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PILOT STUDY OF UKRAINIAN HISTORICAL COLLECTIVE TRAUMA DURING RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR

Abstract. The article examines the role of collective historical trauma in Ukrainian society within the context of the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine. Historical memory forms the foundation of national identity, and for Ukraine, this identity is deeply rooted in traumatic experiences, including the losses during the Soviet era, the Holodomor, deportations, and repressions. The article explores how these historical traumas may be reactivated by new distressing events, such as war, and resurface in societal consciousness. Collective trauma, arising from genocides, political repressions, and other tragedies, leaves a profound imprint on the collective memory of the nation. Traumatic memories may be repressed from the collective consciousness but can resurface in response to new stress-inducing situations. A pilot study showed that historical trauma remains unprocessed in Ukrainian society, as there is a high level of social pain and a desire for compensation for past injustices. Additionally, the study revealed variations in the perception of historical trauma across different regions of Ukraine, shaped by differing historical experiences and memories. The results obtained could serve as a basis for further research and the search for more effective methods for healing historical trauma.

Keywords: collective trauma, historical trauma, ongoing war, pilot research.

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ПІЛОТНЕ ДОСЛІДЖЕННЯ УКРАЇНСЬКОЇ ІСТОРИЧНОЇ КОЛЕКТИВНОЇ ТРАВМИ В ЧАСИ РОСІЙСЬКО-УКРАЇНСЬКОЇ ВІЙНИ

Анотація. У статті розглядається роль колективної історичної травми в українському суспільстві в умовах сучасної війни Росії проти України. Історична пам'ять є основою національної ідентичності, і для України ця ідентичність глибоко корениться в травматичному досвіді, зокрема, втратами під час радянської епохи, Голодомору, депортацій і репресій. Вивчається, як ці історичні травми можуть бути активовані новими травматичними подіями, як-от війна, і знову проявлятися в суспільній свідомості. Колективна травма, що виникає через геноциди, політичні репресії та інші трагедії, залишає глибокий відбиток на колективній пам'яті нації. Травматичні спогади можуть бути витіснені з колективної свідомості, але знову спливати у відповідь на нові стресові ситуації. Пілотне дослідження показало, що історична травма в українському суспільстві залишається неопрацьованою, оскільки спостерігається високий рівень соціального болю та бажання компенсації за минулі злочини. Крім того, дослідження виявило варіації в сприйнятті історичної травми в різних регіонах України, що зумовлено різними історичними досвідами та пам'яттю. Отримані результати можуть стати основою для подальших досліджень і пошуку методів ефективнішого зцілення історичних травм.

Ключові слова: колективна травма, історична травма, триваюча війна, пілотне дослідження.

Introduction. The launch of Russia's full-scale invasion has precipitated a profound collective trauma within Ukrainian society, impacting the nation in its entirety. The recent upheavals in Ukraine occur against the backdrop of a century marked by the Ukrainian people's proximity to, or direct involvement in, numerous historically momentous and often devastating events, including

wars and revolutions [11]. As Mark Twain famously remarked, "history may not repeat itself, but it often rhymes" [13].

History is a cornerstone of national identity for most communities [10]. For Ukraine, this identity has been profoundly shaped by a legacy of hostility toward Russia [18]. Throughout the 20th century, Ukraine faced a series of traumatic events, especially

in the early decades. Notable among these were the defeat in the 1922 civil war for independence, the brutal collectivization and dekulakization policies, the devastating Holodomor of 1932–1933, the annexation of Western Ukraine in 1939, the Stalinist purges of the 1930s and 1940s, and the ethnic cleansing in Crimea in 1944. Also significant was the creation of the Gulag system (1923–1961), etc. [14].

Moreover, the Soviet regime's systematic terror also targeted Ukrainian culture through widespread arrests, executions, and repressive measures that resulted in the near-total destruction of the intellectual elite, as well as the dismantling of the Ukrainian Church, the banning of the Ukrainian language, and the decimation of the nation's cultural heritage [4]. This painful history of repression has left an enduring mark on Ukraine's collective memory, influencing its national identity to this day [15]. In line with the aforementioned, this inquiry aimed to examine how collective historical trauma may persist within the Ukrainian population, and how current violent circumstances may serve to reactivate or intensify unresolved psychological wounds.

Although humanity has been subjected to traumatic experiences since its earliest days, it is only in recent decades that trauma has become a focal point of scholarly inquiry. In particular, the concept of collective trauma – where entire groups or communities endure events that fundamentally shape historical trajectories – has gained prominence [1] (the focus on collective trauma intensified only after the Second World War).

Accordingly, the term “trauma”, derived from the Greek word *τραύμα*, is conceptualized as a psychological wound resulting from highly stressful events that suddenly threaten the life or personal integrity of an individual or group [2]. Trauma typically originates in one or more unbearable events that exceed the threshold of what can be perceived or processed, thus challenging both personal and collective identities [5]. In fact, human-induced collective traumas include large-scale events such as wars, genocides, revolutions, coups d'état, political repression, mass deportations, human-made or environmental disasters, totalitarian systems, political or religious oppression, restrictions on the freedom of large groups, acts of terrorism, etc. [12, pp. 58-59].

However, nations often retain memories of events that occurred long before the lives of current generations. Traumas recurring over decades in a group's history are termed historical traumas [9], and the concept is sometimes used interchangeably with transgenerational trauma [12]. In fact, extreme traumatic

experiences, such as genocide, remain deeply embedded in the collective and individual historical memory of a people. These memories do not fade over time; instead, they continuously influence national construction [3].

When an experience becomes unmanageable, or when the individual or collective involved is incapable of assimilating or confronting it, the mind instinctively contains it and withdraws it from conscious perception. This psychological strategy is referred to as «encapsulation». Therefore, commonly, those impacted exhibit emotional disengagement from any lingering traces of the traumatic memory [14]. Such emotional trauma often goes unrecognized or remains unaddressed within the broader social context [19].

Sometimes, individuals or groups may be unexpectedly affected by memories of trauma that, though seemingly buried, remain latent beneath the surface. These recollections can be triggered by external stimulus, provoking intense emotional responses such as anxiety or panic [14]. In response, people often adopt avoidance strategies – steering clear of certain places or topics – that progressively narrow their life choices. Over time, this can lead to a sense of being psychologically «frozen» or emotionally numb. Paradoxically, such numbness, despite the unresolved trauma, may serve as a coping mechanism that enables continued functioning [14].

Presentation of the research. Due to the relatively recent emergence of academic interest in historical trauma, there is currently an insufficient body of scientific evidence to definitively confirm or disprove the hypothesis that Ukrainian historical trauma remains unprocessed or unresolved. In this context, it is plausible to suggest that the ongoing war has triggered or activated pain associated with encapsulated historical trauma. Moreover, considering Ukraine's intricate historical background, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the manifestation of historical trauma may vary significantly across different regions of the country.

This aspect was addressed through the design of an exploratory research or pilot study, aimed at clarifying this issue at a preliminary level. Such preliminary studies are typically conducted prior to the main (or confirmatory) research when a specific problem, process, phenomenon, or mechanism related to a particular community, location, object, or society is still insufficiently explored – that is, when existing knowledge on the topic remains limited [7]. Pilot studies are small-scale investigations used to explore poorly defined or insufficiently studied issues, typically without a specific hypothesis [6; 16].

Questionnaire. As no standardized tools were available, a questionnaire was developed for this research. Its theoretical basis, especially on violent conflict and collective trauma, draws from Schori-Eyal, Halperin, and Bar-Tal (2014) on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, though adapted to the Russo-Ukrainian context, which involves a distinct history of imperial domination and cultural suppression. Additional references for items on (un)processed trauma and collective beliefs include Fülöp & László (2013), Villagram et al. (2021), and Stan- kov (2019). In addition to other signs of collective trauma, “pain” is considered a key indicator. Trauma, conceptualized as a “wound”, should not cause pain if properly processed. Another indicator is “traumatic loss”. Unresolved collective trauma is characterized by the presence of “social pain”, etc.

In the pilot questionnaire (which covered various areas of research interest), 12 items were dedicated to exploring historical trauma:

1. The sense of shared identity or the idea of «brotherhood» with Russia triggers rejection in me, particularly due to the traumatic experiences of the past, when the concept of «brother» was pathologically distorted by the Soviet Union.

2. I feel pain knowing that, historically, the Ukrainian people have often suffered unjustly from crimes and aggressions perpetrated by the Russians (and their predecessors, the USSR and the Russian Empire), including those resulting from the communist totalitarian system, repression, expropriation, collectivization, deportation to Siberia, the Gulag, the processes of Russification and assimilation of Ukraine, the Holodomor genocide (1932–1933), the «Executed Renaissance», punitive psychiatry, and other illegal actions by Russia, the USSR, and the Russian Empire.

3. I have noticed that in Ukrainian folk songs, folklore, popular art, and literature (particularly in the works of Shevchenko and Franko), there are many sorrowful (depressive) themes (concerning the unhappy fate, the suffering of Ukraine, oppression, etc.).

4. I feel pain due to the fact that throughout history, Russia (the Russian Empire, the USSR) falsified Ukraine’s history, destroyed Ukrainian monuments and historical artifacts, and prohibited the use of the Ukrainian language (thereby destroying the Ukrainian identity).

5. I feel sorrow that Russia (the Russian Empire, the USSR) destroyed and sought to subjugate (or attract to its side) all those who supported the ideas of Ukrainian identity, particularly the finest repre-

sentatives of Ukrainian culture, the intelligentsia, the clergy, and so on.

6. I believe that the Holodomor was a genocide committed by the Stalinist regime to destroy Ukrainian identity and prevent the struggle for independence and self-determination.

7. I believe that the USSR carried out the Russification of Eastern Ukraine (through processes of assimilation) as an attempt to construct a Soviet identity and suppress Ukrainian identity.

8. Reflecting on the Holodomor of 1932–1933 and the Russian war in Ukraine (2022–2023), I believe that history – specifically, the destruction of Ukrainians – tends to repeat itself.

9. I assume that Ukrainian identity has suffered more under the oppression of Russia (and its historical predecessors – the USSR, the Russian Empire, etc.) than under that of any other country.

10. I experience resentment, a sense of loss, and sorrow – I am disheartened by the fact that the Holodomor has been met with silence and that its orchestrators have not been brought to justice. In other words, the Ukrainian people have not been afforded the opportunity to restore justice, unlike the Jewish people, who received formal apologies and reparations from Germany for the Holocaust.

11. I would like the Russian Federation to officially acknowledge its responsibility for the harm inflicted upon Ukraine during the 2014–2022 war, as well as for the Holodomor (perpetrated by the USSR in 1932–1933), and to issue a formal apology to the Ukrainian people.

12. I aspire to a broad international public condemnation of Russia for its war crimes and crimes against humanity in Ukraine (akin to the Nuremberg Trials that brought Nazi atrocities to justice).

Participants rated each statement on a scale from 1 (completely untrue) to 5 (completely true).

Sample: With a population of approximately 44 million, a sample size of around 400 participants is typical for a socially representative sample [17]. However, due to online data collection via Google Forms, 408 responses were received. Participants were balanced across various regions of Ukraine, with data collection taking place during the active phase of the war. The sample distribution by geographical origin is as follows: Western – 26.7%, Central – 30.7%, Eastern – 39%, Abroad – 3.6%. Women make up 69.9% of the sample, while men – 30.1%. Age distribution is as follows: 16–30 years – 16.2%, 30–35 years – 18.6%, 35–40 years – 19.4%, 40–45 years – 17.9%, 45–50 years – 16.9%, and 50–75 years – 11%.

Psychometric characteristics. The data analysis using SPSS revealed the following descriptive statistics: mean = 138.27, variance = 154.335, standard deviation = 12.423, and Cronbach's alpha = .894. Cronbach's alpha is the primary focus in exploratory research as it assesses the reliability of the measurement tool. Values between 0.70 and 0.80 are considered acceptable, with lower values indicating poor reliability [8, p. 709]. A Cronbach's alpha of 0.894 in our study indicates high reliability and a robust measure of the constructs.

Results of ANOVA. To examine the relationship between sociodemographic variables and the questionnaire areas, Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to assess whether group means differ significantly. P-values between 0.001 and 0.05 indicate statistical significance. ANOVA identifies if differences between subgroups are due to the independent variable, which may cause the observed variations. The analysis revealed significant differences only between collective historical trauma and the geographical origin of participants from different regions of Ukraine (Table II), with no significant differences found for other aspects. In order to ensure an effective comparison in the ANOVA for this study, the western region was combined with the foreign group due to the similarity of responses and the need to maintain comparable group sizes (Table 1).

As shown in Table II, the ANOVA reveals a significant effect of historical trauma based on region

of origin. Specifically, Group 1, consisting of participants from the western part of Ukraine and abroad, reports a significantly higher level of pain related to historical trauma compared to Groups 2 (central part) and 3 (eastern and southern parts). The p-value for both comparisons is 0.008, indicating that the observed differences are statistically significant and unlikely to be due to chance (Table 2).

3. Conclusions of the conducted study. The qualitative evaluation of the graphic materials of the obtained results suggests that it is highly probable that historical trauma in Ukraine remains unprocessed, as the majority of respondents exhibit social pain and a desire for justice and compensation for past wrongs.

The ANOVA results, instead, confirm the theoretical framework: «The tragedy of the Ukrainian people is commemorated by those who did not experience it, mainly in the western regions, while those who lived through it understand it less», as Yevhen Sverstyuk remarked on the 80th anniversary of the Holodomor. In regions such as Kharkiv, Luhansk, and Dnipropetrovsk, discussing the Holodomor remains particularly challenging, highlighting the loss of historical memory in post-genocidal Ukrainian society, including its political elite [22, p. 302].

In this context, the difference between the inhabitants of Eastern and Western Ukraine is particularly noteworthy. Researchers suggest that in the Eastern part of Ukraine, there was a tendency to avoid dis-

Table 1

Geographical origin groups for the ANOVA analysis

| | | | Frequency | Percentage | Valid percentage | Cumulative percentage |
|-------|---|---------------------------|-----------|------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| Valid | 1 | Western part and abroad | 124 | 30,4 | 30,4 | 30,4 |
| | 2 | Central part | 136 | 33,3 | 33,3 | 63,7 |
| | 3 | Eastern and Southern part | 148 | 36,3 | 36,3 | 100,0 |
| | | Totale | 408 | 100,0 | 100,0 | |

Table 2

ANOVA of Historical Trauma Differences in Relation to Geographical Origin

| Total | N | Mean | DS | | | | |
|-------|---------------------------|---------|---------|---------|-------|-------|------|
| | 408 | 57,3627 | 4,74673 | | | | |
| | Groups | N | Mean | DS | G.L. | F | P |
| 1 | Western part and abroad | 124 | 58,4355 | 2,94183 | | | |
| 2 | Central part | 136 | 56,8824 | 5,90048 | 2/404 | 4,631 | ,010 |
| 3 | Eastern and Southern part | 148 | 56,9054 | 4,66619 | | | |

Differences between the categories of the same factor

| Groups | Mean A | Mean B | Differences A-B | Standard Error | G.L. | P |
|--------|---------|---------|-----------------|----------------|-------|------|
| 1/2 | 58,4355 | 56,8824 | 1,55313* | ,58420 | 1/258 | ,008 |
| 1/3 | 58,4355 | 56,9054 | 1,53008* | ,57279 | 1/270 | ,008 |

cussing the Holodomor. This phenomenon was not only a neurobiological strategy to protect the psyche of eyewitnesses, passed down to subsequent generations, but also a reflection of fear of the Soviet authorities, who could severely punish anyone daring to mention the man-made famine. In contrast, in Western Ukraine, the topic of the Holodomor was discussed more openly [22].

According to the ANOVA analysis, the pain associated with historical trauma is greater in the western part of Ukraine, which did not experience the Holodomor, compared to the central and eastern regions. One possible explanation for this is that those who directly lived through the trauma in the central and eastern areas may have been overwhelmed by the experience, leading them to encapsulate their trauma and adopt a «freeze» coping mechanism. This may have also resulted in a form of emotional detachment, as a psychological defense to protect themselves and future generations from the pain of the past. In

contrast, in the western part of Ukraine, people are likely to experience this pain more acutely due to social identity factors, as they identify with their fellow Ukrainians who suffered from the Holodomor, thereby sharing in their collective suffering indirectly.

In **summary**, this study is exploratory in nature and provides initial insights into the regional differences in the experience of historical trauma in Ukraine. However, future confirmatory research is needed to validate these findings. It would also be valuable to apply a variety of research methods – including longitudinal studies, in-depth qualitative interviews, and mixed-method approaches – to gain a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of trauma transmission, emotional responses, and collective memory across generations. Such efforts will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the long-term psychological and social impacts of the Holodomor and help inform national strategies for historical remembrance and collective healing.

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