

Nation-building from (below) the grassroots: Everyday nationalism in Ukraine's bomb shelters

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Abstract

Life has profoundly changed for Ukrainian citizens since the beginning of the Russia–Ukraine war. While millions have fled Ukraine as refugees and displaced persons, others have remained in their cities to take up arms, volunteer, and/or shield for safety. Despite the devastation at all levels of society caused by Russia's ongoing attacks, Ukrainians' expressions and practices of nationhood have endured and even evolved in light of their country's war-torn reality, as is especially evident in the country's bomb shelters. As hegemonic theorising in nationalism studies often centres on the territorial state and its institutions, this paper instead considers the experiences of ordinary individuals who hold important colloquial and vernacular knowledge. Specifically, the project examines the everyday lives of Ukrainians at—or below—the grassroots within bomb shelters in the heavily attacked cities of Chernihiv, Kyiv, and Kharkiv to reveal how Ukrainian nationalism has manifested and even been (re)produced amidst the conflict. In demonstrating that nationalism has served as both a sentiment and expression of self, the findings emphasise its significance in the current conflict as a motivating and unifying force in Ukrainians' everyday lives.

KEYWORDS

conflict, everyday nationalism, Russian aggression, Ukraine, Ukrainian nation

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1 | INTRODUCTION

'I love Ukraine, I believe in it, I hope it will survive and stay strong'.-Chernihiv resident from her bomb shelter¹

Since Russia's invasion on 24 February 2022, everyday life in Ukraine has been fundamentally disrupted. Millions of citizens have been displaced and fled for safety in the country's westernmost regions or abroad as refugees, while others have stayed in their homes to volunteer in various capacities. Ukrainians of all ages have taken up arms to defend their territory, including many with no previous military training. Those unable to flee have hid from the horrors of the war in underground metro stations, basements, cellars and other makeshift bomb shelters, sometimes with hundreds of others. Survival has consequently become the state of being for citizens amidst Ukraine's war-torn reality, albeit in diverse forms.

Still, a strong attachment to the Ukrainian nation has remained, and arguably even grown, since Russia's invasion. Beyond ordinary citizens' tangible efforts to support the military and defend their cities and towns, overt expressions of nationhood have been widely observed across the country since February 2022, and shared globally across multiple platforms, especially in video form. These sentiments have been especially evident in artworks and performances, among other media, produced in the underground shelters where people have sought refuge since the earliest days of the war. Whereas these sites were mundane places prior to the war, they became the entire spatial realities or 'worlds' of many Ukrainians, at least temporarily, and, accordingly, are where their nation is experienced and (re)produced. Although bomb shelters have not been widely considered in studies of politics or nationalism, and are typically viewed as austere places where citizens are passive and powerless, these unique sites remain important for everyday nationalism by serving as a theatre for the redefinition of national sentiments and practices of the nation in a new spatial and temporal context. Within the context of the Russia–Ukraine war, videos and photos of various confrontations and destroyed cities have colloquially been used to demonstrate the strength of the Ukrainian nation, for both Ukrainian and international audiences, yet, few studies have systematically analysed grassroots sentiments and the expressions of ordinary citizens. As such, it must be asked: How has nationhood been conveyed at the grassroots in Ukraine amidst Russia's aggression? What is the significance of nationalism in this dynamic context? And, what might everyday practices of nationhood tell us about Ukrainian nationalism prewar and perhaps post-war?

To answer these questions, the everyday realities of Ukrainians in the cities of Chernihiv, Kyiv, and Kharkiv are examined here. In considering how nationalism has been negotiated, challenged and (re)produced by ordinary people in, or rather, *below*, Ukraine's grassroots in various bomb shelters, it can be seen that nationalism has been 'actively constructed' (Mann & Fenton, 2009) as a response to Russia's antagonism. While serving as a sentiment and expression of self, nationalism has also proven to be a unifying and motivating force for Ukraine's citizens. In this way, the project serves as a starting point for larger conversations around bottom-up nation-building, especially within the Ukrainian context both amidst Russia's aggression and into the future.²

2 | NATIONALISM IN THE EVERYDAY

As a subfield of nationalism studies, 'everyday nationalism' investigates the everyday social practices, experiences, and meanings around nationhood. By emphasising the agency of ordinary people and recognising that nationalism may be variably expressed and experienced across time and space (Skey, 2011), this approach explores the ways nationalism is manifested in the everyday lives of ordinary people, or the "lived experience of nationalism," in particular spatial and temporal contexts (Knott, 2016: 1). In contrast to more hegemonic and top-down nationalism frameworks centring on the territorial state and its institutions, everyday nationalism neither seeks to provide an encompassing description of the relevance, role, nor even origin of nationalism for the 'masses' (Goode &

Stroup, 2015). Rather, everyday nationalism is interested in the social practices and processes beyond (or, in this case, below) the state to disclose the 'vernacular understandings' and everyday experiences of nationalism (Brubaker et al., 2006: 9). With an emphasis on the perspectives of ordinary people, who are regularly 'missing' from the dominant scholarship (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008; Goode, 2020), this framework includes both the more visible daily practices, encounters, and self-conceptions, and the specific idioms and common knowledge associated with individual nations. Although resembling Michael Billig's (1995) 'banal' nationalism, everyday nationalism is less interested in the larger institutions and structures which shape and/or construct nationalism than the ways people negotiate, (re)produce, and challenge the nation through their everyday practices (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008).

By exploring the 'everyday social experience' within Ukraine's bomb shelters (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000: 4), or at least what can be observed from the outside, this study therefore exposes how nationalism has 'worked' and been 'lived' in Ukraine during the Russia-Ukraine war (Brubaker et al., 2006). The experiences within basements and other bomb shelters are of particular interest here because they have served as homes for millions of Ukrainians since Russia's invasion, offering safety and protection from the devastation only metres above.³ In line with everyday nationalism's aims to further knowledge around how nationhood is spatially experienced and expressed in the everyday lives of ordinary people within the places where they reside (Skey, 2011), these sites are hence among the most salient to explore everyday nationalism within a war setting. Although bomb shelters serve a certain function in a specific environment, and therefore remain quite understudied, they nonetheless reveal much about a precise time-space context and shed light on larger socio-political phenomena (Goode & Stroup, 2015). Still, accessing data from outside these places is incredibly challenging due to their role in ensuring citizens' safety and security, and because Internet access and cell coverage are limited. In addition, minimal information is shared about the locations of bomb shelters and who is sheltering inside, and physical access is curtailed because of the dynamic settings in which they are required. As the experience of bomb shelters can only be known through those who have lived within them, qualitative analyses of audio-visual data shared on a variety of platforms thus allow for the best possible examination of the everyday realities within these places. Indeed, all data accessed through these means are deeply contextual and not entirely representative of the bomb shelter experience, yet, they provide the most accurate accounts available given the situation.

3 | EVERYDAY NATIONALISM WITHIN THE BOMB SHELTERS

When examining the ways nationhood has been expressed in the everyday lives of Ukrainians amidst Russia's antagonism, it can be seen that national sentiments have served as expressions of identity and attachment within the context of the war. In many instances, citizens' reasons for shielding in their cities integrally show their loyalty to their nation. As one woman living in a bomb shelter in Chernihiv detailed to [Sky News](#) when explaining why she had stayed to help others in need, especially citizens with special needs unable to leave their homes: 'I am staying with my people. I stay with my country. Probably, when we win, you know, we need some rehabilitation, but we will reconstruct the country and we will make it even more beautiful because we love our country, we love our people'. The paper's introductory quote almost identically reflects these same sentiments. While one's decision to stay certainly does not guarantee they are more committed to their nation than those who chose (or were forced) to flee to more western regions or abroad, the actions of those who have remained in Ukraine have nevertheless recurrently shown a strong commitment to the Ukrainian nation and to helping those defending it.⁴ In a shelter in the basement of a local school which housed approximately 300 of Chernihiv's residents, for instance, a woman explained she felt helpless not being able to do more to help the war effort, and therefore 'started writing letters of support and grateful words to people who protect [them]'; notably, she also stated that these actions were "the least" she could do for others given the current circumstances.⁵ Comparable [illustrations](#) of civilians coming together to support the larger community amidst the shelling include daily activities like cleaning and cooking for Ukraine's military personnel, territorial defence volunteers, and, especially, 'for the children'. Even though simple and seemingly

mundane everyday tasks like volunteering and cleaning drastically vary from the overt expressions of nationhood typically recognised as 'nationalism,' within the context of the war, these actions inherently show Ukrainian citizens' dedication to ensuring the preservation and continuation of their nation for future generations. Like this, national sentiments have been renegotiated and redefined at the grassroots in response to Russia's antagonism as ordinary practices have come to intrinsically demonstrate a commitment to the Ukrainian nation (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008; Goode, 2020).

Music and artwork have equally been used by Ukrainians to boost morale within their refuges. Starkly contrasting the immense devastation simultaneously occurring only a few metres above, the atmospheres in the underground shelters have often reflected a sombre dynamic, such as in one of Kyiv's metro-turned bomb shelters where Danil Kolotun, a young musician from a prominent state orchestra, played the Ukrainian national anthem on his trumpet most evenings as the capital was attacked. His performances subsequently became part of the everyday rituals of the hundreds of people within the shelter in the early days of the war, much like the post-dinner practice of sharing tea and food. When asked about his recitals, Kolotun explained to *The New Yorker* that he used music as a way to relieve his own stress and anger regarding Russia's invasion, as well as to console others: "I'm a musician—that's what I can do well—so I figured I'd make that my contribution." The violin performances of popular Ukrainian folk song, 'Verbovaya Doshechka (The Willow Board),' by Illia Bondarenko and Mykola Lysenko's 19th century, 'Nich Yaka Misyachna (What a Moonlit Night),' by a young female musician in another underground shelter demonstrates a similar juxtaposition between war and peace. The latter song is one of Ukraine's most popular folk songs and symbolises passion, love, beauty, and tenderness; its playing within this particular context thus reflects the use of art and beauty to unite the nation amidst its significant losses, and an inherent reproduction and redefinition of the Ukrainian nation in a new time and place (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008; Skey, 2011). Also reinforcing the unification of a collective Ukrainian 'we' standing in contrast to others (as 'they') is the fact that a video of the female violinist playing this song was widely shared on social media channels with the overlaid words: "[w]hat we do in bomb shelters when they bomb us from the sky" (emphasis added).

Still, it is not only ordinary individuals who have engaged in musical performances within the underground shelters, as well-known Ukrainian artists have likewise played in these nontraditional settings since the beginning of the war. One prominent example is that of Svyatoslav Vakarchuk, frontman of the Ukrainian rock band, *Okean Elzy*, who has travelled across Ukraine and performed for a variety of audiences in diverse settings. Notably, Vakarchuk's concerts have not been limited to bomb shelters, but also amidst the debris of shelled buildings, on empty squares in major cities, and in train stations filled with refugees. Of these, particularly noteworthy concerts include one in a metro-turned bunker in Kharkiv during the first month of war on 16 March 2022, wherein those sheltering sang the popularised Ukrainian song, 'Chervona Ruta (Red Rue),' alongside the artist. Though not necessarily seeming extraordinary, the collective chorus of this folk-pop tune in this city bordering Russia consisting of predominantly Russian-speakers is particularly remarkable given the song's historical significance for Ukrainians as an ode to Ukraine itself with its nuanced references to pride, romance, tragedy, resilience, and national identity. The singing of this song in this specific setting therefore shows its new meaning in the contemporary day as a weapon of resistance against Russia's aggressive imposition. Vakarchuk's 'Everything Will be Alright' concert on 24 April 2022, Orthodox Easter Sunday, in the Kyiv *Zoloti Vorota* (Golden Gate) metro station—which served as a shelter for thousands of the city's residents during the height of the attacks on the capital—was equally a display of nationhood and an attempt to both inspire and console Ukrainians (see Figure 1). Moreover, these exhibitions of nationhood point to the significance of everyday nationalism as a form resistance and protest against the Russian offensive. As national sentiments and symbols have been used in similar ways throughout Ukraine's history to support the nation's fight against assault, especially those associated with Soviet and/or Russian regimes, it can therefore be seen that Ukrainians are drawing on old patterns to both unify and motivate the nation against Russia as the latest threat.

Beyond these significant exhibitions of Ukrainian nationalism, it must be stated that children have likewise overtly reproduced their nation amidst the war. Like older generations, young singers have used music to boost the morale of their fellow citizens during attacks on their cities, such as those who sang a famous Kyiv anthem while

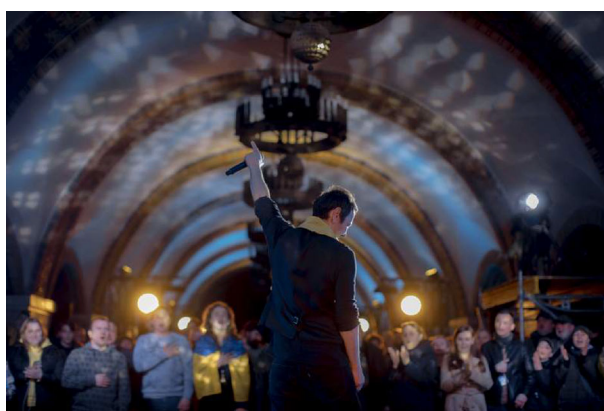


FIGURE 1 Svyatoslav Vakarchuk in Kyiv's *Zoloti Vorota* Bomb Shelter. Source of photo: TopNews [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/juma.12877)]

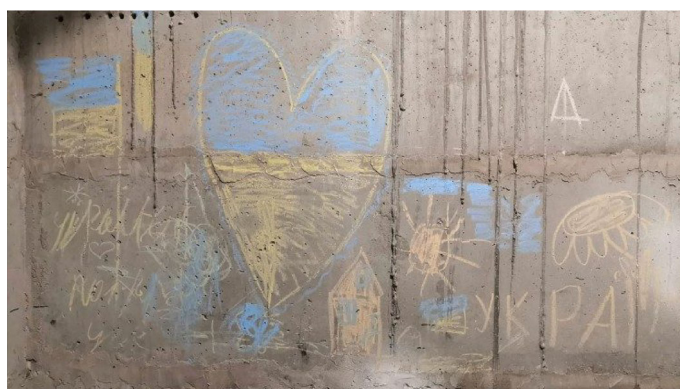


FIGURE 2 Children's drawings on a bomb shelter wall in Chernihiv. Source of photo: Vatican News [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/juma.12877)]

their city was shelled above during the early days of the war and Amelia Anisovych's Ukrainian rendition of Frozen's 'Let It Go' from her bomb shelter. A video of 3-year old Leonard Bush from Irpin singing the influential Ukrainian insurgent hymn, 'Oï u Luzi Chervona Kalyna' (In the Meadow, a Red Kalyna), additionally went viral in the first weeks of the war, although the live stream of him performing 'Not Your War' during *Okean Elzy's* concert in the Kyiv metro was an especially prominent demonstration of Ukrainian resistance and perseverance. Other striking examples of how national meanings have been imbued in everyday practices and encounters include the artwork produced by children when passing time underground; Figure 2 is one visible exemplification. These illustrations reveal that even Ukraine's youngest citizens have cognitively-emotively aligned themselves with the Ukrainian nation and recognised its importance (Howlett, 2020). While the children's reproductions of nationhood could indeed come from their absorption of national narratives through the presentation of music and art in their bomb shelters, colloquial discussions and more subtle rhetoric has likely also played an important role, given that these small places became Ukrainians' entire 'worlds'. Other discreet depictions of the nation possibly observed by young people include the films shown in some shelters, such as the classic silent Ukrainian films played in a few of Kyiv's bunkers by the city's administration and the Oleksandr Dovzhenko National Centre, and the Ukrainian flags hung on the walls of many bunkers. These visible enactments, performances, and practices hence show that the implicit ascribed and subjective

ideas associated with the Ukrainian nation (Anderson, 2006) have gained new significance within the context of the war, including even for the youngest generation.

4 | UKRAINIAN NATIONALISM GOING FORWARD

Though this study has only just begun a much larger conversation around the Ukrainian nation within the context of the Russia–Ukraine war, it can be seen that Ukrainian nationalism has served as both a sentiment and expression of self for Ukrainians in their everyday lives. The findings have also demonstrated that ordinary practices and expressions of the nation have proven to be a unifying and motivating force for citizens within Ukraine's underground shelters, especially as a form of resistance against their neighbour's aggressive imposition. Still, it must be noted that expressions and practices of the nation resembling those highlighted here have also been seen in parallel (at least spatially) above ground in Ukraine amidst the violence. Prominent examples include the trumpeter who played the Ukrainian national anthem from his balcony in the midst of clashes with Russia in Sumy in the early days of the war, Ukrainian military personnel singing popular folk songs near the frontlines, and the military band who played the national anthem beside a crater created by a Russian missile in Kyiv. The patriotic Ukrainian song dedicated to the deadly Bayraktar combat drone has likewise gained widespread popularity both in Ukraine and abroad following its release on 1 March 2022. Furthermore, and in addition to Leonard Bush's adaptation of 'Oï u Luzi Chervona Kalyna,' several other versions have emerged around the world since the song was sung by Andriy Khlyvnyuk, leader of the Ukrainian band, Boombox, in Kyiv in the days following 24 February 2022; particularly noteworthy examples include those by Pink Floyd, Marlaire Maas, and the South African band, The Kiffness (David Scott). Citizens who fled Ukraine have also continued to show their attachment to their country, especially by using social media as a tool to spread awareness about the harsh realities at the grassroots. These examples accordingly encourage many areas of further research in showing the introduction of new national symbols and the redefinition of old ones as a way to define, motivate, and support the Ukrainian nation in their fight against Russia's aggression.

Moving forward, then, much research is still needed to further explore how a stronger sense of Ukrainian identity may have developed in the country since the beginning of the war, both among those displaced and those who sheltered in place. In line with the findings of this study and also the [Tweet](#) by Belarusian journalist, Hanna Liubakova, which emphasised that "unity, courage and strength are [now] visible on every level in (Ukraine's) society," the ways the Ukrainian nation has persevered and, perhaps, even been (re)built in light of Russia's aggression is significant and deserves further analysis. In particular, as few studies have explored nationalism within bomb shelters, the Ukrainian case prompts several questions about how we think about 'bottom-up' nation-building when practices and expressions of the nation take place at new spatial scales *below* the grassroots. Moreover, the redefinition of national symbols, especially music and art, in light of the Russia–Ukraine war also encourages us to consider the role of conflict in unifying and motivating national collectives. Most importantly, this analysis shows that nationalism grows through the everyday practices of people within their unique spatial and temporal contexts. It is therefore fundamental to include the voices at all levels in a state—both literally and figuratively—to understanding nationalism in the everyday.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Interview conducted by author on 6 March 2022.

² The role of other countries in influencing Ukrainians' everyday experiences and supporting Ukraine through humanitarian and military aid, as well as international activism, is not overtly examined here; however, it remains an important consideration for future explorations of nation-building in Ukraine within the context of the war.

- ³ This number cannot definitively be determined given the dynamic and catastrophic nature of the war.
- ⁴ Although out of the scope of this project, an exploration into the strength of local identities and attachments of both those who left and stayed is a particularly important area for further research.
- ⁵ Interview conducted by author on 6 March 2022.

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