social phenomenon emerged in the Soviet Union: individual citizens and groups, primarily intellectuals, began to publicly express their dissent with the current state of affairs. They criticised the policies of the ruling Communist Party and government, advocated for the democratisation of society, and demanded the observance of civil rights and religious freedoms. These individuals became known as dissidents (from the Latin dissidens – “disagreeing”), and their activities collectively formed what came to be called the dissident movement.

DISSENTERS: THE UKRAINIAN DISSIDENT MOVEMENT



Liubov Panchenko (1938–2022): Artist and fashion designer. A member of the Sixtiers generation promoting Ukrainian culture during a period of relative liberalization. Her works were censored during Soviet times. In March 2022, while trapped in occupied Bucha without food or assistance, she died of starvation. Photo courtesy of the Museum of the Sixtiers Movement.



Oleksa Tykhyi (1927–1984): Dissident from Donetsk region, teacher, and co-founder of the Ukrainian Helsinki Group. Advocated for the Ukrainian language and against Russification in Donbas. Died in prison.

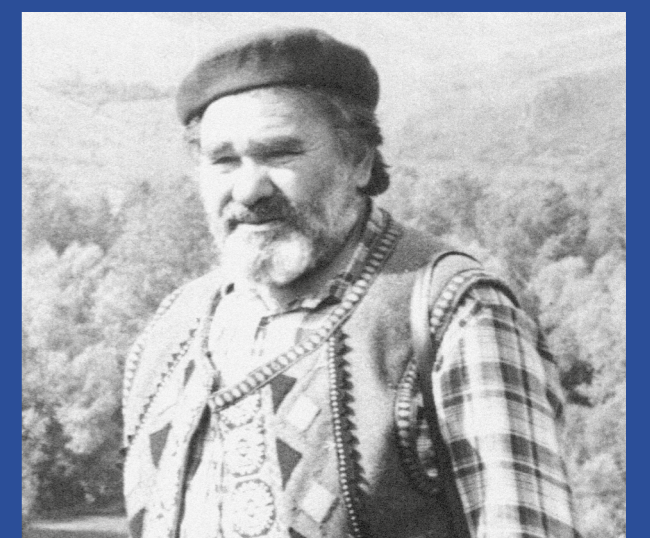
In Soviet Ukraine (the Ukrainian SSR), dissidents not only demanded democratic reforms but also stood up for the Ukrainian people's right to statehood, the free development of the Ukrainian language and culture, and the right of Crimean Tatars to return to their historical homeland—Crimea.

Ukrainian dissidents paid special attention to defending civil rights and human freedoms. In November 1976, they founded the Ukrainian Helsinki Group to monitor the Soviet government's compliance with the Helsinki Accords signed in Finland in 1975. The group was headed by writer and human rights defender Mykola Rudenko,

Nadiya Svitlychna and Pavlo Stokotelnny with their children Yarema and Ivasyk. Born in Luhansk region, Nadiya was an active member of the dissident movement, along with her brother Ivan. In 1972, she was sentenced to four years in prison. Photo courtesy of the Museum of the Sixtiers Movement.



Vasyl Stus (1938–1985): An iconic Ukrainian poet and human rights advocate. Persecuted for defending Ukrainian cultural rights, his works were banned or destroyed, and he was repeatedly imprisoned, where he ultimately died. Photo courtesy of the Museum of the Sixtiers Movement.



Mykola Rudenko (1920–2004): Philosopher, poet, and author of fiction and non-fiction works. Political prisoner and founder of the Ukrainian Helsinki Group. Photo courtesy of the Museum of the Sixtiers Movement.

and among its founding members was Petro Hryhorenko, a World War II general who was imprisoned in a psychiatric hospital for his activism. Many other dissidents faced the same fate. Nearly all of them endured imprisonment, forced labour camps, and exile. Prominent figures such as poets Vasyl Stus, Yuriy Lytvyn, and human rights activist Oleksa Tykhyi died in detention.

The Ukrainian dissident movement's unwavering struggle for freedom of speech, human rights, and national independence became a crucial step toward Ukraine's eventual independence in 1991.

Revolution of Dignity. Barricade near Kyiv's "Dynamo" Stadium named after Valeriy Lobanovskiy, January 2014. Photo: Danylo Krasnov, Ukrinform.



At the end of the 1980s, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, then under Soviet influence following World War II, were swept by a wave of change. A series of democratic revolutions marked the end of the communist era. Socialist federations like Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and the Soviet Union disintegrated into a number of independent national states. Among them was Ukraine, which declared its independence on August 24, 1991.

A key factor in Ukraine's challenging path toward democratisation and its return to the European family was a series of mass acts of civil resistance. These protests, held in the central square of the capital, Independence Square (Maidan Nezalezhnosti), came to be known collectively as the "Maidans."

THROUGH THE "MAIDANS" TO DEMOCRACY

On October 2, 1990, more than 100 students from various Ukrainian cities set up a tent camp on October Revolution Square and began a hunger strike. Photo: Ukrinform.

The first of these was the 1990 student protest known as the "Revolution on Granite." It preceded Ukraine's declaration of independence. During this protest, hundreds of students went on a hunger strike, accelerating the momentum toward independence.

The second Maidan was the "Orange Revolution," a series of mass protests between November 2004 and January 2005 in response to electoral fraud in favour of the incumbent regime's candidate, Viktor Yanukovich. The protests led to a repeat vote, which was won by the opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko.



The beginning of mass protests against the falsified election results on November 22, 2004. Tents were set up on Independence Square and the surrounding streets. Photo: Volodymyr Falin, Ukrinform.

Protesters pass stones to one another during clashes on Independence Square, Kyiv, February 19, 2014. Photo: Oleh Petrasjuk, Ukrinform.



The third and most well-known Maidan is the Revolution of Dignity (November 2013 – February 2014), also associated with Yanukovich, who had become president in 2010. His decision to abandon the pro-European course in favour of closer ties with Russia triggered widespread public outrage. The peak of the confrontation came in February 2014, when security forces attempted to violently disperse protesters, resulting in the deaths of nearly a hundred people. Within days, Yanukovich fled Kyiv. These events decisively anchored Ukraine's future in the Euro-Atlantic community.

Ukrainian State Emergency Service workers dismantling debris after Russian attacks, 2022. Photo: UNIAN.



In February 2014, the Russian Federation launched an armed attack against Ukraine. Initially, Russian forces occupied and illegally annexed Crimea, followed by incursions into parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions. In response, Ukraine initiated an Anti-Terrorist Operation to counter the aggression. Unable to accept Ukraine's sovereign and democratic European choice, the Russian leadership opted for a military violation of the territorial integrity of a neighbouring independent state.

A civilian car marked "Children" shot at by Russian occupiers, March 2022.



WAR AGAINST RUSSIAN AGGRESSION

Vitalii Skakun, a combat engineer with the 35th Separate Marine Brigade named after Rear Admiral Mykhailo Ostrohradskyi and Hero of Ukraine, blew up a bridge in Henichesk, Kherson region, on the first day of the full-scale invasion to stop the advance of Russian tanks – sacrificing his life in the process. Photo: Internet sources.



From 2014 to 2022, despite ongoing armed provocations by Russia, Ukraine made continuous efforts to preserve peace and protect its sovereignty through diplomatic and political means.

On 24 February 2022, the Russian Federation launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russian forces advanced toward the capital, Kyiv, but were repelled and forced to retreat, abandoning equipment and looted property in their wake.

Since the outset of the full-scale invasion, Ukraine has been confronting a vastly superior invading force in terms of size and resources. However, the courage and heroism of Ukrainian defenders, men and women alike, have drawn admiration and support from around the world. The names of cities such as Mariupol, Bakhmut, and Avdiivka have become symbols of resistance and will be forever inscribed in global military history.

On the territories temporarily occupied by Russian forces, numerous war crimes have been committed against the civilian population. In towns like Bucha and Iziur, Russian troops conducted mass executions of civilians prior to their withdrawal. Russian forces have also targeted nuclear facilities, including the Chornobyl and Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plants, violating international norms of wartime conduct.

For eleven years, Ukraine has been defending its independence in a just war for its right to exist. The resilience of the Ukrainian people, supported by a strong coalition of democratic nations worldwide, continues to demonstrate the unbreakable will of Ukraine to resist aggression and secure freedom in what has become the largest armed conflict of the 21st century.



Remains of a Russian tank in Kyiv region, spring 2022. Photo: UNIAN.



Identification of victims of war crimes committed by Russian forces in Bucha, April 2022. Photo: UNIAN.