DECONSTRUCTING NARRATIVES OF BELONGING AND OTHERNESS AMONG STEPPE UKRAINE VILLAGERS: PLACE, SPACE, LANGUAGE, AND HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

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ABSTRACT

The image of Steppe Ukraine as a historical region has mainly been constructed based on narratives originating from urban centres that are often perceived as alien to this territory and people. Being one of the most industrial and urbanised parts of Ukraine during the period of the Soviet Union, the region witnessed a significant alteration in its peasant culture. Collectivisation, Holodomor, and the Second World War are the leading causes of the alteration in the social composition of Steppe Ukraine's rural populations. The article deals with the complex question of identity formation among the villagers of Steppe Ukraine. There is particularly focus on the strategies of narrating feelings of belonging and otherness used by local villagers based on their understanding of the history of the places they inhabit. The article also looks at the inhabitants' relationships with the people with whom they used to coexist in the same space, although these peoples were often wiped out amid the changing circumstances of the region.

KEYWORDS: Steppe Ukraine • belonging • othering • villagers • identity • Soviet Union

INTRODUCTION

Like any similar life-world imaginaries, images of Steppe Ukraine[1] have been constructed upon narratives and stories that originated at different times and under different circumstances throughout history. Various agents have conveyed these narratives with competing intentions. As time passed, the narratives became so intertwined that they need to be analysed in their complexity. Many narratives were forced on Steppe Ukraine villagers by the different regimes that ruled the region. Every generation has

renegotiated inherited narratives and invented numerous new ones, passing on only those to which they could strongly relate. Each narrative altered their sense of belonging and otherness in a particular way.

Before the 18th century, this territory was called the Wild Field (*Dyke pole*). It was predominantly populated by nomadic Nogay Tatars (Hrybovs'kyi 2007b; 2012), Crimean Tatars, and Zaporozhian Cossacks. The latter controlled a substantial northern portion of this territory and had their own polity known as the Zaporozhian Cossack Host, with a fortress at the centre called the Zaporozhian Sich (Mil'chev 2009). In the mid-18th century, the Russian Empire moved different groups from the Balkans and Moldavia to the region. Thus, in 1752, out of the northwestern lands of the Zaporozhian Host, the administrative and military territorial unit of New Serbia was created (Dyck 1981). In 1753, Sloviano-Serbia was created with its administrative centre in Bahamut (Posun'ko 1998). The declared purpose of those entities was to protect against Turkish and Tatar attacks and to control the Zaporozhian Cossacks. In the later 18th century the entire territory of Steppe Ukraine was politically and administratively incorporated into the Russian Empire (Pankieiev 2023). In 1775 the Zaporozhian Sich was destroyed, and most Cossacks lost their previously high social positions. Though some managed to maintain their noble status within the empire, many were downgraded to the status of indentured peasants, which caused considerable resistance.

Imperial Russia attempted to settle this colonial territory, called at that time New Russia (*Novorossiia*) after the name of the administrative unit that included the majority of this territory, with many ethnically and religiously diverse settlers. This was done to change the social and ethnic composition of the Ukrainian steppe and make the lands more controllable and economically productive (Sunderland 2004: 74–75; Staples 2024: 6, 12–13). The largest numbers of settlers consisted of Mennonites, Jews, Serbians, Bulgarians, Armenians, Greeks, and other groups both from within and outside of the Russian Empire (Polons'ka-Vasylenko 1955; Pinson 1979; Dyck 1981; Boneva 2006; Bosa 2018). Religious groups such as Doukhobors, Old Believers, and Molokans were also moved to the region (Staples 2003; Friesen 2008; Ivlieva 2011; Dyck et al. 2015). Those religious groups were ethnically Russian and were comprised of those who rejected the church reforms introduced in mid-17th-century Moscow and, as a result, were persecuted and sought refuge in the Steppe region of Ukraine.

At the same time, some indigenous groups that inhabited the Azov and Black Sea coastal areas were virtually erased from the Ukrainian steppe and relocated to other territories. At the end of the 18th century, the Russian Empire deported substantial numbers of the Nogay Tatars to the Caucasus, while some of them voluntarily fled to Ottoman-held lands (Hrybovs'kyi 2007a). Ultimately, afraid of being persecuted or dissatisfied with their lower social position as peasants, many Cossacks also choose to flee.

Nevertheless, in the late 18th century, despite the Russian Empire's efforts to colonise the region with settlers from various groups, the steppe population remained largely Ukrainian. Even the Russians, who were resettled there in bigger numbers, constituted only a minority. For instance, in the New Russia governorate in 1778, there were 140,387 Ukrainians compared to just 12,529 Russians (Boiko et al. 2023: 7). Similarly, in the Azov Governorate, out of the total population of 223,312 recorded in the 1779 population register, 138,671 were Ukrainians and 45,812 were Russians. Before the establishment of the Azov Governorate, the local population had numbered 154,655.

Those Ukrainians who lived in small settlements managed to preserve their local identity and continued to have strong ties with Cossack and other local traditions. The nature of the Ukrainian steppe played a significant role, as it reminded inhabitants about past events and bridged oral traditions from one generation to another (Olenenko 2015; Moon 2016). Wetlands along the Dnipro, which used to be home to many small Cossack overwintering settlements (*zymivnyky*), also played an essential role in forming local oral traditions (Shiyan 2008).

At the end of the 19th century, Ukraine's urbanisation in territories under control of the Russian Empire was approximately 20% (Guthier 1981: 157). As Steven Guthier (ibid.) points out, "The pre-revolutionary cities in Ukraine were islands of alien language and culture in the Ukrainian peasant sea." He also states that 80% of the rural Ukrainian population spoke Ukrainian, while only one-third of the urban population were Ukrainians. For Steppe Ukraine, Kateryna Roshko (2017: 43) affirms that in 1897 Ukrainians constituted 70.9% of the rural population of the region. According to her, the second-largest group in the villages was Russians, at 13.2%, and the third-largest comprised "German colonists, Jews, Bulgarians, and others" (ibid.).

Regardless, Ukrainians who moved from surrounding villages to big cities and towns were more likely to assimilate and lose their emotional connection to the local cultures of their native villages. The significant factor in this process was the Russian Empire's prohibition on using Ukrainian in education and publishing through enforcement of the Valuev Circular, the Ems Decree, and other policies (Remy 2007).

The inhabitants of Steppe Ukraine witnessed many different events during the first half of the 20th century that reshaped the region's demographic and cultural composition. Most significantly, this region did not escape the aftermath of the First World War and subsequent consolidation of the Soviet State as a key centre where different forces contested each other's position. The Red and White Armies operated there, as well as Nestor Makhno's anarchist movement, which was born in the region, causing damage and many casualties to the local population (Patterson 2020).

Significant population losses were suffered due to the Holodomor of 1932–1933, a genocide by starvation that took the lives of millions of people (Ivan'kov 2004; Kul'chyts'kyi et al. 2008; Marochko 2015; Plokhy 2015–2016: 389; Dotsenko 2018). Dekulakisation, collectivisation, and industrialisation distorted both the landscape, on which were encoded the memories of past generations, and the region's contemporary social and cultural structures. Numerous villages disappeared along with their histories, and the remaining citizens were scattered elsewhere in Steppe Ukraine or relocated to other regions. New types of settlement were created around the kolkhozes, forcing a new type of identity on the rural population. The Soviet authorities also imposed a repopulation of the region through the mass resettlement of people from other regions of the Ukrainian SSR and other republics in the USSR (Rozovyk 2020).

The Second World War also caused the loss of significant numbers of inhabitants. As a result of the war, some population groups disappeared almost entirely from the region, leaving only miscellaneous traces. For instance, many Jewish settlements were depopulated as a result of the Holocaust in the region (Kaparulin 2021). Furthermore, this historically and traditionally rural region rapidly increased the development of cities and towns, becoming the most urbanised part of Ukraine. New ways of industrialisation after the war caused even more destruction of the local cultural fabric. Between 1955

and 1958, 75 old villages throughout the Dnipro floodplain were inundated due to the construction of the Kakhovka Reservoir (Olenenko 2019: 127). Many of those flooded villages traced their history back to the Cossack *zymivnyky* (Duncan Smith 2019: 8).

By the early 1990s, the rural population accounted for around 27% of the total population in Steppe Ukraine (All-Ukrainian Population Census 2001). Today's popular public image of that region is predominantly constructed upon narratives that come from the regional city centres and have roots in the Soviet past. Meanwhile, the villages are *terra incognita*, and the cultural attitudes of their inhabitants that drive their processes of self-determination and othering are rarely described or analysed. In recent years, perceptions of the population of the region have also been imposed via the foreign geopolitical concept of *Novorossiia* (New Russia), particularly from Russia.

The goal of this research is to analyse the narration strategies that the older generation of Steppe Ukraine villagers have used to construct their sense of belonging and otherness since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The research is centred primarily on narratives of place, space, language, and historical consciousness. Those narratives highlight the complexity of the identities of the village inhabitants and help us understand the role of the internal and external factors that trigger the identity negotiation process.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The primary source for this analysis is oral testimonies that were recorded by scholars from the Zaporizhia National University, the Novytskyi Scientific Society in Zaporizhia, and the Zaporizhia Branch of the Mykhailo Hrushevsky Institute of Ukrainian Archaeography and Source Studies at the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine. These testimonies were gathered by ethnographic research expeditions to more than 200 villages across the Ukrainian Steppe, starting in the early 2000s. The author of this article was a member of the research team that organises these expeditions in this region and is a native of the region.

Villages were selected based on their founding date and their social and ethnic composition. Interviewees were chosen based primarily on their age, i.e. 65 years or older. Some of the oldest correspondents were nearly 100 years old when they were interviewed. Because an expedition to one village usually lasted several weeks, it allowed the research team to interview a substantial number of inhabitants and establish a rapport with them.

This population segment is also interesting because they lived most of their lives under Soviet rule, and their identities developed under the influence of many formative forces of that era. They also embody the connection between the generational memory of those who lived in the region before the Soviet state was established and the fully Soviet generations that were raised and formed in relatively stable times after Second World War (Khanenko-Friesen 2015: 237).

Although the interviews were not recorded directly after the fall of the Soviet Union, there is an assumption that the narratives were not significantly altered during the period of interviews. This article uses only interviews collected between 2000 and 2006 that were published in the *Oral History of Steppe Ukraine* series (11 volumes to date: Boiko 2008–2010; Sokhan 2012; Papakin 2015). The recording of these interviews and

their subsequent publication in this series were carried out in accordance with the legal and scholarly norms on ethics, authorship, and copyright that were in place in Ukraine at that time (Boiko 2008–2010 vol 1: LV). Each volume contains transcribed interviews recorded during the expedition to a single village. Thus, the volumes constitute a comparative source for research on the local social and cultural environment in Steppe Ukraine. Considering that the majority of villages included in this research have been occupied as a result of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which started on February 24, 2022, the interviews collected in those villages gains increased significance.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The concepts of belonging and otherness are integral components of group identity. Localised communities are keen to develop strong feelings of belonging, and therefore they protect the social structures and territorial boundaries which they represent or inhabit from the damaging influence of others; notably, their resistance is usually conscious (Jensen 2011: 66; Johnson and Coleman 2012: 866). Meanwhile, otherness is always traced through stories and narratives (Cottle 2022: 535). Thomas Hylland Eriksen (1995: 427) proposes two modes of group belongingness: the first is based on *we-hood*, which corresponds to shared identity; the second is *us-hood*, which applies the construction of identity in disposition to the 'external agent' of the other.

The depiction of external others envisions that the other is located, first of all, outside of the territorial boundaries that the group inhabits. However, the other can also belong to the same locality as the group when viewed as an *internal other* (Johnson and Coleman 2012).

The scale of the locality and strength of the senses of belonging and othering are interdependent (Herb and Kaplan 1999). Space, place, and region are key concepts that identify the size of a locality. However, they don't necessarily identify in a hierarchal manner the elements that contribute to the formation of a sense of belonging and otherness. Members of one group at different levels of locality can characterise their belonging or otherness differently in comparison to other groups (Lewicka 2008: 211–212). On the other hand, to be considered as other, a group doesn't have to be from another locality. *Otherness* can occur even among the members of one group and cause the group to split or weaken its sense of belonging. People develop stronger bonds with places they inhabit after residing in one location with relatable physical characteristics for a long period (Lewicka 2008). Physical architectural features such as buildings or natural features influence place memory significantly as an integral part of the identity of those who construct them and those who use them, contributing to the dichotomy "other vis-à-vis self" (Herrle 2008: 12).

The groups that came first into a given locality tend to expect those who arrive after them to follow a set of rules in order to be accepted in the locality and to respect the social structures and traditions that are in place. The order of arrival of groups to a locality also affects how the historical narratives are shaped and what psychological weight they have on the group's self-determination (Liu et al. 1999: 1022–1023). There are situations in which groups that arrived later exercise dominance over the indigenous groups, reversing the process of assimilation. Colonial powers are one of the

causes of reverse assimilation. However, the processes of self-demarcation of groups' geographical and social boundaries are entirely imaginary (Anderson 1991) and rely on different criteria, which can be unique to a particular location.

Regional and national identities are viewed as higher-order identities in terms of their geographical scale (Herb 1999; 2017). Nevertheless, they are often constructed on narratives rooted in a specific locality. These promoted localised narratives then dictate their criteria to other groups, whose sense of belonging and loyalty to the region or nation should thereby be constructed and judged. This usually causes the alienation of groups that cannot relate to those narratives or forces them into resistance and promotion of alternative narratives. Tensions between groups are inevitable, no matter at what level of locality those groups interact. Inter-group contact can grow into real conflict with their respective states and groups in power (Paasi 2003: 447), although this is usually limited to groups with political aspirations.

Historical consciousness occupies a chief role in constructing a sense of belonging, otherness, and othering. Jörn Rüsen (2004: 72) identified four types of historical consciousness: traditional, exemplary, critical, and genetic. These types are in constant interplay and mediated through histories narrated via state-run bureaucratic and education institutions, the work of professional historians, and the collective memory of ordinary people (Clark and Peck 2019: 2). In the Soviet Union, all of these were under the tight control of the state (Velychenko 1993: 47–50). The past was instrumentalised in order to serve the strictly defined purpose of political control. But the most difficult to control was the collective memory of ordinary people, especially those who lived far from the cities and administrative centres, in small villages. It took time for some narratives that were forced from above to take root in small communities like villages, and usually they became intertwined with local elements.

One's own past also serves as a way of othering, not only of others but also ourselves (Prozorov 2010). The distant self of the past is always different from one's self now. Memories of the past are contrasted with the present situation. Dramatic experiences can force people to negate their own past or suffer partial or total amnesia (Howard-Hassmann 2015). The memories of victims and their heirs will also affect acts of remembering and interpreting the past (Rimé et al. 2015; Larocque and Reynaud 2019: 10). The opposite of negation of the past is nostalgia for better past times (Klumbytė 2008).

The past is a spatiotemporal category (Prozorov 2010: 1285). All events unfold in a specific locality. Events that unfold in close proximity have an intimate impact on the act of othering and forming a feeling of belonging. The past and space are entangled, because every human being is a spatial being who transcends his or her identity through place, space, and then through time.

Specific historical situations framed in a given location produce different markers of social othering and belonging that are forced onto groups that inhabit that locality in that specific timeframe (Yuval-Davis 2006: 201). While certain differences are constructed as significant markers of the social and cultural grid, others meanwhile are suppressed or reduced in their meaning and can later be decoded only if they are interpreted within a specific historical context of locality (Knapp 2005; Yuval-Davis 2006). However, in collective memory those narratives are sometimes deprived of a chronology and concentrate on localised experiences, with some differences constructed and others suppressed.

People living in the same locality experience and remember the same events differently. The individual component is crucial to understanding collective narratives. As Amos Funkenstein (1989: 6) observes, "the most personal memory cannot be removed from the social context". When something is remembered as a personal account, it is always structured on or around common characteristics of the time and locality in which the remembered event unfolded. Every individual story is part of the collective memory, and vice versa.

All narratives are narrated through the means of language. Language is the main communication tool for conveying otherness and subsequent belonging. Language is also an essential criterion on which belonging and otherness are constructed. Those who speak different languages are always regarded as others, while those who speak the same language automatically belong to the group. The concept of language contact is apt to describes the contrasting role of language when it functions in close geographical and social proximity during the formation of identity and belonging, and the otherness and othering that arises therefrom (Nelde 1987; Hazen 2002).

FRAMING BELONGING AND OTHERNESS

At first glance, the architecture of Ukrainian steppe villages is quite nondescript. It is often difficult for untrained investigators to distinguish the specific features of one district's villages from the features of another district. Most houses in southern Ukraine's steppe villages were built after the Second World War; 19th-century dwellings are extremely rare.

Furthermore, the physical features within the spaces which people inhabit also play an important role in recovering place memory and transmitting it to subsequent generations. For instance, the urban architecture of the Steppe was seriously damaged or utterly destroyed during the Second World War. Even those historic buildings that managed to survive were usually rebuilt with a new, Soviet-style façade. Because of all this, rebuilt buildings usually get lost in the urban environment (with the exception of buildings in a few cities such as Odesa) and rarely play a role as place reminders in the urban contexts of Steppe Ukraine.

In villages, however, we have the opposite situation. The presence of even the structural remains of historic architecture creates a socially positive environment for forming a collective place memory, which can be transmitted intergenerationally. This often reinforces memory about the historical reasons for a region's multicultural nature.

Notably, recent ethnographic expeditions often found that formerly Mennonite or Jewish houses were inhabited by the current village population. The presence or remains of these buildings in or around the villages were always noticeable and almost always remarked on by the interviewees. These architectural voices from the past often pushed villagers' boundaries of place memory far beyond their own experience and challenged the dominant narratives of their lifetime. Usually these buildings stand out and look different from other village houses. Though hearsay descriptions persisted about their former owners, it is important that these buildings forced the residents to think about their villages and the region historically and from the perspective of others.

Hanna Savchenko,[2] from Mala Bilozirka village in Zaporizhia oblast, recalled that near her native village of Rozovka, very close to the current village, was a German colony with beautiful buildings – a very distinct memory for her (Boiko 2008–2010 vol 4: 65). But this memory was also attached to her memory of a German girl, Liza, who lived in her village.

Hanna identified Liza as someone who arrived "from away". Liza obviously did not belong to the German colony, but she was identified as German and thus did not fully belong in the village. However, it was clear that the colony and the village occupied the same space for so long that she did not question her village or the colony's presence in the past. The quality of the homes in the colony played a significant role in constructing those memories and helped Hanna recall historical details with little effort.

Hanna also provided a very comprehensive account of the life of Jewish people in her village and the surrounding areas. She says that they were everywhere. She remembered that merchants and artisans at the local fairs were predominantly Jews. But what is interesting is that she had a difficult time *locating* them in her place-memory. "They lived somewhere here, God knows, but they had arrived here", she said about their presence (ibid.). Then she continued, "Jewish families lived in Bilozirka too, but the only thing they did was trade" (ibid.). It is not surprising, therefore, that she did not describe the distinct look of Jewish houses in her village and the environs. Because she had real interactions with them, she did not need any other means to preserve her memories of their presence. What was paramount for her was that Jews were good people and that they all interacted with them and with other people peacefully. The narrative of peaceable coexistence resurfaces throughout the region very often, which may be the result of Soviet ideology, which was heavily promoted after the war (Schlegel 2019: 147). Nevertheless, the region did not escape the pogroms and ethnic conflicts. Hanna also displayed sincere compassion about the tragic fate of the Jews during the German occupation, including the mass killings. She couldn't understand why they suffered so much.

Lidia Riabokon[3] from Bilenke village, Zaporizhia oblast, in her recollections of the decision of her family to relocate to this village, also cited the distinctive look of buildings there:

> Then [we decided] to move, and we moved in '53 to Bilenke. It was a steppe village where we had lived, and Bilenke was not so bad after that. And there was, how should I put it, there was even culture here. There had been a German colony in the village, the buildings were entirely different, and there was even a school. It was so beautiful! The school was old, there was a little alley from the school to the Dnipro, with flowers planted, and all around, everything was done so well in the village. Well, we liked it, and we stayed. (Boiko 2008–2010 vol 4: 305)

The decisive factor for the family's decision to remain in the village was that it had a developed culture, articulated in the village's architectural variation and its cleanliness. The village had a relatable spatial quality, with some uniqueness, meaning the family could acquire a place attachment and have a better life. They were also aware that some of those buildings were left behind by the German speaking Mennonites who used to inhabit this village, but she doesn't display any cognitive dissonance regarding their disappearance.

What is interesting is that the local villagers also often demonstrated an awareness of the historical conditions in which those 'colonies' were established. The phrase "it was Catherine the Second who allowed them to settle here" was quite ubiquitous and resurfaces in different variations in many of the recorded testimonies. Tamila Keida[4] even demonstrated a significant understanding of German, which after many years is still quite strongly embodied in her consciousness:

> We had German settlers [in our village]. Where I lived, in Kuibysheve district, there was a village next to us, it was called Chervonoselivka. They called it Rotendorf. That was their name, and we called it Chervone Selo [Red Village]. Because *roten* means 'red' and *Dorf* means 'village'. The Germans lived there, and it's where I lived – a large village next to where the Germans lived. And when the war started, they hid, because they were being taken away. Our people were afraid that they would help the [invading] Germans, because they were part of the German race, and a lot of people hid. There were also Jews. It was mainly in the village of Chka-lova. That's where the Jews were, basically. And we also had a village there called Naiven. Naiven, they called it, that's what it was called in Hebrew, and Jews also lived there. I know because we'd go, my father was an agronomist, and he would say "now we're going to go 'to the Jews', to look at a field there." They were occupied with the same things that everyone did in the kolkhozes…
>
> These settlements had been here for a long time. They were settled way back under Catherine. Who knows when they arrived, the Germans and the Jews. They talked among themselves … you know, as we do at home, their families did it in their own language, and otherwise they spoke in Ukrainian or Russian. (Boiko 2008–2010 vol 7: 144)

Villagers often perceived "German colony" members as former proximal others, as those who used to be an integral part of the common space, with whom they had to coexist. It is important to mention that when villagers speak about the history of how those "colonists" came to the area, they are explicitly talking about their own history as well. The villagers consider themselves as autochthonous inhabitants who lived where they did before the "colonies" arrived. As such, their memories of the German colonies play an important role in reinforcing their place identity and serve as criteria for belonging.

In some cases, however, villagers perceived the German colonies and their members somewhat negatively. These attitudes were detected predominantly in the eldest interviewees. For example, Polina Nazaretian,[5] born in 1910, displayed mixed feelings regarding the presence of German colonies. She condemned the tsars for exhausting Ukraine by settling "their own people" in Ukraine. But the memories of her own experience of coexistence with the "colonists" are flattened. She emphasised that they all worked in the kolkhozes alongside other villagers. What is interesting is that she constantly underscored how they were brought here and did not belong here in the first place.

> The Tsars wearied [Ukraine], it was poor, poor. Catherine the First[6] settled the Germans here, I'm talking about how they lived earlier. Tsarina Catherine, those people of hers. This was Smoliana, a German colony there was. And there was Novozlatopil, a Jewish colony there.

Now, I'm not saying anything, but we used to call them *zhydy*. We called them that but then we changed it. And so they lived there, they settled here, in Novozlatopil, by Zaporizhia; there was the German colony and the Jewish colony. People worked there, and when it became a kolkhoz, they worked in the kolkhoz – worked and worked, the Jews, the Germans worked, those whom Catherine had settled there. They have been living in Ukraine, in Smoliana, for a long time. (Boiko 2008–2010 vol 5: 217)

Old Songs and legends are one of the sources of memories about the colonies and attitudes toward them. Their texts are not fully remembered, but the locals are often keen to provide some lines from them to make their points stronger and contextualise their own narratives.

In Halyna Kopna's[7] account, we can see a more negative attitude toward the settlers brought to Ukraine by Empress Catherine the Second. In this particular example, we see again the notion of identity attempting to preserve a local order of life from outside influence. The "colonists" are not the immediate cause of the anger, though they are its target. Rather, the anger is caused by the constant attempts of the imperial centre to institute new patterns of local life, with all the attendant consequences.

There used to be a gathering point on Khortytsia [Island], then it became a colony settled by Germans. Here, Catherine the First gave the land to the Germans. As the song says: "Catherine, you cursed mother, what have you done? You've given away Ukraine's best lands to the Germans." There was a song like that; it was banned at some point. There was indeed a song like that. And they sang it all the way until the Revolution, but then it was banned. Because they didn't like Tsarina Catherine… (Boiko 2008–2010 vol 5: 121)

In reality, the attitudes of local villagers to colony members was greatly influenced by the degree and nature of their interactions with them. This was a completely subjective category, and in some cases it involved the emergence of prejudices, which were then generalised and transmitted to other members of the community and passed down to future generations.

In this regard, the village of Bashtanka proves instructive. The majority of those interviewed expressed positive attitudes and empathy toward not only local Jewish colonies but Jews as a national group overall. Near the village of Bashtanka, many Jews had been killed by the German Army. Narratives about those mass killings are very common among the citizens of this village. All the memories of these tragic events are very emotional. Jews were an integral part of the local fabric, and killing them was considered a disruption of peaceful life and social equilibrium. According to Olena Parafilo,[8]

Most of all, the Germans hated the Jews. There were Jews [living among us], and wherever they were, they drove them out, in single file, and drove them, and in Kodyma … there was a cliff. And the cliff was in the forest there. And they drove the Jews out by the thousands. They drove them out through the gates, and there was the cliff. And they're going, they're shooting them there, and they fell there, at the precipice. Some were injured, others.… Those who managed to survive waited to move until night. Many of those who lived stayed; they came to us as partisans. To

our ranks. And when the war finished, all of the Jews, where their people had been killed, there ran a river of blood, you understand, and the smell … they laid out – so many people. All the same, then, there, close to the forest, the people made a Jewish cemetery. It's a very beautiful cemetery, with pine trees all around. And the rows of gravestones are sturdy and beautiful. Well, anyway… (Sokhan 2012: 272)

In this case, the cemetery serves as a powerful reminder of tragic events that unfolded in the village and nearby. However, we can also see that pro-Jewish sympathies stemmed from villagers' positive memories of a former village head from the 1950s who happened to be a Jew.

Many villagers admired him for his professional management and leadership skills. But when describing his professionalism, they always underline that he was a Jew, often making his ethnicity the focal point of their narrative. They appreciated that under his leadership, the village and its inhabitants had never been more prosperous. This factor is especially important as villagers all struggled to make ends meet in the 1990s, after the fall of the Soviet Union. What is most important is that the villagers remembered this prosperity not in terms of the Soviet Union, but rather in terms of a good manager who cared about and developed personal relationships with them, and who also happened to be a Jew. The village head's wife is also an integral element of the collective narrative for Bashtanka. Similarly to her husband, she is portrayed very positively. Almost every time she is mentioned, the interviewees underlined that she was a Jew as well as her husband.

> Maria Ivanivna:[9] Grosman was there, he was the chairman of our kolkhoz.
> Mykhailo Trokhimovych: He was a Jew, a real husbandryman [*khoziaïn*]!
> M. I.: His wife was a doctor, Liuda Romanovna, and she…
> M. T.: A leader.
> M. I.: A leader. If he had lived, truthfully, we would have had the paths to the latrines carpeted in gold, honestly. Honestly! Oh! … He was such a man! … He knew – he went to Leningrad. To arrange things. To go there, to submit [petitions]…
> M. T.: There were vineyards, orchards, vineyards, that's how it was, he was a true master. And thrifty, he built everything. Well … the man knew the value of money. [He] set up a kolkhoz. (Sokhan 2012: 308)

The fact that the head and his wife arrived at the village from somewhere else could also cast some doubts on their credibility and their ability to blend in. However, because they adopted the local customs and demonstrated universal human qualities, the community accepted them. In their accounts, villagers underline that the head and his wife were simple people who lived ordinary lives. Their service to the community, kindness, politeness, and honesty dominate every narrative. The villagers viewed these criteria of belonging as essential. The head and his wife earned the privilege of becoming accepted as part of the group, although their difference remained an essential part of the storytelling, even after they died in the 1960s.

In some narratives, the head and his wife were praised more highly than locals ever were. Kateryna Savenko[10] called them golden people (Sokhan 2012: 216), but the identification of their otherness is always present.

To further crystallise the notion of belonging and otherness in Steppe Ukraine, we need to look into relations between local inhabitants and Ukrainians who moved or were relocated from other countries or regions of Ukraine under different circumstances, during the lifetime of locals and those with whom they have had to coexist since then. The interplay of language attitudes is also an important element in the formation of the different identities of Steppe Ukrainians in this period.

After the Second World War, many western Ukrainians were relocated to the Steppe (Irioglu 2020). The presence of those who were relocated did not go unnoticed by the locals. This created several parallel narratives that reinforced othering processes in terms of identity formation. The name that locals used to identify people resettled from western Ukraine was a calque of the Russian pejorative *zapadentsy* 'westerners'. There were also other names. *Banderivtsi* (Rus. *banderovtsy*) 'followers of Bandera' was also among the most common names and was usually used in a derogatory manner. Stepan Bandera was a leader of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army in western Ukraine during the Second World War. In the USSR, his name and the organisation he led were portrayed as enemies of the regime, and blaming attitudes towards all western Ukrainians were very common, even among the general population. According to Varvara Porada: [11]

> The *zapadentsi*, here, whether they are Ukrainians or Poles, we say *zapadentsi*. They do live here, and there are a lot of them, both young and old. This was already after the war. There were no Poles. After the war, life was very good here. The farms were large. They arrived, settled down to live on the farms, began to drink, and taught our boys how to drink and live in the world [laughs]. (Boiko 2008–2010 vol 7: 251)

The language was the primary marker distinguishing the origins of Ukrainians from western Ukraine. Hanna Frich[12] explained that the Ukrainian they spoke was different from the Ukrainian used in Steppe Ukraine:

> They weren't differentiated. It was just language, you know, when they spoke their own language when they … Ay … You couldn't understand it. Sometimes Polish, sometimes … well, it was not our language. But all the same, they understood each other, worked together, some worked on the kolkhoz team, on our farms too, dairymaids.… There were more dairy maids than there were our own people, from the town. Just from the resettlers.
>
> As if we know the [family name]! They lived there, in [western Ukraine], not in the actual – they lived in Poland. The war ended, and they were resettled here, in western Ukraine. Poles, and there, they occupied their village. They were born there, mama says, they were born and lived there. And after the war, the Poles forcibly resettled them here, from Poland. (Sokhan 2012: 457)

Ukrainians who were forcibly relocated, or moved from western Ukraine voluntarily, were not fully recognised and accepted into the social structure of Ukrainian Steppe villages. They remained trapped within a special category defined by the us versus them conflict. Their status was very fluid. If they followed local norms, they were accepted and regarded as competent fully fledged community members. However, if their behaviour deviated from local norms, they were described as bad influences.

Interestingly, the language marker is used as a mixture of national and local identities. The latter usually dominated over the former. The villagers recognised that the issue of language usage had been regulated by different policies during the Soviet Union and bore an ideological significance. The policies and everyday state practices stimulated the mass Russification of Ukrainian populations and were ubiquitous and systematic during that period. In contrast, Steppe Ukraine villages differed from the region's cities. Rural residents were not influenced by Russification policies as much as urban people. They often employed *surzhyk*, a Russified version of Ukrainian, but in its nature, it was still Ukrainian.

> Nadia Vasylivna:[13] Among the people, there was always a normal attitude towards the Ukrainian language. Why not? There was no oblique pressure from the leadership. Why? There was a question then, one time, only I don't know under whom, of only the Ukrainian language being used in state institutions. And now, both Ukrainian and Russian. But we, you see, our language is Ukrainian – it's not clean Ukrainian, but mixed.
> Vasyl Hryhorovych: It's mixed. Take Poltava, for instance – there's a whole different accent there. Take Kyiv – a completely different accent. And in Zaporizhia, Ukrainians talk just like us. And they sang songs. Only I never sang. (Boiko 2008–2010 vol 7: 124)

Mixed marriages became a very common phenomenon after the Second World War. Spouses often visited relatives of their partners in the regions of their origin, where they were exposed to subjective narratives about the groups and the region they represented. The language played a significant marker in these cases that contributed to reversed thinking about people's own identities and differences. Alla Kibalska[14] explained:

> My husband was from the west, from Lviv oblast. So I travelled there often, to Lviv. And there … Ukrainian is completely mixed with Polish. But here, here in our village – it's west there, and here it's east. Here, our language is mixed with Russian … that's the colloquial. Well, and it's, I would adjust and talk to them. They would say: "Your language is Kyivan." Not like theirs. "And yours", I would say, "is Polish." Once they start, well.… But it's nothing, there are all kinds of people there, but they started calling me a *moskal'ka* [Moscow woman] right away. Whenever I'd go – "The *moskal'ka* has arrived." (Boiko 2008–2010 vol 7: 154)

Attitudes towards Ukrainians who were resettled from Romania were very similar to those who were relocated from western Ukraine. However, in some cases, how those relocated justified their presence and relocation differed. They often engaged in reinterpretation of the historical accounts of the region to justify their position within and outside the community. Their narratives, first of all, were aimed at explaining their absence in the past and convey the validity of their presence now to fit into the locality and community, to form the bond of belonging and obtain locals' recognition of that bond.

> My name is Iukhym Antonovych Poïmsk'yi.[15] I was born in '22, on the 22nd of May. I turned 80 this year on May 22. I was born in Romania. We, our lineage, are the descendants of the Zaporozhian Sich. We lived abroad for one hundred and fifty years, during the rule of serfdom under Catherine the Second. How can I explain to you what the rule of serfdom was? (Boiko 2008–2010 vol 4: 197)

To be accepted by the locals, the Romanian-Ukrainians presented themselves as return-ees, as those who used to belong to this place but were compelled to leave by the same forces that populated these territories with foreign colonists. However, their reintegra-tion was made difficult by the fact that they had arrived during the lifetime of those interviewed, therefore they were still viewed and characterised as others. As Nira Yuval-Devis (2006: 202) conveys, the myths of origin are very strong and instrumen-tal elements in constructing the identity of belonging. Those narratives of origin that passed from one generation to the other have exclusive emotional power. Elspeth Pro-byn (1996: 19) affirms, "Individuals and groups are caught between wanting to belong and wanting to become".

Those who arrived from other localities over the lifespan of the locals were accepted into the community on the basis of abiding by the norms of the local way of life and on the condition that they didn't introduce any distractive elements that could corrupt the locals.

As mentioned in one of the above passages about resettlers from western Ukraine, locals attributed the introduction of drinking habits to them (bad things came from others). But the most recent newcomers received the harshest criticism. As the follow-ing examples show, Romanians are depicted as those who collaborated and worked alongside the locals on collective farms. The fact that they worked together mattered a lot, as the culture of collective farm work fostered relations in which everyone worked together but stayed alert around newcomers. This was also a part of the ideological training that the villagers were exposed to through the Communist Party education sys-tem on the ground. Usually, ideological workshops were conducted on a regular basis by *partorg* political organisers (Birkenmayer 1970). Such officials oversaw the imple-mentation of the Soviet Communist Party's Central Committee agenda. These officials were tasked with uprooting ideas viewed as dangerous for the system, and they and other officials also conducted ongoing surveillance of the people. Locals were usually aware of these functions. This is why those who were resettled after the Second World War were viewed as reliable members of the community because their background had been checked and some limited information about them was communicated to villag-ers by the local authorities, meaning that they at least knew from where these people had arrived and under what circumstances. If those who arrived were deemed by the authorities to be unreliable, this was communicated to the locals, often covertly in the form of rumours. The locals were also under detailed scrutiny and could be forced out of their own social community if they were considered unreliable or discredited by state authorities. For example, the *Ostarbeiter* (those who were forced to work in Nazi German labour camps and after the Second World War returned to their home villages) were usually portrayed and treated as disloyal and traitors to the state (Meliakov 2007: 139–140).

The locals also worried that the number of native villagers was getting so small that it became difficult to sustain the feeling of belonging, as those to whom they could relate were few. Vira Patalakh[16] spoke about Romanians who arrived in Bilenke village after the Second World War, and the most recent newcomers to the village, who refused to follow the local rules. She said that locals felt that they were criticised by the new-comers for being protective of the local way of life:

In the '50s, they sent more Romanians to our village. Maybe 20 of them. And they went into the kolkhoz, who gave them a house there, they settled, the Romanians. They had fled. They were searching for a better life. Romanians were also in our [work team], but we didn't ask them: "Why have you come to us?" But there were no other resettlers. How did people act towards them? What was it to the people? They arrived, the people worked, they entered the kolkhoz. Now, there are more foreigners here. And who knows where they came from? They were not native *biliany* [natives of Bilenke]. And, oh! "*Biliany* are so greedy, so hateful." Well, then, why did you come here? Well, *biliany*. There are very few of us native *biliany* left. And our young people – they've all fled to the city, from the kolkhozes. (Boiko 2008–2010 vol 4: 74)

Villagers also employ very different narrative strategies when they speak about those who are Russian, or speak Russian, to make sense of their presence in the same locality. For instance, Maria Kruhliak[17] from Mala Bilozirka, born in 1916, sees her village as homogeneous with only Ukrainians living there.

Here in Bilozirka, we are all of the same nationality. Well, we are all Ukrainians, and who are Russians? I don't know any here. Those who came, well, they are Ukrainians too. At one time or another, *zapadentsi* [westerners] and *chernihovtsi* [people from Chernihiv region] arrived, and they were also Ukrainians. (Boiko 2008–2010 vol 2: 30)

However, her neighbour in the village Hryhorii Monko,[18] born in 1926, acknowledged that there are some Russians in the village, and he even befriended some of them. However, he also underscores the fact that most of the villagers are Ukrainians (Boiko 2008–2010 vol 2: 61). Some, such as Lidia Riabokon,[19] also acknowledged that there are some villages nearby where Russians dominate, and they did not want to live in those villages because they are Ukrainians (Boiko 2008–2010 vol 4: 302).

Many remember the arrival of people from Russia in their villages and their first interactions with them. Some became family members through marriage with them. Kateryna Ushakova[20] shared the story of her mother-in-law and other Russian families who arrived in her village of Hrozove. According to Kateryna, they came from Kursk in 1929. Her story is about how the locals accepted those families by negotiating their presence in the village cultural space and recognising their cultural differences from local traditions such as food and architecture. For instance, many Steppe Ukrainian houses were traditionally constructed with clay and whitewashed inside and outside with lime. They also required regular maintenance by smearing them with a mixture of clay, horse manure, and wheat straw, a practice foreign to those who came to Steppe Ukrainian villages from Russia. Kateryna Ushakova shared how she helped a Russian woman fix her house, and through her story, she explicitly described her attitude toward Russians as a group of outsiders. However, her narrative strategy is also conclusive about the peaceful coexistence of local villagers with those from Russia in one safe space for all members of the village.

And the mother-in-law, she is a *katsap*,[21] and she cooked the Russian *shchi* with only water and an egg, well, what kind of borscht is that?… I almost died. She came here from Russia in 1929, from the Kursk region. Six families came just here.…

They were good people, even though they were Russian, but they were good. We brought them bread, lard, and milk. Apartments were given to them here. One of those who came wrote: "It's fine here." People here were welcoming. Helped them for a while.

And here, only *katsapy* lived [pointing to part of the village street]. There was a woman, well, the kind of Russian that she did not know how to do anything. She asked me to whitewash in her house. So I did.

There had been lice also, and the white shirt would be spotted. And she told me: "You know what, Katia, I will buy red powders; paint everything red for us so that at least those lice are not visible." So I repainted everything in red, and she gave me a kerchief for my work. We lived a good life. Nobody was resentful. Such was life. We sang songs together, even "Katyusha"[22] – it's a nice marching song. We could walk three kilometres away, and there was no violence. Girls could walk safely. (Boiko 2008–2010 vol 1: 168)

However, the recorded testimonies also indicate how identity politics in the Soviet Union influenced the self-identification of some villagers. A man from the village of Mala Bilozirka[23] shared a story about his mother, who identified herself as Russian in her Soviet identity document ('passport') although she was Ukrainian. He also recalls his family story, which extends back, as he claims, to before 1861, when his family was serfs to Rokhman, a Russian noble family. His story reveals how space and place are the markers of belonging and identity. As in the previous testimony, he spoke about the local traditional maintenance of houses in Steppe Ukraine and how people from Russia were unfamiliar with those traditions because they were "forest people":

She is Ukrainian, but in her passport, she wrote that she was Russian. She did not speak Ukrainian, but she spoke pure Ukrainian before the war. She graduated from a school in Melitopol, and there were so many Ukrainians there that they instilled in her a love for the Ukrainian language. And she remembered that her roots were Ukrainian, but at first, her native language was not Ukrainian. And then, when the Soviets came for the second time, she held her nose to the wind and tried to speak Russian.…

[Was this your grandmother who served at Rohman's?]

No, it was not a grandmother; it was a great grandmother. That was before 1861. Some of them were exchanged: two Russian families for one Poltava resident. One Ukrainian family was worth two Russian ones, that's how they used to do it. She taught them how to whitewash, clean, and manage the house. They came from the forest; they were forest people. (Boiko 2008–2010 vol 2: 200)

Other similar narratives in the testimonies hint at the goals that the Soviet Union's identity politics pursued and somehow achieved: mixing national identities and erasing their differences. This often contributed to confusion about self-identification and how the other is identified and viewed in the community. This situation is clearly encapsulated in Anastasiia Shcherbak's[24] response. Anastasiia was interviewed in the village of Shyroke: "We sang in Russian and Ukrainian. I'm not a [Russian] *katsapka*, and not a [Ukrainian] *khokhlushka* either. I don't even know who I am." (Boiko 2008–2010 vol 1: 203)

Despite the external forces the villagers were exposed to, many display narrative strategies that help them reconnect with the locality and their identities. Valentyna

Kozyriatska,[25] born in 1916, shares her family's story of arriving in the village of Bilenke from Russia in 1935, emphasising that her father was a native of Bilenke:

> I was born in Russia, but my father is from Bilenke. He left for land there. Russia had a lot of land, but people there wanted to do little with it. And the Khokhols, you know, they took the land.… [My father was born] in 1886…. He was 12 years old when he left for Russia because he said: "I was 12 years old when we left." [Where?]
> Well, it was Samara province…. Many went there for land. Many stayed, but many returned after the war, after dekulakisation. I was born there, but we are Ukrainians. But people there did not call us Ukrainians. They called us *malorosy* ['Little Russians']. (Boiko 2008–2010 vol 6: 101)

What is also interesting about the old residents of Bilenke village is that when the interviews were recorded, they still used a very complex system of identifying the local people and those who were not native. Their system and names of different population categories were very similar to those used by Cossacks in the 18th century: *staryi bilianyn*, *bilianyn*, *zayda* (arriviste), *zabluda* (vagabond), *zabroda* (wanderer), *zaplava* (flotsam), *pryplava* (jetsam), *chuzyi* (stranger) (Boiko 2008: 71).

Attitudes to others changed in the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the boundaries of localness and nativeness blurred. The locals worried that the number of native villagers was getting so small that it became difficult to sustain the feeling of belonging, as those to whom they could relate were few in number. These attitudes are very common for villages with a long history from which residents trace their origin.

CONCLUSIONS

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the narratives of belonging and otherness of elder villagers in Steppe Ukraine stretched beyond their lived experiences and were constructed based on accounts of official history, memories of ordinary people about geographically bounded space, cultural and social specificities of the imagined places they inhabit, and spoken languages. Justification of the notion of localness is a key element that contributes to the construction of a feeling of belonging. Localness is driven by attitudes toward culturally and ethnically different neighbours and those who arrived in Steppe Ukraine from other regions of Ukraine or other localities at different points of time.

The purposeful politics of the Soviet Union caused the most dramatic changes in the demographic composition in the region. The Soviet regime also contributed to the production of state-sponsored narratives that justified and explained those changes according to the accepted ideology of the Communist Party. Nevertheless, despite strong ideological control and pressure, a full replacement of the old narratives that originated and circulated before the Soviet Union has not occurred. In some cases, we see rather a mixture of old context with new meanings introduced during the Soviet era. Many villagers were also pushed to reinvent and adjust their understanding of localness and criteria of belonging and otherness, often based on universal social norms of behaviour rather than local traditional culture.

Cases of pre–Soviet era narratives of belonging and otherness can usually be found in villages that originated from Cossack or foreign colony settlements. Those villages that have remnants or fully surviving buildings or any other structural or architectural elements are more likely to have narratives that are diverse and accommodate the complex history of the village and the region. The inhabitants of those villages demonstrate an awareness of the history of their villages and people with whom they used to share common space. The nature of this knowledge is folkloric, as it is passed through generations via old songs and legends. Those villagers also integrate their languages in their narrative strategies to contextualise their otherness.

Justification of the notion of localness is a key element that contributes to constructing a feeling of belonging. Localness is driven by attitudes toward culturally and ethnically different neighbours and those who arrived from other regions at different times. The villagers engaged in different narrative strategies to make sense of the presence of those who are viewed as the other. Narratives of origin and arrival are the key motifs, especially for the oldest respondents for whom they play an important role in defining their sense of belonging.

ENDNOTES

1 Steppe Ukraine is a natural region in Ukraine defined by its landscape and climate; it is also a concept in Ukrainian historiography that looks into the region's development holistically. Steppe Ukraine is also the anticolonial concept that considers the history and sociocultural aspects of the region inside and outside official structures from the perspective of local communities that have inhabited the territory throughout different periods. Today, these lands include the territories of Odesa, Mykolaiv, Kherson, Zaporizhia, Dnipropetrovsk, Kirovohrad, Donetsk oblasts, most of Luhansk oblast, and the southern portion of Kharkiv oblast.

2 Hanna Savchenko, born 1928, village of Mala Bilozirka, Zaporizhia oblast.

3 Lidia Maksymivna Riabokon, born 1919, village of Bilenke, Vasylivka district, Zaporizhia oblast.

4 Tamila Ivanivna Keida, born 1941, village of Chubarivka, Polohy district, Zaporizhia oblast.

5 Polina Pylypivna Nazaretian, born 1910, Bilenke village, Zaporizhia district, Zaporizhia oblast.

6 The settlement measures are often attributed to Catherine the First, but actually they took place during the reign of Catherine the Second.

7 Halyna Petrivna Kopna, born 1929, village of Bilenke, Zaporizhia district, Zaporizhia oblast.

8 Olena Ievpatiivna Parafilo, born 1931, village of Pryvilne, Bashtanka district, Mykolaiv oblast.

9 Maria Ivanivna Pozniak, born 1931, and Mykhailo Trokhymovych Pozniak, born 1926, village of Pryvilne, Bashtanka district, Mykolaiv oblast.

10 Kateryna Matviivna Savenko, born 1929, village of Pryvilne, Bashtanka district, Mykolaiv oblast.

11 Varvara Illarionovna Porada, born 1929, village of Chubarivka, Polohy district, Zaporizhia oblast.

12 Hanna Hrihorivna Frich, born 1927, village of Pryvilne, Bashtanka district, Mykolaiv oblast.

13 Nadia Vasylivna Halenko, born 1928, and Vasyl Hryhorovych Halenko, born 1934, village of Chubarivka, Polohy district, Zaporizhia oblast.

14 Alla Svyrydivna Kibalska, born 1931, village of Chubarivka, Polohy district, Zaporizhia oblast.

15 Iukhym Antonovych Poimskyi, born 1922, village of Bilenke, Zaporizhia district, Zaporizhia oblast.

16 Vira Lukianivna Patalakh, born 1922, village of Bilenke, Zaporizhia district.

17 Maria Vasylivna Kruhliak, born 1919, village of Mala Bilozirka, Vasylivka district, Zaporizhia oblast.

18 Hryhorii Fedorovych Monko, born 1926, village of Mala Bilozirka, Vasylivka district, Zaporizhia oblast.

19 Lidia Maksymivna Riabokon, born 1919, village of Bilenke, Vasylivka district, Zaporizhia oblast.

20 Kateryna Markivna Ushakova, born 1923, village of Hrozove, Vasylivka district, Zaporizhia oblast.

21 Has been used in colloquial Ukrainian since the 18th century to denote people of Russian nationality.

22 A very popular Soviet-era military marching song performed only in military settings. It was composed by Matvey Blanter in 1938 and the lyrics in Russian written by the Soviet poet Mikhail Isakovskiy. Katyusha is a rocket launcher system actively used by the Red Army in the Second World War.

23 A resident of the village of Mala Bilozirka, Vasylivka district, Zaporizhia oblast.

24 Anastasiia Tymofiivna Shcherbak, born 1912, village of Shyroke, Vasylivka district, Zaporizhia oblast.

25 Valentyna Mykytivna Kozyriatska, born 1916, village of Bilenke, Zaporizhia district.

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