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From Sacred Land to Sovereignty: The Influence of the Steppes on Ukrainian Identity

Magister (MA) Thesis

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Abstract

This thesis explores the socio-cultural significance of the Ukrainian steppes and their destruction amid the Russia Ukraine War. Through an interdisciplinary framework combining Environmental Humanities and Identity Studies, the study examines how the steppes have shaped Ukrainian collective imagination and national identity from early history to the present day. Tracing their influence through historical turns, art, literature, religion, and political resistance, the steppes emerge not merely as a geographic feature, but as a sacred landscape central to Ukrainian culture and sovereign identity.

The analysis unfolds in three parts: first, it investigates the historical role of the steppe region in forming early Ukrainian identity and cultural narratives; second, it examines the steppes as a symbolic and literal site of resistance during Imperial and Soviet domination; and third, it considers the steppes in the context of the current war, evaluating the cultural impact of their decimation. Drawing on sources ranging from historical texts, religious writings, and artworks to environmental data, grassroots movements, and contemporary journalism, the study reveals how the erasure of the steppe biome represents not just ecological loss but an attack on Ukrainian identity and sacred heritage.

In doing so, this work critiques dominant, commodifying views of nature in mainstream wartime discourse, calling instead for recognition of ecocide as a profound human tragedy. It affirms the steppes as an enduring symbol of Ukrainian independence and highlights the urgent need to integrate more nuanced eco-cultural perspectives into discourse on environmental policy and war. This study presents landscapes as vital agents of identity, resilience, and collective imagination in an effort to center alternative land ethics long obscured by imperial and capitalist hegemonies.

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Introduction

The territory of Ukraine is an invaluable region of natural heritage, containing diverse ecological biomes and habitats that are home to 35% of Europe's biodiversity[1]. The territory's natural bounty has long been a defining feature of Ukrainian culture and a continuous driver of its social, economic, and political development. However, the advent of the Russia Ukraine War has brought an existential threat to Ukrainian nature, as war-related environmental devastation has occurred at unprecedented levels. Since the beginning of the war in 2022, more than 30% of the country's protected areas have been destroyed[2]. Bombardment, fires, heavy military equipment, pollution, resource extraction, and lack of environmental governance are just a few of the ways the war is leading to ecocide in Ukraine. And given that all forms of life are immeasurably connected, this destruction is having profound impacts far beyond what can be regarded as strictly ecological.

As the stakes of the war grow ever higher, it is critical that international dialogue considers the nuanced ways that environmental destruction resulting from such brutal aggression impacts people. All too often, environmental damage is reduced to practical losses in terms of natural resources or arable land, accepted as collateral damage of war. Mainstream perspectives harbor an unspoken connection to economic value; ecological implications are relegated (and usually subordinated) to another sphere. This is due to capitalist, hegemonic frameworks that commodify nature and assign it value based on economic parameters. Unfortunately, such logics are prevalent and seep through to treatment of the environment during wartime. The critical, pragmatic atmosphere of war can in fact greatly proliferate this quantitative reasoning and reduce ecological harm to collateral damage. Needless to say, such a reductionist approach to environmental issues during warfare is extremely harmful and leaves behind a slew of critical issues in urgent need of discussion. For example, environmental destruction is often not conceptualized as cultural loss, filled with historical significance, stolen identity, and negative implications for the broader human condition. And similarly, dominant ideologies don't fully allow for the concept of non-human victims of war to hold much weight. These deficiencies underscore the dire need for more thorough eco-cultural research into war, illuminating the

[1] United Nations Environment Programme. *The Environmental Impact of the Conflict in Ukraine: A Preliminary Review*. Nairobi: UNEP, 2022.
[2] United Nations Environment Programme. *The Environmental Impact of the Conflict in Ukraine: A Preliminary Review*.

unseen harm that ecological loss inflicts on human individuals and societies, both at the physical and conscious level. Enriching the emerging body of knowledge on the very intricate human-nature networks that get disrupted by war enables a far deeper comprehension of the true implications of ecocide.

Based on such understanding, this multidisciplinary study examines one natural region of Ukraine, the southeastern steppelands, to uncover overlooked dimensions of the environmental harm occurring in the Russia Ukraine War. To guide this investigation, the following research question was raised: *What meaning have the steppes held in Ukrainian collective imagination, and how does this historic relationship inform sovereign national identity in the present?* The study begins by examining how the natural landscape of the steppes has immensely impacted the formation of Ukrainian collective imagination, community, and national identity. This is achieved through diachronic analysis into how the steppes were key to shaping Ukrainian history, blending analysis of historical narratives, art, literature, folk knowledge, and religion in search of connections to the steppes. It will then build off of these findings to analyze how the steppes were also intrinsically tied to Ukrainian resistance, playing an identity-affirming role as Ukraine made efforts to proclaim its independent identity against foreign powers. A similar multidisciplinary lens is used, though it additionally employs comparative historical analysis to vividly illustrate the steppes from a Ukrainian perspective that contrasts foreign others. The study then lands in the present, where the previous dynamics are brought into focus as they surface in the war. In this section, contemporary literature and informal sources are added to the analysis to help draw out the place of the steppes in contemporary Ukrainian national consciousness. Though the context of these relationships varies widely, the themes and immaterial value of the steppes, as they relate to national memory, are interdependent—the current erasure of the steppe biome echoes events of the past that were partially responsible for Ukraine's collective embrace and defense of the steppes as a sacred piece of heritage. Hence, these different indicators converge to reveal an intrinsic emotional value that the steppes hold in the Ukrainian collective imagination and national identity. Put more briefly, this study examines the steppes as a continuous setting for eco-nationalism in the context of Ukrainian identity-formation, with crucial relevance to present geopolitics.

Given the highly interdisciplinary nature of the topic, a wide range of different formal and informal sources thread together to answer the research question. The research was initially

inspired by the physical environmental tolls of the war, based on the emerging body of data that outlines the scale and characteristics of the environmental harm occurring. The United Nations has carried out environmental impact assessments on the direct and indirect environmental effects[3], and many institutions, such as for example Yale University, have also published material on various nuanced environmental developments[4]. Environmental databases such as Ecodozor[5] were consulted for supplemental data. Additionally, research on the psychological impacts of the war such as the work of Sergi Jargin[6] provided useful groundwork into how various ecological harms have begun to impact humans.

Building on this emerging body of environmental impact data, this study applies an analytical framework that connects ecological degradation to cultural identity. This theoretical framework guiding this work is based on critical environmental literature on the human and non-human relations at a metaphysical, political, and societal level. Lawrence Buell's seminal book *The Environmental Imagination*[7], as well as Jane Dawson's work on eco-nationalism[8] and Astrid Bracke's work on ecocriticism[9] are foundational. Guattari's writings and theories[10] also provide a framework to how ecology can be socially and mentally constructed, relating to how natural landscapes can shape identity. The concept of ecosophy, which views environmental change as deeply intertwined with social and mental constructs, provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how the destruction of the steppes represents a broader loss to Ukrainian identity, not only ecologically but also culturally and spiritually. All of these works feed into a greater academic discourse about alternative environmental thought, which were read in parallel with a variety of sources on the topic of collective imagination and national identity, including

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[3] United Nations Environment Programme. *The Environmental Impact of the Conflict in Ukraine: A Preliminary Review*

[4] Pearce, F. "Collateral Damage: The Environmental Cost of the Ukraine War." *Yale Environment 360*, September 6, 2022.

[5] Ecodozor. *Environmental Consequences and Risks of Fighting in Ukraine*. "Ecodozor." Accessed 2024. https://ecodozor.org.

[6] Jargin, S. "Selected Religion-Related and Psychological Aspects of the War in Ukraine." 2023. https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.17339.59685.

[7] Buell, L. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1nzfgsv.

[8] Dawson, J. I. "The Two Faces of Environmental Justice: Lessons from the Eco-Nationalist Phenomenon." *Environmental Politics* 9, no. 2, 2000, 22–60. https://doi.org/10.1080/09644010008414523.

[9] Bracke, A., and M. Corporaal. "Ecocriticism and English Studies: An Introduction." *English Studies* 91, no. 7, 2010, 709–12. https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2010.518038.

[10] Berressem, H. "Introduction: Guattari and Ecology." In *Felix Guattari's Schizoanalytic Ecology*, Edinburgh University Press, 2020, 1–22.

The Collective Imagination[11], *The Collective Memory*[12], and *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*[13]. Together, the bodies of literature in Environmental Humanities and Memory Studies provide the theoretical framework for how the steppes contributed to the formation of Ukrainian identity. The guiding theory is further elaborated in the Methodology section.

The first chapter of this study focuses on the early formations of identity in the steppes, using historical context to analyze how the steppe landscape was crucial to shaping early aspects of Ukrainian culture. The major themes touch on migration, the nomadic lifestyle, the perception of steppes as "barbaric", and the creation of a borderland. To outline life in the steppes during this time period, historical texts about Ukraine are relied on, including Magosci's *A History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples* [14] and Plokhy's *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* [15]. These narratives are supplemented by literature from a variety of disciplines, including ecological[16], archeological[17], and anthropological[18]. Sources are consulted intermittently as the text outlines significant early moments of development in the steppes that have had lasting impacts on Ukrainian identity.

The second chapter delves into the Imperial and Soviet periods of Ukrainian history, focusing on the steppes as a cultural force in an era when Ukraine's sovereign identity became highly contested. The chapter establishes historical context and finds connections between the steppes and identity, drawing from historical sources about pivotal political moments and religion in the steppes, from primary sources such as art, literature, and materials from cultural organizations in Ukraine (many steppe reserves' websites, for example, include information about historic ruins/landmarks located in their territory). Blending this variety of sources, the chapter analyzes how the steppes were upheld by Ukrainians as a source of national pride,

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[11] Murphy, P. *The Collective Imagination: The Creative Spirit of Free Societies*. 1st ed. London: Routledge, 2012. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315614830.
[12]Halbwachs, M. *The Collective Memory*. New York: Harper & Row, 1980.
[13]Anderson, B. R. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. ed. London: Verso, 2016.
[14]Magocsi, P. R. *History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples*. 2nd rev. and expanded ed. Toronto, Ont: University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division, 2010.
[15]Plokhy, S. *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine*. New York: Basic Books, 2017.
[16]Deák, B., et al. "Heritage of Ancient Cultures Supports Conservation: A Continent-Wide Perspective from the Eurasian Steppes." *bioRxiv*, 2022. https://doi.org/10.1101/2022.09.29.510067.
[17]Phillips, E. D. "New Light on the Ancient History of the Eurasian Steppe." *American Journal of Archaeology* 61, no. 3 (1957): 269–80.
[18] Varga, B. "The Identity-Shaping/Forming Role of the Border/Peripheral Region – 'Kraj' – in the Formation of Cossacks in Ukraine." *Études Sur La Région Méditerranéenne*, 2023, 33–43.

claimed as a uniquely Ukrainian landscape backdropping national identity. Along with revealing this almost mythical conception of the steppes, historical sources are also used to show how the steppes played a role as a physical setting for resistance, given that they make up Ukraine's southeastern borders and were often the sites of invasion[19]. This chapter is also informed by a robust body of literature detailing historical environmental movements within Ukraine and Russia. John Lehr's article "The Ukrainian Sacred Landscape: A Metaphor of Survival and Acculturation[20]" discusses historic ties between environment, culture, and independence in Ukraine, which are further reflected in later works by Tetiana Perga[21] and Chernyshev et al[22]. Similar work also exists pertaining to environmental resistance within the Soviet Union, such as Kazak Rinata's "Environmental Protection and Public Participation in the USSR during the Latter 20th Century[23]." Finally, this chapter builds on the work of a number of transdisciplinary historians who have published research about natural history and Ukrainian culture, including Volodymyr Vernadsky[24], Darya Tsymbalyuk[25], and Tanya Richardson[26].

With the historical and cultural context established, the third chapter of the study moves on to examine the environmental and cultural impact of the current war, exploring how the destruction of the steppes echoes past struggles for sovereignty. This chapter uses environmental data presented by reports and publications of the UN, environmental NGOs, and the Ukrainian government. To analyze how this environmental damage in the steppes constitutes a cultural loss, it will draw from contemporary articles that discuss the environment during the war[27], grassroots

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[19] Moon, D. G. "Steppe by Steppe: Exploring Environmental Change in Southern Ukraine." *Global Environment* 9, no. 2 (2016): 414–39. https://doi.org/10.3197/ge.2016.090205.
[20] Lehr, J. *The Ukrainian Sacred Landscape: A Metaphor of Survival and Acculturation*. Winnipeg: University of Winnipeg, 1989.
[21]Perga, T. "The Fallout of Chernobyl: The Emergence of an Environmental Movement in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic." In *Nature and the Iron Curtain: Environmental Policy and Social Movements in Communist and Capitalist Countries, 1945–1990*, edited by A. M. Kirchhof and J. R. McNeill, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019, 55-72 https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvhrd0c1.7.
[22] Chernyshev, D., Y. Ivashko, D. Kuśnierz-Krupa, and A. Dmytrenko. "Role of Natural Landscape in Perception of Ukrainian Sacral Architecture Monuments." *Landscape Architecture and Art* 17, 2021, 13–21. https://doi.org/10.22616/j.landarchart.2020.17.02.
[23] Kazak, R. "Environmental Protection and Public Participation in the USSR during the Latter 20th Century." *Journal of Environmental Law and Policy* 001, 2021, 126–35. https://doi.org/10.33002/jelp001.06.
[24] Oldfield, J. D., and D. J. B. Shaw. "V. I. Vernadsky and the Noosphere Concept: Russian Understandings of Society–Nature Interaction." *Geoforum* 37, no. 1, 2006, 145–54. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2005.01.004.
[25]Tsymbolyuk, D. "The Unlikely Species Tangled in Ukraine's Resistance to Russia." *BBC*, February 23, 2024.
[26]Richardson, T. "Objecting (to) Infrastructure: Ecopolitics at the Ukrainian Ends of the Danube." *Science as Culture* 25, no. 1, 2016, 69–95. https://doi.org/10.1080/09505431.2015.1081503.
[27]Jargin, S., "The War in Ukraine: Psychological and Religion-Related Aspects." *SSRN*, 2023.

movements to protect threatened land, and the response of citizens to steppe destruction[28]. Mariya Lesiv explores the emergence of Ukrainian Paganism as a result of Russian Aggression in her book *Blood Brothers or Blood Enemies: Ukrainian Pagans' Beliefs and Responses to the Ukraine–Russia Crisis*[29]*,* discussing ideological drivers of Ukrainian pagan identity that are also echoed in the work of Oksana Smorzevska[30], Adrian Ivakhiv[31], and Stanislav Panin[32]. Other researchers also have looked at the war's impacts on religion more broadly, and include discussion of environmental aspects of Ukrainian Orthodoxy and internal changes since the war[33] [34] [35]. The intersections between environment and religion uncovered in this research relate to intrinsic Ukrainian identity, imbuing its landscapes with a certain spiritual value that is recognized in popular consciousness and a continuous driving force behind resistance movements. Various aspects of this environmental nationalist motivation are also explored by Adrien Nonjun in *The new path of Ukrainian eco-nationalism*[36] and Sophie Pinkham in *Black Square: Adventures in post-Soviet Ukraine*[37]. This literature helps conceptualize the ways the environment features in Ukrainian imagination and the ways destruction of the steppes during war has impacted this, which can subsequently be analyzed to build understanding of what is driving ideological resistance. In addition, researchers such as Oksana Udovyk[38] and Tanya Richardson[39] have published work surrounding grassroots initiatives and ecopolitics that are

[28]UNICEF, "Voices of Askania: Steppe Lost," September 13, 2024.
[29] Lesiv, M., "Blood Brothers or Blood Enemies: Ukrainian Pagans' Beliefs and Responses to the Ukraine–Russia Crisis," in *Cosmopolitanism, Nationalism, and Modern Paganism*, ed. K. Rountree, Palgrave Studies in New Religions and Alternative Spiritualities, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-56200-5_7.
[30]Smorzevs'ka, O. O. "The Hero-Warrior in the Worldview and Practice of Contemporary Pagans in Ukraine." *Online. Religio.* 31, no. 1, 2023, 9–31.
[31] Ivakhiv, A. "In Search of Deeper Identities: Neopaganism and 'Native Faith' in Contemporary Ukraine." *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 8, no. 3, 2005: 7–38. https://doi.org/10.1525/nr.2005.8.3.7.
[32]Panin, S., *Alternative Spiritualities in Russia during the Conflict in Ukraine*, Routledge, 2019.
[33]Korniichuk, I. "The Impact of the Russian-Ukrainian Military Conflict on Religious Life in Ukraine." Białystok: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku, 2016.
[34]Krawchuk, A. "War and Religious Discourse in the Russia–Ukraine Conflict." In *The (De)Legitimization of Violence in Sacred and Human Contexts*, edited by M. Shafiq and T. Donlin-Smith, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51125-8_10.
[35]Rifai, S. L. "Russian War in Ukraine and Religious Teachings on War," *SSRN*, 2022.
[36]Nonjon, A., "The New Path of Ukrainian Eco-Nationalism," *University of Alberta Forum for Ukrainian Studies*, 2020.
[37]Pinkham, S., *Black Square: Adventures in Post-Soviet Ukraine*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016.
[38]Udovyk, O. "Beyond the Conflict and Weak Civil Society: Stories from Ukraine: Cases of Grassroots Initiatives for Sustainable Development." *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 4 (2017): 187. https://doi.org/10.21226/T27W6R.
[39]Richardson, T. "Objecting (to) Infrastructure: Ecopolitics at the Ukrainian Ends of the Danube," *Science as Culture* 25, no. 1, 2016, 69–95. https://doi.org/10.1080/09505431.2015.1081503.

prevalent in contemporary Ukrainian environmental activism. Journalists such as Darya Tsymbolyuk[40] and Hannah Simmons[41] have been covering environmental impacts of the war including various fronts of Ukrainian resistance, as well as Freek Van der Vet[42] and Oleksii Viedrov[43], who have applied technical and historical lenses to Ukraine's environmental activism. Finally, the study utilizes local news articles in the steppe region, social media discussions, art exhibitions, activist materials, and personal narratives. This literature helps build in-depth understanding of the types of environmental resistance occurring as a result of this conflict, connecting the intangible environmental impacts on identity to visible political events.

All of these areas of research form a multidimensional, interdisciplinary body of literature that can help in analyzing the war's environmental impacts on identity and values. The following chapters will weave together and build on these perspectives in an effort to bring to light an alternative, more critical narrative on the extent of the environmental trauma of this war. By doing so, it works towards a more developed understanding of the environment, furthering recognition of the land as an inalienable, inextricable source of nourishment for the human mind, body, and soul.

[40]Tsymbolyuk, D. "The Unlikely Species Tangled in Ukraine's Resistance to Russia." *BBC*, February 23, 2024.
[41]Timmons, H. S. "Nature-Based Recovery Needed for Ukraine's Damaged Protected Areas." *Mongabay*, 2023.
[42]van der Vet, F. "A Polluting War: Risk, Experts, and the Politics of Monitoring Wartime Environmental Harm in Eastern Ukraine," *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, 2024. https://doi.org/10.1177/23996544241229553.
[43]Viedrov, O. "From a Mirror of Kharkiv Society to Leading Environmental Movement: The Case of 'Green Front,'" *Employment and Economy in Central and Eastern Europe*, 2015.

Study Design and Methodological Approach

Research Design

This thesis employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary research design to uncover the complex role of Ukraine's steppe biome in shaping Ukrainian identity, both in its early formation and against external pressures. Though deeply entwined, the different role of organic identity formation (informed by Herderian cultural nationalism[44]) and reactive identity formation (based on postcolonial theory and conflict nationalism[45] [46]) is recognized. Essentially, the steppes function as both the natural environment from which the unique Ukrainian culture emerged, as well as a continuous setting for existential threats to Ukrainian sovereignty which instigated a responsive form of nationalism. The role of the steppes in these two phenomena is distinctive, and in the context of this project have been analyzed through slightly different approaches. When examining the foundational role of the steppes in the emergence of Ukrainian national identity, and the evolution of this relationship through time, the project employs diachronic cultural analysis, in which it traces the dynamic system of social, ecological, economic, institutional and psychological factors that inform cultural development[47]. Informed by this perspective, it follows how historic political, anthropological, and natural processes contributed to the development of a transcendent mythology of the steppes that has become rooted in Ukrainian collective imagination. When examining the subsequent layers of identity created by the connection of the steppes to Ukrainian resistance, the study employs historic comparative analysis, demonstrating how the Ukrainian perspective on the steppes in various physical and symbolic contexts starkly contrasts those of external powers encroaching on them. The characterization of the steppes through Ukrainian versus foreign eyes, clearly compared in parallel mediums, makes visible the unique relationship of Ukraine with the steppe and legitimizes its distinct sovereign eco-cultural identity. This study is not limited to a single disciplinary framework but instead draws from

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[44] Chirot, D. "Herder's Multicultural Theory of Nationalism and Its Consequences," *East European Politics and Societies*, SAGE Publications Ltd, 1996, 7.
[45]Choon, B. K., R. Goh, and R. Young. *The Silent Word: Textual Meaning and the Unwritten*. Singapore: World Scientific, 1998, 6.
[46]Julian, G., and J. Watson. "Anticolonial Nationalism from Imagined Communities to Colonial Conflict." *European Journal of Sociology* 60, no. 1, 2019, 31–68.
[47]Iliev, R., and B. Ojalehto. "Bringing History Back to Culture: On the Missing Diachronic Component in the Research on Culture and Cognition." *Frontiers in Psychology* 6, 2015, 716.

history, cultural studies, literature, art, and personal accounts to weave the complex narrative of the steppes in Ukrainian consciousness..

Sources and Materials

The sources used in this study are varied, but fall into two broad categories, reflecting both historical depth and contemporary discourse. Historical and cultural texts serve to establish the ubiquitous presence of the steppes in the fabric of Ukrainian identity, while instances of contemporary discourse illustrate how these historic relationships are surfacing in the current critical situation in Ukraine. Often there is overlap between these categories, with stories, media, or imagery from the past being reconfigured in the present and applied to the war. Connecting this myriad of sources serves to illustrate how entrenched the steppes are in identity, and how relevant they are to the slew of ideological, political, and ecological tensions of contemporary Ukraine. Though diverse, the sources were thoughtfully chosen from a large body of literature, based on thematic indicators, to aptly demonstrate the most relevant, formative developments in Ukrainian identity and their connection to the present. The selection of diverse sources was highly intentional and attempted to move away from a linear reconstruction of Ukrainian history, instead emphasizing the cyclical nature of imperial power dynamics and identity struggles as they resurface across broad stretches of time and development. The convergence of the selected sources contextualizes the current critical moment in Ukraine, wherein the survival of a sacred landscape and a valuable alternative narrative to modern land ethics hangs precariously.

Historical and Cultural Texts

This body of material includes historical chronicles, literary works, visual art, and folk-derived sources that portray or reference the Ukrainian steppe. These sources span from early Slavic chronicles to 19th- and 20th-century eco-nationalist literature and art. These materials are presented to reveal a multidimensional picture of Ukraine's steppe identity and are analyzed with an emphasis on hermeneutic interpretation[48], identifying recurring themes and seeking inductive understanding. Throughout this analysis, the aim was to interpret how the

[48]Kinsella, E. A. "Hermeneutics and Critical Hermeneutics: Exploring Possibilities Within the Art of Interpretation." *Qualitative Social Research* 7, no. 3, 2006: 3.

steppe has functioned as symbolic geography, a space of resistance, and a repository of collective memory.

Contemporary Media and Discourse

In the third chapter of the study, a range of activist work, official publication, and informal discourse was used to assess the role of the steppe in contemporary Ukrainian identity, especially in the context of the ongoing war. Such sources include:

- News articles and investigative reports
- Artistic and activist projects responding to the war
- NGO and governmental reports
- Academic blogs
- Personal Letters
- Social Media comments

These materials are referenced to convey the current voice of Ukrainian resistance, throughout various societal outlets, as they connect with the steppes. This includes connections that are both physical and immediate, such as the perspective of displaced persons directly impacted by the destruction of steppes in the war, as well as symbolic and abstract, such as the subtle references to the steppes in activist art.

Analytical Framework

The analysis is structured semi-chronologically into three core phases:

1. Formation – How the steppe figures in early mythic, historical, and literary representations of Ukrainian identity, namely how the physical steppe environment eventually acquired mental and spiritual value in the Ukrainian community

2. Resistance – The steppe as a site of military, cultural, and ideological resistance, particularly during the Imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet periods when Ukrainian identity was threatened to an existential degree.

3. Current Conflict – The steppe's re-emergence as both a symbolic national emblem and physical victim in the ongoing devastation of Russian-Ukrainian war, particularly as a reincarnation of past imperialism

This structure allows for the tracing of thematic continuity and transformation, demonstrating how historical power dynamics have reconfigured to inform current narratives and identity constructions.

Theoretical Grounding

This study draws on multiple theoretical lenses to interpret its materials. Most essentially, the framework combines environmental and anthropological theories, intertwining these understandings to show overlap between nature and culture. The environment and human society enact change on each other symbiotically, and particularly when analyzing collective identity formation, cannot be isolated from each other. It is through this framework that one can understand that the characteristics of Ukrainian sovereignty are inherently tied to the steppe landscape, and the status of the steppe (physically and symbolically) is continuously affected by human consciousness. From this critical understanding, the deeply human and cultural value of the steppe can be drawn.

This study is guided by environmental philosophy, especially the principles of deep ecology and its emphasis on the nature's intrinsic value beyond that relating to human utility[49]. Within the umbrella of Deep Ecology, the concept of the noosphere, introduced by Ukrainian scientist Vladimir Vernadsky, further supports this study by suggesting that the biosphere and human schemas are co-dependent phenomena, that collective consciousness simultaneously shapes and is shaped by the environment[50]. Applying this theory to Ukraine, the steppe is not merely a passive backdrop to national development, but an active agent in the collective imagination. Arne Næss and Felix Guattari's parallel concept of ecosophy also provided a useful framework, as it challenges the notion of an external environment and proposes environmental, social, and mental ecologies[51]. Through this lens, the steppe may be interpreted as both

[49]Naess, A., and G. Sessions. "The Basic Principles of Deep Ecology." *The Trumpeter* 3, no. 4, 1986, 14.
[50]Vernadsky, V. "The Transition from the Biosphere to the Noösphere," *Scientific Thought as a Planetary Phenomenon*, 1938, 18.
[51]Levesque, S. "Two Versions of Ecosophy: Arne Næss, Félix Guattari, and Their Connection with Semiotics." *Σημειωτκή - Sign Systems Studies* 4, 2016, 512.

ecologically and spiritually significant, comprising a Ukrainian sacred landscape. Also relevant is Tim Ingold's anthropological work on dwelling and landscape, which argues that human perception and social meaning are inextricably embedded in lived environments, as "organisms figure not as externally bounded entities but as bundles of interwoven lines of growth and movement, together constituting a meshwork in fluid space[52]." This study applies these notions as it examines how Ukrainian identity has been continuously formed through intimate, enduring relations with the steppe.

Complementing these environmental theories are seminal theories in nationalism and identity studies. Maurice Halbwachs' theory of collective memory[53] provides a framework through which the steppes can be viewed as repositories of historical trauma and pride—locations where national memory is anchored in the physical land. Anthony D. Smith's work on ethno-symbolism similarly emphasizes the ideological power of shared myths, landscapes, and heritage in sustaining national identity[54]. This role of such symbols comes to a head in moments of crisis, when conflict nationalism (as described by scholars like Rogers Brubaker[55]) emerges in response to existential threats and occupation, leading to instances of identity consolidation around familiar cultural and historic symbols. The study also relies on the concept of eco-nationalism, wherein characteristic environments fuel political and ideological movements during national struggles[56]. This of course intersects with Benedict Anderson's imagined communities[57], as the symbolic role of the steppe is shared by widespread individuals as part of a cohesive national whole. Finally, inspired by Charles Tilly's theories of state formation, the analysis supports the idea that national identity is often based on an intersection of memory, environment, and resistance[58]. As such, the steppes are a driving force of cultural development and sovereignty movements in varying contexts reconfigured over time.

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[52]Ingold, T. "Bindings against Boundaries: Entanglements of Life in an Open World." *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 40, no. 8, 2008, 1796.
[53]Halbwachs, M. *The Collective Memory*. New York: Harper & Row, 1980, 87.
[54]Smith, A. D. *Theories of Nationalism: Alternative Models of Nation Formation*. In *Asian Nationalism*. Routledge, 2002, 11.
[55]Brubaker, R. "Ethnicity, Race, and Nationalism." *Annual Review of Sociology* 35, no. 1, 2009, 21.
[56]Nonjon, A. "The New Path of Ukrainian Eco-Nationalism." *Forum for Ukrainian Studies*, University of Alberta, 2020, 2.
[57]Anderson, B. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* In *The New Social Theory Reader*, Routledge, 2020, 282-88.
[58]Krinsky, J., and A. Mische. "Formations and Formalisms: Charles Tilly and the Paradox of the Actor." *Annual Review of Sociology* 39, no. 1, 2013, 4.

Reflexivity and Ethical Considerations

Given the inclusion of non-traditional and informal sources, this thesis acknowledges the epistemological limitations of its methodology. However, this inclusivity also carries a strength: it allows the study to capture a wide range of cultural expressions and perspectives that may otherwise have remained undocumented, or may not have been connected in the context of a wider environmental and anthropological framework. Throughout the research process, reflexive attention is given to source credibility, context, and positionality of both the researcher and authors.

As this study engages with sensitive topics and materials related to an ongoing war and national trauma, the attention to ethics and responsibilities that come with such a meaningful endeavor are recognized. The representations of the Ukrainian steppe under study, whether in historical sources or contemporary expression, are not neutral artifacts but are deeply embedded in identity formation, collective memory, and critical political struggles.

This research does not claim an objective or detached position but instead adopts a reflexive stance, acknowledging the ways in which personal background, academic training, and interpretive frameworks shape the analysis and working to mitigate this bias. Whenever possible, Ukrainian voices are centered, prioritizing sources produced by Ukrainian individuals and communities. The goal of the study is not to speak *for* these communities, but rather to interpret and contextualize cultural materials, drawing attention to these critical topics and contributing to the emerging body of discourse on the function of land, memory, and identity amidst conflict.

Chapter 1: Early Formations of Collective Imagination in the Steppes

"We sometimes imagine the oldest remembrances to be the most immediate; or, rather, they are all illuminated in a uniform light, like objects blending together in the twilight."

-Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* [1]

National identity is forged by centuries of human thought, interaction, and innovation, compounded and reconfigured through generations to eventually arrive in the present. In light of this, to properly understand the complex ideological space held by the steppes in contemporary times, it is first necessary to track down early formations of Ukrainian identity. Though distant, and at times suppressed, repressed, and disputed, they comprise cultural roots inherent to *украïніка* (the essence of Ukrainian heritage). This chapter seeks to uncover the specific, highly significant role of the steppes in these early formations– formations that have been routinely instrumentalized to bolster Ukrainian independence and have been thoroughly baked into Ukrainian consciousness through collective memory. The aim is not to provide a comprehensive overview of Ukrainian history, but rather a general framework of poignant moments of identity formation, in connection with the steppes, that have endured the centuries in both visceral and subliminal forms. This chapter first explores the ancient tribes of the steppes, then moves on to the formation of Kievan Rus, and concludes with the rise of the Cossacks from the steppe environment. Throughout, it will examine how the geography of the steppes influenced these developments and had lasting impacts. Gathering these moments serves to illustrate how Ukraine's southeastern environment has long been an agent of its history, imbued with immeasurable emotion, culture, and spirit. The steppes have definitively shaped how Ukrainian and pre-Ukrianian peoples have lived for thousands of years. This chapter merges human and natural history in an attempt to convey how these narratives are hardly exclusive and instead convergent.

A Transient Mode of Being

Viewed by some historians as the cradle of Slavic civilization, the steppes have a long and entangled history that backdrops the emergence of Rus. Tendrils of Ukrainian identity reach back to these iconic landscapes in an almost mythological fashion. The earliest inhabitants of the

[1]Halbwachs, M. *The Collective Memory*. New York: Harper & Row, 1980, 87.

steppes from 10000 to 5000 BC were forced to be nomadic, as weather patterns and resource availability prevented sedentary civilization[2]. The Western Steppes, namely the Pontic Caspian Steppe that partly covers modern day Ukraine, was more lush, temperate, and forgiving than its Eastern counterparts spanning central Asia. This region also provided reprieve from mountains in the north and west and deserts to the south[3]. These factors contributed to a general continuous east to west migration pattern of early peoples, with many tribes gravitating to the Western Steppe and thus forming an early cultural hub[4]. The dynamic landscape of the steppes, demanding constant motion on the part of the nomadic tribes, led to what historian Barry Cunliffe describes as "emotionally conditioning" by the environment[5]. The natural environment wove through almost all aspects of life, as the steppe's ecological and climatic cycles determined where and how these early tribespeople lived. This pervasive relationship is difficult to mentally reconstruct in a contemporary context, when the environment is conceptualized as a series of external entities that "surround". In the steppes, as was the case with many early, particularly nomadic, communities, the environment was thoroughly entrenched, simultaneously subject and object, inside and outside, cause and effect–-inhaled and exhaled so thoroughly that "environment" for them would hold little sense as a term. To understand early cultural formations of the steppes, one must undo the modern, western logics that have overtime worked to detangle and reduce the environment to the foreign, external, and isolated status it currently holds. By doing so, one can begin to understand how the steppes were foundational to all aspects of life and inherently cultural; they were as influential to the immaterial aspects of life as they were the physical.

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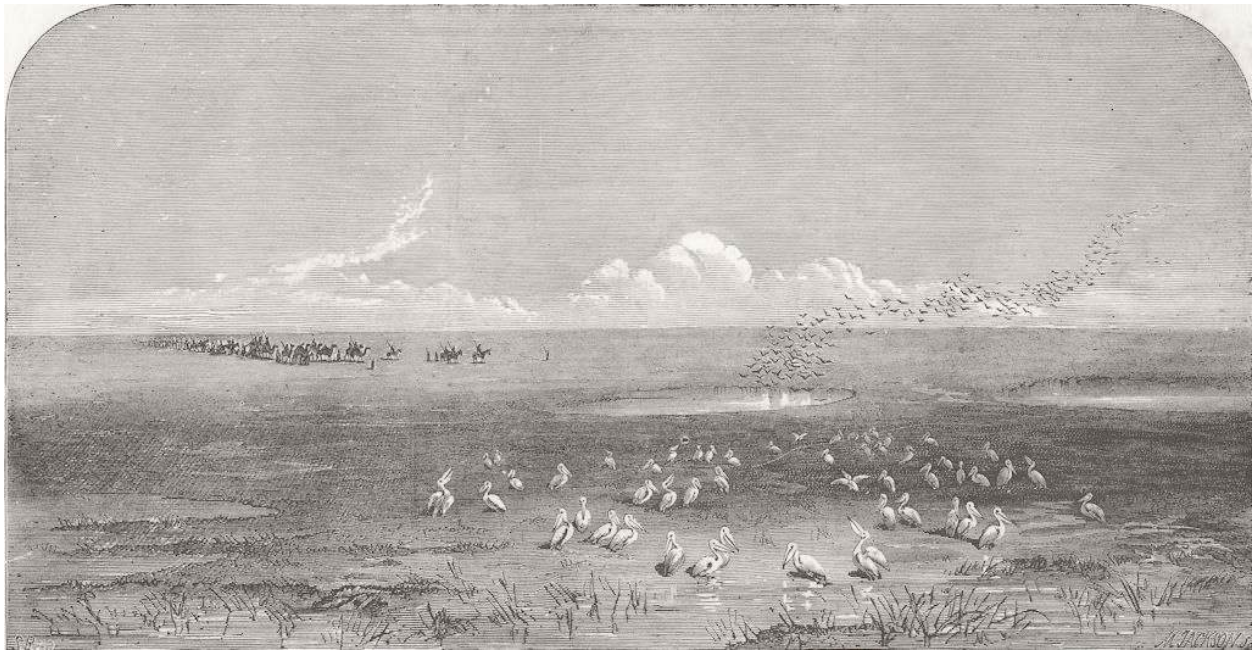
[2]Shishlina, N. "Eurasian Steppe Nomad." In *Encyclopedia of Prehistory*, edited by P. N. Peregrine and M. Ember. Boston, MA: Springer, 2001.
[3]Cunliffe, B. W. *By Steppe, Desert, and Ocean: The Birth of Eurasia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, chap. 2.
[4]Cunliffe, *By Steppe, Desert, and Ocean*, chap. 2.
[5]Cunliffe, *By Steppe, Desert, and Ocean*, chap. 2.



Scene on the Steppes of the Caspian, 1854[6]

Over the centuries, the hunters and foragers of the steppes evolved into herders, relying on livestock and master horsemanship, yet retaining their mobile lifeways[7]. One of the earliest recorded cultures in the steppes were the Yamnaya, the first known pastoral nomadic society who inhabited the Eurasian Steppe 5,000 years ago[8]. The Yamnaya's proficiency on horseback allowed them to move incredible distances, catalyzing the advent of bronze age technology and cultural exchange in Europe. New genetic evidence suggests that Yamnaya men intermarried with central and northern European populations and had a wider influence on the genetic and cultural makeup of ancient Europe than previously believed[9]. These advances were made possible by the revolutionary modes of transportation developed in the steppes thanks to herd animals. In fact, the early inhabitants of the Pontic Caspian Steppe were incredibly dependent on steppe fauna, hunting horses, deer, and wild boars[10]. Their importance is reflected in burial rituals, during which sheep, goats, cattle, and horses were sacrificed, their bones used in the *rite*

[6]"Steppes of the Caspian." *Illustrated London News*, 1864. https://www.antiquemapsandprints.com/product/ukraine-steppes-of-the-caspian-1854-old-antique-vintage-print-picture/P-5-01087~P-5-01087.
[7]Cunliffe, *By Steppe, Desert, and Ocean*, chap. 3.
[8]Anthony, D. W. "The Yamnaya Culture and the Invention of Nomadic Pastoralism in the Eurasian Steppes." In *The Indo-European Puzzle Revisited: Integrating Archaeology, Genetics, and Linguistics*, edited by K. Kristiansen, G. Kroonen, and E. Willerslev, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023, 13-33
[9] Anthony, "The Yamnaya Culture and the Invention of Nomadic Pastoralism in the Eurasian Steppes."
[10]Shishlina, N. "Eurasian Steppe Nomad." In *Encyclopedia of Prehistory*, edited by P. N. Peregrine and M. Ember. Boston, MA: Springer, 2001.

de passage of death[11]. During this era, "head and hide" burials that incorporated the animal remains became common throughout the steppes and are discovered periodically[12]. Along with spiritual meaning, herd animals provided valuable meat, blood, wool, horn, bone, sinew, milk and even dung. Milk was such a vital commodity in the steppes that it is no surprise the mutation that makes humans lactose tolerant soon became dominant in the western steppes[13]. Given their significance, herd animals also became closely connected to social hierarchies and were used to facilitate alliances among steppe communities. These developments marked distinct cultural developments that differed from the agrarian societies forming farther south and west[14]. The unique geography of the steppes continued to drive cultural divide over the centuries; in the later "prehistory period" from 1150 BC to 850 AD, Ukrainian territory diverged into two spheres: the steppe "hinterlands" and the Greek coastal cities[15]. As this divide solidified, the steppes began to attain a barbaric and ruthless characterization. This emergent perceived inferiority of steppe cultures is evident in these enduring label of "hinterland", as it is in their earliest recorded descriptions. Magosci writes:

> The earliest information about the steppe hinterland and its inhabitants comes from contemporary Greek, Roman, Byzantine, and Arab writers, who almost invariably painted negative descriptions of fierce barbarians from the east whose only purpose in life was to destroy the achievements of the civilized world as represented by Greece and, later, Rome and the Byzantine Empire[16].

Only recently has academic discourse departed from these crude understandings of steppe cultures, underlining how the misunderstanding of steppe regions and cultures has been persistent. Stephen Rudnitsky's 1918 work, an introduction to Ukrainian geography, describes the steppes as follows:

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[11]Cunliffe, *By Steppe, Desert, and Ocean*, chap. 3.
[12]Cunliffe, *By Steppe, Desert, and Ocean*, chap. 3.
[13]Cunliffe, *By Steppe, Desert, and Ocean*, chap. 3.
[14]Cunliffe, *By Steppe, Desert, and Ocean*, chap. 3.
[15]Magocsi, P. R. *History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples*. 2nd rev. and expanded ed. Toronto, Ont: University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division, 2010, 25.
[16] Magocsi, *History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples*, 25

> The Ukraine has always been the nearest European neighbor of the steppe-country of Central Asia. There, from the earliest beginnings of history, dwelt pillaging hordes of Nomads, who would flood Europe from this point. The Pontian steppes of the Southern Ukraine were, for these steppe-people, the natural military road to the West and Southwest, where the rich, civilized lands of the Mediterranean region lau invitingly open. For more than a thousand years, from the beginnings of the history of the Ukraine, these nomadic Asiatic tribes traversed the South Ukrainian steppes, covering the entire Ukraine with war and unspeakable misery. Huns, Avars, Khazars, Magyars, Pechenegs, Torks, Berendians, Polovs, Tatars, Kalmucks, infested the Ukraine in succession. Of all the European peoples, the Ukrainians always had to be the first to oppose these steppe-plunderers. The nomads always had first to force their way thru the Ukraine. Many of them were annihilated by the ancient Ukrainians; thus, the Khazars, Pechenegs, Torks and Berendians; others were held off, as the Polovs or the Kalmucks. But the Ukraine exhausted its strength in this eternal warfare, and, in the terrible stress occasioned by the Tatars, lost their ancient culture and their mighty state.
>
> If, therefore, any one of the European nations may claim the credit of having been Europe's shield against Asiatic barbarism, it is the half-forgotten Ukrainian nation.[17]

Rudnitsky's texts inexplicably attempts to parse out a European Ukrainian identity from a barbaric Asatic identity associated with the steppe regions, contrasting a civilized Western Europe from a primitive Eastern steppe region. Archeological discoveries have falsified such accounts, revealing that steppe peoples were in fact relatively peaceful, stable, and innovative, and their presence is inextricable from any reconstruction of ancient Ukrainian culture[18]. The period saw the successive rise of nomadic steppe civilizations: the Cimmerians, Scythians, Sarmatians, Alans, Huns, Avars, Bulgars, and Khazars[19]. In these unique societies, steppe nomads were considered "notables" of elite status[20]. The mobile lifestyle prevailed, with elites roaming the steppes on horseback, and entire cities uprooting and resettling elsewhere in a

[17]Rudnytskyi, S. *Ukraine, the Land and Its People: An Introduction to Its Geography*. United States: Rand McNally & Co, 1918.
[18]Kradin, N. "Ancient Steppe Nomad Societies." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History*, 2018.
[19] Magocsi, *History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples*, 25
[20] Magocsi, *History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples*, 25

caravan-like fashion[21]. It is important to note the distinct character of this lifestyle, deeply contrasting the sedentary civilizations surrounding it. As historian Walter Pohl notes, "Nomads were the quintessential Other of sedentary civilizations.[22]" This otherness would create a legacy of falsely constructed understandings of the steppes, visible in ancient texts as well as modern, and notable as a means of continued erasure of this landscape's cultural value. The characterization of the steppes as primitive and barbaric obscures their cultural and natural bounty, and would be echoed in the subsequent eras' ongoing delegitimization of this land and its people. In these early malignments, we begin to see roots of the ongoing "war on steppes" that will be further discussed in later chapters.

Ecological and Spiritual Synergy

Of the ancient steppe nomads, the Scythians are particularly impressive and well-remembered. They established intricate trading networks with the Greek coastal cities of the Black Sea based on the wealth of natural resources lining the Dnieper River, leading to a period of exchange, technological innovation, and stability known as *Pax Scythica*[23]. During their rule, the Scythians built into the steppes numerous royal burial mounds that are now spread throughout south-central Ukraine and continuously being excavated[24]. These burial mounds (known as kurhany, or barrows) have preserved fascinating elements of early steppe heritage, including small-scale decorative art depicting in gold and bronze a slew of animal forms[25]. Also of note are the discoveries of hundreds of stone grave markers in the shape of standing or sitting women, known as "skifs'ki baby" (old scythian women)[26]. While bringing to light glimpses of prehistoric life in these regions, these excavations also evidence the intersection of people, environment, and religion in the steppes, as burial mounds and grave markers seamlessly blend into the landscape and animal forms accompany the dead into afterlife.

Scythian religion was closely connected to nature and featured many deities that corresponded with natural phenomena, including Papai, the sky father, Api, the water goddess,

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[21] Magocsi, *History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples*, 27
[22]Pohl, W. *Empires and Exchanges in Eurasian Late Antiquity: Rome, China, Iran, and the Steppe, ca. 250–750*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, 189
[23] Magocsi, *History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples*, 34
[24]Obrusanszky, B. "The Ancient Steppe Values and Mindset." *Türkbilig* 39, 2020, 107–119.
[25]Hupfauf, P. *The Art of the Eurasian Steppe: Its Influence on European Cultures*. 1st ed. Routledge, 2024.
[26] Magocsi, *History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples*, 32

Oitosyros, the sun, Argimpasa, a fertility goddess, and Uatsilla, the the deity of thunderstorms[27]. Religious rituals directly involved the landscape, such as the practice of planting a sword in stone or brushwood before pouring sacrificial blood over it and creating an altar[28]. Linkages between the religion and the steppe environment would persist throughout the millennia, as evidenced by the Gökturk Empire that dominated the steppes in the 6th century AD. The Gökturk worshipped a slew of nature deities, whose reverence formed an earth cult that would also hold political dimensions. The kagan's (a supreme sovereign and militant leader) court was located in a sacred cave believed to be the center of the universe. Elcin Kürsat-Ahlers describes this blend of political and religious order in his chapter "The Role and Contents of Ideology in the Early Nomadic Empires of the Eurasian Steppe":

> Determined by the sacred basis of legitimation, the concept of *il*, meaning 'state territory', appears not only as a geographical term, but also as a sacred territory, on which the sanctified social organization and sacred laws, *tör*ü, are established. Sanctity is intermingled with the social order.[29]

Kürsat-Ahlers goes on to describe how such traits were common across many successive steppe-dwelling tribes, the steppe landscape proving to be a continuous source of cultural and societal structure. Examining the nature religion practices of the Scythians, Gökturks, and numerous other steppe civilizations that preceded and succeeded them shows that even in the ancient world (or perhaps *especially* then), the steppes were regarded with sacred reverence directly connected to the divine. Remnants of this spiritual landscape have resurfaced physically in the form of statues, altars, or ritual objects unearthed during periodic bouts of archeological discovery–and are passed down through generations of steppe peoples that continue to celebrate the sacred history of their land.

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[27]Foltz, R. "Scythian Neo-Paganism in the Caucasus: The Ossetian Uatsdin as a 'Nature Religion.'" *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 13, no. 3, 2020, 314–32.
[28] Foltz, "Scythian Neo-Paganism in the Caucasus: The Ossetian Uatsdin As a 'Nature Religion'", 314–32.
[29]Kürsat-Ahlers, E. "The Role and Contents of Ideology in the Early Nomadic Empires of the Eurasian Steppes." In *Ideology and the Formation of Early States*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1996.

Sculpture of the god Uastyrdzhi carved into a cliff[30]

Though it may seem dubious that these ancient connections to the land would hold relevance today, the significance of the steppes in Ukrainian and even Pan-European development cannot be understated. The Scythians' pagan spiritual beliefs were powerful enough to outlast the advent of Christianity and are even being revived in parts of the steppe region today[31]. At a biological and linguistic level, the relevance of the ancient steppes is continuously being discovered. Emergent studies now suggest that "steppe ancestry" was far more prevalent in early European civilization than previously believed: analysis of ancient DNA of the Corded Ware people of central Europe revealed that three quarters of their ancestry was traced to the Yamnaya culture that inhabited the steppes north of the Black Sea[32]. Along with this common European "steppe ancestry", new studies suggest that a Proto-Indo-European language, a

[30] Foltz, "Scythian Neo-Paganism in the Caucasus: The Ossetian Uatsdin As a 'Nature Religion'", 314–32.
[31] Foltz, "Scythian Neo-Paganism in the Caucasus: The Ossetian Uatsdin As a 'Nature Religion'", 314–32.
[32] Balter, M. "The Mysterious Indo-European Homeland May Have Been in the Steppes of Ukraine and Russia." *Science*, 2020.

precursor to today's almost 400 living Indo-European languages, was first spoken by the pastoral herders who lived in the vast steppe lands north of the Black Sea beginning about 6000 years ago[33]. The cultural and ecological legacies of the ancient steppes are also interdependent, reaching into the present even at the same time: scientists have found that remnants of ancient settlements, burial mounds, and earthworks act as valuable "habitat islands" in the steppes, preserving rare plant species of previous centuries[34]. Dayneko et al. discuss how these cultural importance of these sites has shielded their floral inhabitants from intensive agricultural processes and propose that "not only natural but cultural objects could show high conservation value[35]." These studies of various disciplines illustrate how past cultures' dynamic relationship with the steppes, which informed their migration patterns and lifeways, was highly influential to the millenia that followed and is present at a tangible, physical level as well as a cognitive one. This is especially true of the Ukrainian territory, which stood as the gateway between the steppes and Europe.

Slavic Culture Emerges from the Mixed Forest Steppes

The origins of Slavic culture remain to some degree shrouded in mystery, as historians offer competing theories on the details of Slavic development, a definitive record yet unpronounced. However, it is increasingly clear that the Ukrainian steppes played a vital role in the formation of Slavic culture. Most historians agree that the earliest roots of Slavic culture centered around the mixed forest steppes of modern-day central Ukraine[36]. The earliest Slavic tribes were scattered and their exact ethnic origins uncertain, but the first historians to write about the Slavs divided them into three major groups: the Venedi, Antae, and Sclaveni[37]. Of these, the Antae had the most notable connections to Ukrainian development[38]. The Antae derived from a Sarmatian tribe known as the Alans, who arrived in the Ukrainian steppe in the second century[39]. Over time, they organized and assimilated together with the Slavic tribes in

[33] Balter, "The Mysterious Indo-European Homeland May Have Been in the Steppes of Ukraine and Russia."
[34]Dayneko, P. "Ancient Settlements in Southern Ukraine: How Do Local and Landscape Factors Shape Vascular Plant Diversity Patterns in the Last Remnants of Grass Steppe Vegetation?" *Tuexenia*, 2020, 460
[35] Dayneko. "Ancient Settlements in Southern Ukraine : How Do Local and Landscape Factors Shape Vascular Plant Diversity Patterns in the Last Remnants of Grass Steppe Vegetation?" 460
[36]Gerasimenko, N. "The Holocene Climatic and Environmental Changes in the Forest-Steppe and Steppe Belts of Ukraine and Their Impact on Ancient Cultures." *Geoconcept Association of Applied Geography*, 2024, 4.
[37] Magocsi, *History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples*, 42
[38] Magocsi, *History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples*, 42
[39] Magocsi, *History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples*, 42

their midst, and began a northward migration into more heavily Slav-populated lands until the tribe became predominantly Slavic [40]. Cattle herding, advanced artisanry, and unique hill forts were characteristic of their society, as was the creation of small-scale agricultural settlements on riverbanks[41]. By the fourth century, the Antae were known as a powerful tribal league and formidable military force. Like with their nomadic ancestors, the vulnerable conditions of the open steppes, providing few geographic defenses, hardened the Antae into experienced fighters[42]. They conducted successful raids against the Byzantine empire and resisted the Goths, giving rise to legendary figures such as Antean warrior "king" Boz, remembered to this day[43]. Remnants of Antean culture are also physical, in the form of river bank settlements, pagan idols, pottery, tools, and ornaments that are continuously discovered in the mixed and open steppe zones of Ukraine[44]. Even once the Antae eventually faced demise at the hands of invading Hun, their lifestyle and culture persisted through the Pen'kivka and other subsequent steppe cultures[45]. It is during this time period that one can observe tangible traces of culture that persistently inform Ukrainian foundational myths. Through the charismatic warrior-spirit of the steppe horsemen that produced legendary, half-mythological heroes, to their unique semi-nomadic riverbank lifestyle, to the staggering spiritual totems unearthed after millenia, the early centuries AD sowed certain seeds of a uniquely Ukrainian heritage. It is for precisely this reason that non-Soviet Ukrainian authors consider the Antaens responsible for one of the earliest Slavic states and first Ukrainian state (though this view is contested, not surprisingly by nationally-divided schools of thought)[46]. All of these aforementioned enduring cultural aspects are deeply influenced, and in fact inherent, to the steppes. In some sense, this era saw the early construction of cultural boundaries, i.e. what is and is not Slavic at a physical, cognitive, and spiritual level, driven by a multitude of defining forces– including, quite prominently, the steppe environment.

Though the Antae as a distinct tribe faded, their influence on the cultural and military traditions of the Slavic people lived on, laying the groundwork for the formation of the first Slavic state, Kievan Rus, three centuries later. Indeed, Kievan Rus was highly influenced by the

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[40] Magocsi, *History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples*, 43
[41] Vernadsky, G. "On the Origins of the Antae." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 59, no. 1 (1939): 56
[42] Vernadsky. "On the Origins of the Antae." 56
[43] Magocsi, *History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples*, 43
[44] Magocsi, *History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples*, 43
[45] Magocsi, *History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples*, 43
[46] Magocsi, *History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples*, 43

steppe civilizations that preceded it and is regarded as a legendary cradle of Ukrainian culture[47]. The steppe region played a crucial role in shaping Kievan Rus, albeit a more detached one, as they were an adjacent but separate region exerting external pressure on Kievan Rus[48]. The fertile land of the steppe of course supported agriculture, and military strategies were developed based on those of steppe civilizations. The steppe also facilitated trade, acting as a gateway for

Cuman Wagons in the Steppe in the Radziwill Chronicle, 1490s.[49]

commerce between Europe and Asia, connecting Kievan Rus to other cultures and fostering economic growth[50]. Culturally, the intense steppe environment may have instilled a sense of resilience in the people, expressed through the themes of endurance and heroism often depicted

[47]Arnold, R. "Between Russia and Ukraine—The Cossack Boundary." *Europe-Asia Studies* 77, no. 1, 2024, 64
[48]Wojnar, M. "The West and the Great Steppe in the History of Rus and Russia." *Studia z Dziejów Rosji i Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej* 47, no. 1, 2012, 122
[49]Library of the Russian Academy of Sciences. *Cuman Wagons in the Radziwill Chronicle, Russia, 1490s.* Ban 34.5.30. St. Petersburg, n.d.
[50] Wojnar, "The West and the Great Steppe in the History of Rus and Russia," 122

in Kievan Rus' art[51]. This motif also shaped religious views, in which the steppe landscape resurfaced to symbolize both spiritual struggle and divine protection[52].

Heroes of the Borderland

The developments described in the previous section would influence the rise of a group of steppe peoples that has attained near-mythological status in Ukrainian collective memory. These fiercely-respected nomadic warriors, vernerated throughout Ukraine to this day, were the Cossacks.

> Most Ukrainian historians (M. Kostomarov, M. Hrushevs'kyi, v. Lypyns'kyi, D. Doroshenko), and for that matter nineteenth-century literary figures and nurturers of the national psyche (T. Shevchenko, I. Franko), consider that the phenomenon of Cossackdom embodied the best characteristics of Ukrainians, which are supposedly reflected in the Cossack desire for freedom, independence, and a democratic way of life.[53]

During the period of Kievan Rus, the southern steppe zone of Ukraine remained sparsely populated. This was due to a combination of factors, including a mid-thirteenth century Mongol invasion[54], which reinforced the longstanding perception of the steppes as wild, dangerous, and untamed. The lack of protective geographic barriers left the steppes open to raiders and susceptible to difficult climatic conditions. During this period, the steppes came to form a borderland, or "no-man's land" between the southern reaches of Poland Lithuania and the northern edge of the Crimean Tatar civilization[55]. Though regarded as a rugged unknown, the steppes were also a well-known region of pristine wilderness, teeming with natural wealth and referred to as "Wild Fields"[56]. Eventually these resources drew in peasants from the northern and western Ukrainian territories, who became the early frontiersmen to settle in the steppe[57]. One settler describes:

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[51]Komech, A. I. *Art of Kievan Rus: Late 10th–Mid-11th Centuries. Volume 1.* Moscow: State Institute for Art Studies, 2010–2025.
[52]Komech, *Art of Kievan Rus: Late 10th–Mid-11th Centuries.*
[53]Doroshenko, D. *Narys Istoriyi Ukraïny*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. Munich, 1966, 152.
[54] Magocsi, *History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples*, 55
[55] Plokhy, *The Cossacks and Religion in Early Modern Ukraine*, 22
[56] Plokhy, *The Cossacks and Religion in Early Modern Ukraine*, 22
[57]Reid, A. "Borderland: A Journey through the History of Ukraine." *Journal of Contemporary History* 53, no. 2, 2018, 453

> Its fields are as blissful as the Elysian … There are so many cattle, wild animals, and various birds in Ukraine that one could think her the birthplace of Diana and Ceres. In the Ukrainian apiaries so much honey is produced that one forgets the Sicilian Gela and the Attic Hymettus. … It is hard to count the Ukrainian lakes teeming with fish. In short, Ukraine is like that land which God promised to the Hebrews, flowing with milk and honey[58].

Overtime, these settlers developed a unique style of life—fishing, hunting, and occasionally farming in the steppes– and became highly proficient fighters at the demands of the open landscape[59]. These communities would eventually receive the name Cossacks (derived from a Turkish term for freebooting warrior) and would gain a reputation as a highly resourceful and tenacious people[60]. The Cossack way of life was highly integrated with the steppe landscape, weaving fabrics from flax and wool of their herds, beekeeping, crafting gunpowder from saltpeter deposits[61] [62]), and building galleys from willow wood and hollow reeds to row down the Dnipro[63]. Their society was described as generous and accepting, and in fact many refugees of various social backgrounds, including Romanians/Moldavians, Tatars, Turks, Jews, and Belorusans, traveled to the Cossack sich (a fortified camp), built on the island of Little Khortytsia in the Dnipro River, in order to escape oppressive governments[64]. Some historians argue that Cossacks emerged due to boiling social tensions in their various states, and by settling in the steppes "in practice were waging a war against both the internal feudal oppression and external enemies[65]." Despite their unmatched military potential, the Cossacks practiced a relatively modest lifestyle, abstaining from overproduction and or expansionist behaviors, earning them a "lazy" reputation among surrounding states who could not fathom their refusal to establish vast trading networks or invade larger swaths of territory[66].

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[58]Doroshenko, *Narys Istoriyi Ukraïny*, 152.
[59] Magocsi, *History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples*, 211
[60] Magocsi, *History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples*, 211
[61] Plokhy, *The Cossacks and Religion in Early Modern Ukraine*, 22
[62] Magocsi, *History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples*, 211
[63] Reid, *Borderland: A Journey through the History of Ukraine*, 453
[64] Reid, *Borderland: A Journey through the History of Ukraine*, 453
[65]Varga, "The Identity-Shaping/Forming Role of the Border/Peripheral Region – 'Kraj' – in the Formation of Cossacks in Ukraine.", 39.
[66] Magocsi, *History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples*, 212

The Zaporozhian Sich, steppes visible in background [67]

The early Cossack society, with its emphasis on equality, liberty, and rural subsistence living, departed from the more imperial, expansionist civilizations surrounding the steppe and to lower classes formed a sort of egalitarian haven[68]. Their fierce reputation and military prowess allowed them to remain relatively independent throughout the 16th-17th centuries, often bargaining with local authorities who sought their military assistance[69]. In many ways, the Cossack way of life mirrored the rugged resilience of the steppe itself—isolated, self-sustaining, and fiercely independent. Their emergence as a dominant force in Ukrainian history marked the culmination of centuries of adaptation to and resistance within the borderlands of the steppes. Thus, the Cossacks, through their distinctive lifestyle borne of the steppes, make up a crucial chapter of Ukrainian history and a deeply celebrated part of Ukrainian identity. To this day, the memory of Cossacks is upheld through costume, heritage sites such as the Cossack graveyard in Odessa or the Cossack Museum on Khortytsia, folk music, oral history, and art[70]. The steppe

[67]"The Zaporozhian Sich (drawing after Riegelman)." *Internet Encyclopedia of Ukraine*. https://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/picturedisplay.asp.
[68] Reid, *Borderland: A Journey through the History of Ukraine,* 453
[69] Magocsi, *History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples*, 212
[70] Arnold."Between Russia and Ukraine—The Cossack Boundary.", 64

landscape drove the rise of the Cossacks, defined their lifestyle, and formed their dear homeland, and as such in itself holds intrinsic cultural value to Ukraine. The vast open steppes carried a promise of freedom and independence for those brave enough to enter, of which the Cossacks were very much a product. In many ways, the steppes and Cossack society embodied a set of values that would resonate with Ukrainians for generations to come. Geographically, the steppes formed a borderland or frontier, and many surrounding powers viewed them as an empty landscape full of lush wilderness. In fact, the word *Ukraine* has etymological roots to the Indo-European word for "border"[71]. This perception has become a defining factor in Ukraine's identity and nationhood, as its territory was historically viewed as a "gate to Europe" [72]and a transitland between east and west. Of the Cossacks, researcher Oksana Amelina writes:

> The main form of raiding was the border clashes of the Cossacks against the Turks and Tatars, the main purpose of which was to capture the prey. However, spoils, like the Cossacks themselves, went through stages of formation, becoming and transformation. It brought not only material benefits, but also reflected the border type of life, thinking, culture, which in turn combined the socio-cultural elements of East and West [73].

In the centuries that followed the Cossack period, Ukraine would continuously be viewed as a land of natural bounty ripe for imperial possession, a naturally wealthy "frontier" for various empires to exploit. This problematic conception persists into the present, and is perhaps related to why Ukrianians so venerate the Cossacks, whose values and ways of life departed from the dominant imperial-capitalist state model. Instead of conquering nature, the Cossacks adapted to their landscape and thrived within it, crafting their own sovereign identity, building an accepting society, and resisting the encroachment of powers that wished to subdue them. Though it is important not to over-idealize the Cossacks, and in fact, their eventual entanglement with Russian and Tatar agendas would prove fateful, there is truth to the notion that particularly in their earlier era they adopted a more sustainable, communal land ethic and practiced collective equality that contrasted the dominant socio-economic hierarchies. These qualities help uncover

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[71] Magocsi, *History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples*, 189
[72] Plokhy, S. *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine*. Basic Books, 2015.
[73]Amelina, O. "The Great Steppe Frontier of Ukraine as A Contributing Factor to the Formation of the Cossack Raids in the 16th and 17th Centuries." *Güneydoğu Avrupa Araştırmaları Dergisi / The Journal of South-Eastern European Studies*, 2021, 12.

why they have become so celebrated and upheld in the Ukrainian psyche and point to the intrinsic value of the steppes in national identity.

Conclusion

This chapter has purposely covered a wide temporal scope in an effort to illustrate the foundational role of steppes in Ukrainian identity. In even the earliest recorded history of the Western Eurasian Steppe, it is evident that the landscape itself drove major processes of cultural development. The steppes' climatic conditions fostered a nomadic style of life dependent on herd animals and an intimate knowledge of vast swaths of land. The revolutionary forms of mobility achieved by steppe dwellers, along with their technological advances, catalyzed cultural exchange and greatly influenced the development of Europe as a whole. Over the millenia, the steppes retained sacred status among their inhabitants, evidenced by veneration of the landscape and inclusion of the earth and wildlife in various religious rituals. These practices point to the significance of the steppes as an agent of Ukrainian and pre-Ukrainian history, shaping a unique style of life that is still celebrated as a point of national pride. The steppes were critical to major elements of Ukrainian national mythology, including Kievan Rus, the first Slavic state, and the Cossacks, heroic steppe warriors. As an external pressure to Kievan Rus, they shaped the state economically, culturally, and religiously. And as the homeland of the Cossacks, they fostered a unique lifestyle and borderland mentality that has become entrenched in Ukrainian cultural imagination. The legacy of the steppes' rich history resurfaces in various mediums. Physical remnants such as art pieces, religious items, and household objects are continuously unearthed through excavation projects, as are structures and shrines that were built into the steppes themselves. These sites often carry hidden ecological value, as they preserve the flora and microbiome of the distant past, most of which has long been wiped out by modern agriculture. Though more difficult to measure, the steppes also hold an intangible, cultural value in the national imagination, encapsulating some almost mystical essence of Ukraine as their vast expanses evoke millennia of dynamic history. Ukraine celebrates the steppes, even as the rest of the world refutes their beauty, deems them empty, and exploits them to ruin. Barbaric characterization of the steppes and subsequent cultural erasure– the beginnings of an ongoing war against the steppes–were touched on in this chapter. The following chapters will begin to explore how Ukraine's kindred relationship with the steppes is intrinsic to resistance in its

longstanding struggle for sovereignty. In this context, the steppes acquire a political significance in addition to the predominantly cultural angle this chapter explored.

Chapter 2: Contested Identity and Ideological Resistance in the Steppes

Songs of revenge and sadness
Sounded in your voice

And a hero you came out of the kurgan
Of your ancient native land [1]

During the late 17th century, Ukraine started to become the object of surrounding powers' ambitions. This was primarily due to its abundant natural resources, in particular the vast steppes, which in light of emerging capitalist systems were deemed an untapped resource. The appetite for Ukraine's territory would only grow in the subsequent centuries, as technological innovation boosted the industrial, agricultural, and natural resource potential of the land. As a result, Ukraine's transition into the modern era would be marked by continuous foreign encroachment and dispossession of territory. This assault surpassed physical transgressions, as the thirst for Ukrainian land manifested in territorial claims that disputed the whole of Ukrainian identity and sought to dismantle its statehood. Hence, Ukraine entered an era of dual resistance, perilously fighting to retain its identity as well as its physical land. And just as its magnificent natural bounty attracted foreign eyes, so it drove national resistance and independence movements. It is for this reason that Ukrainian independence and environmentalism have walked hand in hand historically, and Ukraine remains a prominent case study on eco-nationalism. This chapter argues that the Ukrainian steppes, far from being a passive landscape, functioned as a site of contested identity and active ideological resistance, inspiring eco-nationalist movements that spanned from agrarian uprisings to poetic mythmaking. While the previous chapter traced the steppes' role in forming Ukrainian identity, this chapter focuses on their role in reinforcing and reshaping it against external pressures, which heightened in the 19th and 20th centuries. It will first look at the physical attacks on the steppes and the resulting collective backlash, before examining ideological and religious connections. Finally it will analyze the steppes' symbolic value, as Ukrainians harnessed steppe imagery to affirm their culture in art, music, and literature. These explorations illustrate the steppes' timeless presence, rooted in national mythology and collective memory as a fragment of uniquely Ukrainian heritage that bolstered independence in multiple realms.

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[1] Khlebnikov, V. "Burliuk." *Color and Rhyme* 55 (1964–1965): 30.

A Land Defiled

The 17th century saw the rise of the Cossack Hetmanate, a semi-autonomous polity in the Dnipro region that vied for an independent Ukrainian state. However, the Hetmanate's attempts proved ultimately unsuccessful and swaths of Ukrainian territory were gradually ceded to the Russian Empire[2]. During this period, Peter the Great sent specialists from England and the Netherlands to map the steppe region and construct a network of canals[3]. Little by little, the Russian Empire exerted greater control over the steppe region, inviting foreign colonists to settle there, establishing new military outposts, and expanding agricultural production[4]. Throughout the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the Russian Academy of Sciences took great interest in the steppes and sent numerous expeditions to this region[5]. By meticulously studying the steppe environment, these expeditions sought to maximize the land's agricultural potential and expand the territory and resources of the Russian Empire. Historian David Moon describes these expeditions as follows:

> The expeditions were to investigate, among other things: the nature of the land and water; any uncultivated or unpopulated land that could be used for cultivating grain, hay, or trees; the economic activities of populated places; and the weather. The naturalists were also instructed to collect wildlife and plants. The aims could be summed up as researching the natural resources of the regions they visited and how they might be exploited. The steppe region, with its fertile soil but sparse population, was ripe for development [6].

Over the decades, the number and scope of these expeditions expanded, as did the ploughing of vast swaths of steppe land in Russia's attempts to increase agricultural output[7]. While Russia valued the steppes by their economic potential, it did not view them as a favorable natural

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[2]Magocsi, *History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples*, 323.
[3]Moon, D. *The Plough that Broke the Steppes: Agriculture and Environment on Russia's Grasslands, 1700–1914*. "1 The Eyes of Outsiders." Oxford Studies in Modern European History. Oxford, 2013, 37.
[4]Moon, D. "Steppe by Steppe: Exploring Environmental Change in Southern Ukraine." *Global Environment*. University of York, 2016, 3.
[5]Moon, *The Plough that Broke the Steppes: Agriculture and Environment on Russia's Grasslands 1700-1914*, 47
[6] Moon, *The Plough that Broke the Steppes: Agriculture and Environment on Russia's Grasslands 1700-1914*, 48
[7]Stebelsky, I. "Agricultural Development and Soil Degradation in the Soviet Union: Policies, Patterns, and Trends." In *Environmental Problems in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1987, 72.

landscape, condemning the lack of trees and expansive "emptiness". As one Russian scientist traveling through the steppes stated, "one could not hope that there would be anything worthy of comment, the vast steppes and little-forested areas begin[8]". The lack of woody vegetation so bothered the Russian scientists that they became convinced the steppes in actuality used to be forests and had been ruined by previous nomadic inhabitants[9]. This eventually led to massive afforestation projects in the steppes, which were then publicized by the media as symbolic feats of Soviet power and victory over nature. Professor Douglas Weiner writes, "The iconic power of the image of thousands of kilometers of sturdy oaks breaking the strength of the parched eastern winds (*sukhovei*) was endlessly exploited in films and news clips of the era and resonated with the revived image of the "Fortress USSR" withstanding capitalist encirclement[10]." Also during scientific expeditions to the steppes, Russian scientists became increasingly frustrated by seasonal droughts (a prohibitive factor for large-scale agriculture) and resolved to remedy this issue[11]. Such expeditions illustrate the Russian Empire's overarching perspective on the steppes: rejecting their raw beauty and natural worth while recognizing the economic potential of their fertile soils. It is for the steppes that the Empire became a leader in pedology, quick to discover and claim Ukrainian soil as its own. This was epitomized in the pivotal 1883 study titled *Russian Black Earth* [12].

While imperial Russia began the project of transforming the steppes into a resource map, it was the Soviet Union that fully realized their ecological collapse. The activities of the Russian Empire in Ukraine's steppes reflected a skewed land ethic, gradually stripping the steppes of any immaterial value, and paving the way for the Soviet Union's large-scale terraforming projects and near complete decimation of the steppes. In the first decade of the Soviet Union's existence, collective farming policies led to highly unsustainable land use practices and overfarming[13]. The practices established during this time greatly degraded the steppe soil and led to a 40% decrease in fertility over the subsequent decades[14]. At the same time, grains replaced the steppe wild grasses and the landscape's biodiversity plummeted[15]. The instances of ecological damage during

[8]Moon, *The Plough that Broke the Steppes: Agriculture and Environment on Russia's Grasslands 1700-1914*, 56
[9]Moon, *The Plough that Broke the Steppes: Agriculture and Environment on Russia's Grasslands 1700-1914*, 60
[10]Weiner, D. *A Little Corner of Freedom: Russian Nature Protection from Stalin to Gorbachev*. University of California Press, 1999, 89.
[11]Moon, *The Plough that Broke the Steppes: Agriculture and Environment on Russia's Grasslands 1700-1914*, 70
[12]Moon, *The Plough that Broke the Steppes: Agriculture and Environment on Russia's Grasslands 1700-1914*, 130
[13] Moon, *Steppe by Steppe:Exploring Environmental Change in Southern Ukraine,* 3
[14]Moon, *Steppe by Steppe:Exploring Environmental Change in Southern Ukraine,* 3
[15]Shahgedanova, M. *The Physical Geography of Northern Eurasia*. Oxford University Press, 2003, 259.

this era were countless, manifesting in destructive ploughing, accelerated erosion, intensified algal blooms, faulty sprinkler systems flooding virgin steppes, and far beyond[16]. At the same time, the Soviet Union instituted extensive coal mining operations in the steppes, particularly in the Donbas Basin[17]. And amidst all this, the steppes would suffer a sort of "double invasion" during the 1940s, as Nazi Germany briefly took over the region, also seeking to extract natural resources[18]. Eventually the Soviet Union pushed back the German occupation, and now emboldened, began initiating its "Great Construction Projects of Communism", during which rivers were rerouted, irrigation canals were dug, and massive dams were constructed[19]. One of the most famous of these constructions was the Kakhovka Dam, completed in 1956 and holding billions of cubic meters of the Dnipro River[20]. Its construction wreaked havoc on the hydrology and ecology of the region, with the slowing of the river proving disastrous to the soil and resident flora and fauna[21]. The waters of the Kakhovka reservoir drowned the Great Meadow, the legendary landscape of the Cossacks held sacred by Ukrainians. As a result, tens of thousands of people were displaced, and traditional practices such as livestock breeding, beekeeping, foraging, and willow weaving were eradicated[22]. The tragedy of this destruction is reflected in Ukrainian cultural narratives describing a subsequent "lost paradise" (embodied in phrases such as "our new sea is our new sorrow"), a stark contrast to Soviet propaganda that described the project as a triumph of modernization[23]. Beyond just the Great Meadow, the steppes were completely ravaged by Soviet terraforming projects that neglected traditional farming knowledge[24] and wrought multi-level environmental calamity. Further examples of harm could be found in

[16]Chepurda, G. M. "Ecological Problems of Ukraine after World War II." *Science and Education a New Dimension. Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2013, 28.
[17]Melvin, D. *The Geography of Industry in the U.S.S.R.* Boston University, 1955.
[18]Moon, *Steppe by Steppe:Exploring Environmental Change in Southern Ukraine,* 7
[19]Moon, *Steppe by Steppe:Exploring Environmental Change in Southern Ukraine,* 7
[20]Olenenko, A. 'Zatoplennaia pamiat' Pridneprov'ia: ukrainskie vs sovetskie simboly v bor'be zakonstruirovanie landshafta,' unpublished paper presented to International Conference 'Resistance, Protest and Criticism in the Name of Nature: USSR and Post-Soviet States, 1950–2010,' Moscow, 2015.
[21]Olenenko, 'Zatoplennaia pamiat' Pridneprov'ia: ukrainskie vs sovetskie simboly v bor'be zakonstruirovanie landshafta'
[22] Olenenko, A. ""Our New Sea Is Our New Sorrow": The Conflict between the Ukrainian and the Soviet in the Struggle for the Design of the Lower Dnieper's Landscape," *Ab Imperio*, no. 1, 2019, 132
[23] Olenenko""Our New Sea Is Our New Sorrow", 125
[24]Schönfelder, T., *Reinventing the Steppe: The Agromeliorative Complex in the Russian Periphery*. Slavic Review 81, no. 1, Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies, 2022, 32.

chemical pollution, failed afforestation efforts, dust storms[25], drought, and landslides[26]. Of course, the mistreatment of the environment was replicated throughout the whole of Ukraine—though Ukrainian industrial areas covered about 3.7% of the territory of the former Soviet Union, they accounted for almost 25% of its industrial pollution[27].

Eco-politics in the Soviet Periphery

Naturally, the Soviet manipulation of the steppes was detrimental to the local peasant population as well. Forced collectivization stripped peasants of their private land and livestock, disrupting traditional farming practices and centuries-old livelihoods[28]. The flooding of vast tracts of land during the decades-long "Great Plan of Nature Transformation" directly displaced peasants and destroyed their farmland[29]. The disregard for specific ecological conditions and traditional peasant knowledge by standardized Soviet agricultural practices cyclically contributed to soil erosion, reduced productivity, and displacement [30]. Large-scale construction projects often relied on forced or mobilized labor, diverting peasants from their own farms and exacerbating food shortages[31]. The resulting environmental and social calamities undermined the long-term productivity of the land and destabilized the agricultural base upon which Ukrainian peasants depended. At the same time, Soviet policies toward peripheral regions attacked the peasants' cultural and economic practices. Soviet campaigns subjugated peasant autonomy, railed against peasant institutions, silenced village elites and priests, and prevented local assembly[32]. Ukrainian peasants consequently experienced both environmental and political affronts, which would influence the manner of their subsequent resistance.

With their land and heritage disparaged, Ukrainian peasantry began to take a stand against destructive Soviet land use practices. Peasants staged various acts of resistance,

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[25] Elie, M. "Dessicated Steppes: Drought and Climate Change in the USSR, 1960s-1980s." In Breyfogle, N. *Eurasian Environments: Nature and Ecology in Imperial Russia and Soviet History.* University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018, 16.
[26] Chepurda," Ecological Problems of Ukraine after World War II", 27
[27]Perga, T. "Eco-Nationalism in the Soviet Union in the Late 1980s and Early 1990s: The Ukrainian Case." In *Nationalism in a Transnational Age*. De Gruyter, 2021, 178.
[28]Schönfelder, "Reinventing the Steppe: The Agromeliorative Complex in the Russian Periphery", 36
[29] Chepurda, "Ecological Problems of Ukraine after World War II", 27
[30] Chepurda, "Ecological Problems of Ukraine after World War II", 27
[31] Timm Schönfelder, "Reinventing the Steppe: The Agromeliorative Complex in the Russian Periphery", 36
[32]Yale University. *The War Against the Peasantry, 1927–1930: The Tragedy of the Soviet Countryside*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005, 319.

culminating in the Great Peasant Uprising of 1930. During this event 13,754 rural "mass disturbances" were recorded, the majority of which were in Ukraine[33]. It was during this era that local efforts to protect the steppes also took shape. The earliest was the Askania Nova steppe reserve, created by Friedrich Faltz-Fein and Ukrainian scientists in 1888[34]. In the following century, throughout various stages of Soviet transformation of the steppes, The Tans Maritime Preserve (later The Black Sea Biosphere Reserve), the Ukrainian Steppe Nature Reserve, Kherson Reserve, and Arabatsky Reserve were created[35]. At the same time, many Ukrainian scientists and naturalists spearheaded movements to protect the steppes, conducting extensive research on the steppe environment at the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences[36]. Prominent figures include Nikolai S. Shatilov, Petr P. Rybalko, Vladimir G. Gorshkov, and Andrey S. Zhyrov, all scientists who documented the ecological demise of the steppes and advocated for their conservation[37]. But fascinatingly, their work also extended to the environment at a conceptual level. This is perhaps most evident in the case of Vladimir Vernadsky, whose studies of Ukrainian black soil inspired his groundbreaking concepts of biosphere and noosphere. The biosphere referred to the network of the Earth's ecosystems functioning as an organic whole, while the noosphere radically proposed a new paradigm in which human consciousness merges with, and directly affects, Earth's geological processes[38]. Verdansky's noosphere dictates that human reason is an incredible natural phenomenon that when fully realized shall logically promote conservation and harmony between human and nature[39]. The noosphere of course informed later concepts about humanity's extensive impacts on the environment (such as the "Anthropocene", in which human action becomes a planetary force of change) but it stands unique to this day in its implication of convergence between biological and philosophical development. Verdansky's noosphere suggested a more-than-physical symbiosis between human and environment, an awakening of human consciousness that would inherently preserve its ecological lifeblood, thus putting forth a notion that modern scientific thought has struggled to

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[33] Yale University, *The War Against the Peasantry, 1927–1930. The Tragedy of the Soviet Countryside,* 320
[34]Moon, *The Plough that Broke the Steppes: Agriculture and Environment on Russia's Grasslands 1700-1914*, 301
[35] *Encyclopedia of Ukraine,* Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 2001, https://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?linkpath=pages%5CB%5CL%5CBlackSeaBiosphereReserve.htm
[36]Weiner, D. R., *The Historical Origins of Soviet Environmentalism*, Environmental Review, 1982, 25.
[37] Weiner, *The Historical Origins of Soviet Environmentalism*, 25.
[38]Jaseckova, G., Konvit, M., Vartiak, L., "Vernadsky's concept of the noosphere and its reflection in ethical and moral values of society," *History of Science and Technology*, 12(2), 2022, 233.
[39]Jaseckova, "Vernadsky's concept of the noosphere and its reflection in ethical and moral values of society", 235.

grapple with. This is notable, as it reveals an alternative narrative to environmental thought than what became dominant, unearthed from the rich soils of the steppes. And while directly opposing Soviet land management policies was often futile, Ukrainian scientists managed to pioneer environmental ideology, while simultaneously framing steppe conservation as a valuable research and economic endeavor. The latter was a partially effective tactic given the Soviet cult of "chistaya nauka" (pure science), and is responsible for the few remaining tracts of protected steppe [40].

Towards the latter half of the 20th century, grassroots environmental efforts consolidated into a defining facet of Ukrainian nationalist discourse. Particularly in the wake of perestroika, when Mikhail Gorbachev loosened the reins on critical public discourse, environmental protection became expressly political. According to researcher Adrian Nonjun, "Ukrainian eco-nationalism was motivated by the desire for a culture of political transparency and a higher quality of life that found expression in Ukrainian democratic, and then independentist, discourse[41]." This budding political movement, which included groups such as "Zelenyi Svit" (Green World), gained massive traction following the Chernobyl disaster[42] and became some of the loudest and strongest Ukrainian voices opposing Moscow. By 1989, informal groups engaged in environmental protection were numbered at almost 5000[43]. Many of these localized movements occurred in steppe regions—notable examples include pickets against metallurgical plant pollution in Dnipro-petrovsk and rallies against the construction of a new nuclear plant in Crimea[44]. During the latter protests, the cultural significance of the site of the former Cossack Hetmanate (which the new power plant would disrupt) was cited as an argument against its construction[45]. Such multidimensional backlash—encompassing elements of civic activism, political liberty, ecology, and cultural preservation—demonstrates how an environmental consciousness was pervading all of Ukrainian society in its quest for independence. This is also the reason why scientific organizations such as the Green World Association were led and directed by Ukrainian writers and literary intellectuals[46], a unique collaboration in the phenomenon of eco-nationalism. So intrinsic was the ecological element of Ukrainian

[40]Weiner, *The Historical Origins of Soviet Environmentalism*, 25
[41]Nonjon,"The New Path of Ukrainian Eco-Nationalism," 2.
[42] Nonjon, "The New Path of Ukrainian Eco- Nationalism", p. 2
[43]Perga, *Eco-Nationalism in the Soviet Union in the Late 1980s and Early 1990s: The Ukrainian Case*, 183
[44]Perga, *Eco-Nationalism in the Soviet Union in the Late 1980s and Early 1990s: The Ukrainian Case*, 183
[45]Perga, *Eco-Nationalism in the Soviet Union in the Late 1980s and Early 1990s: The Ukrainian Case*, 184
[46]Perga, *Eco-Nationalism in the Soviet Union in the Late 1980s and Early 1990s: The Ukrainian Case*, 184

sovereignty movements that Zelenyi Svit would eventually pave the way for Narodnyi Rukh (People's Movement), a nationalist group integral to Ukraine's eventual independence in 1991 [47].

The Irrepressible Spirit of the Steppes

Despite the ardency of peasant uprisings in the early Soviet Union, the noble efforts of Ukrainian scientists, and rising eco-nationalism, the steppe regions saw little lasting success in deterring the Soviet imperial machine. The seizure and transformation of steppe lands only intensified over time, and the punitive retaliation for rebellion only became more brutal. However, Ukrainians continued to resist imperialism at an ideological level, particularly through cultural and religious mediums, sparking the emergence of a highly artistic, partly-folkloric eco-nationalist movement. Through various modes of cultural expression, citizens celebrated the beauty of the Ukrainian landscape and collectively remembered Ukrainian history and values while proclaiming a unique national identity.

Throughout this process, religion became a pillar of Ukrainian heritage and independent identity. The steppes played an important role in religious expression and cultivated a sense of spiritual belonging and resistance, the landscape itself a sacred battleground of both faith and national identity. Orthodox churches stood as vertical monuments in a horizontal world of vast plains, symbolic beacons of fortitude amid vastness[48]. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the Cossack Sichs, where wooden churches such as the Church of the Intercession of the Holy Virgin stood at the heart of military strongholds[49]. These sacred structures, built by hand and crowned with onion domes reminiscent of horizon touching sky, reflected a deeply spiritual architecture[50]. The Cossacks revered the Virgin Mary as a divine maternal protector[51], and their church embodied a physical manifestation of this divine guardianship over their sacred steppelands. Of course, as the Russian Empire absorbed Ukrainian territory, these local places of worship were often replaced by larger, more ornate cathedrals designed in the Russian imperial style, signaling both religious and political domination[52]. Under the Soviet regime, the assault

[47] Nonjon, "The New Path of Ukrainian Eco-Nationalism," *University of Alberta Forum for Ukrainian Studies*, 2.
[48] Kulik, A. A., Ievleva, O. T., "Features of the Architecture of the Main Church of the Don Cossacks," *The Turkish Online Journal of Design, Art and Communication*, 2016, 32–36.
[49] *Mamayeva Sloboda,* https://mamayeva-sloboda.kyiv.ua/en/about-us/
[50] Kulik, "Features of the Architecture of the Main Church of the Don Cossacks," 32–36.
[51] Kosiv, R., "Shelter of the World, More Spacious than a Cloud: Two Types of Iconography of Virgin Mother of Mercy in Western Ukrainian Icons on Canvas and Church Banners of the 1670–1730s," *IKON*, 2017, 388.
[52] Urakin, A., "Transformation of Church Architectural Composition in Ukraine between the Tenth and Eighteenth Centuries as a Theoretical Basis of Restoration," *Journal of Heritage Conservation*, 2022, 20.

intensified: churches were closed, demolished, or repurposed into secular buildings, leaving behind only ruins. Yet, even in their absence, these sacred sites endured as symbols of defiance and loss, their silhouettes preserved in oral histories, literature, and nationalist iconography[53].

Alongside religious architecture, sacred songs and hymns carried spiritual resonance throughout the steppes. Ukrainian liturgical and folk-religious music frequently featured steppe imagery as a metaphor for divine blessing, sorrow, and martyrdom. Songs like "Oy u poli veter viye" (Oh, the Wind Blows Across the Field)[54] and "Hey, Sokoly"[55] praise the steppe as a site of heroic sacrifice and eternal rest– wind sweeping grass evokes the breath of God or the whisper of a departing soul. These melodies were often sung in the native Ukrainian language, turning musical performance into an act of linguistic and spiritual resistance amidst Russification and cultural repression[56]. The kobzars—wandering blind minstrels—embodied this resistance as they journeyed town-to-town reciting dumas (epic ballads) of Cossack martyrdom and spiritual battles. Many dumas blended sacred themes with nationalist overtones, sanctifying the steppes as both a battleground and promised land [57].

In religious settings as in the broader cultural zeitgeist, Cossacks stood as one of the strongest symbols of the steppe's power to build identity and unity. The mythology of the Cossack warrior-saint emerged partly out of Orthodox martyrdom and anti-imperial resistance. Cossacks were elevated as defenders of both faith and homeland, often portrayed in folk epics as Christ-like figures crucified by foreign powers—whether Ottoman, Polish, or Russian[58]. Over time, these stories fused with Eastern Christian themes of holy suffering and redemption. The steppes, in this framing, became more than a natural environment—they were consecrated terrain, soaked in the blood of both patriots and foes[59]. This synthesis of Orthodox spirituality, Cossack mythology, and sacred geography formed a distinctly Ukrainian religious and

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[53]Kovalchuk, I., "Historiography of Ukrainian Icon Painting in the First Half of the 20th Century," *Bulletin of Lviv National Academy of Arts*, no. 39, 2019, 89–110.
[54]"Ой у полі вітер віє." *Українська народна пісня*. Accessed 2024. https://ukr-pisni.at.ua/load/ukrajinska_narodna_pisnja_oj_u_poli_viter_vie/1-1-0-278.
[55]Uncertain author, "Hey, Sokoly," 20th century, Poland. https://lyricstranslate.com/en/%D0%B3%D0%B5%D0%B9-%D1%81%D0%BE%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B8-hey-falcons.html.
[56]Petrovych, O., Zavalniuk, I., and Bohatko, V., "Exploring the Semantics and Structure of Vocatives in Ukrainian Folk Songs," *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*, 2024, 233.
[57]Swietlicki, M., and Ulanowicz, A., *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Children's Literature*, Routledge, 2025, chap. 1.
[58]Johnson, M. R., *Nationalism and Orthodoxy in Ukrainian Political Thought: The Ontology of Resistance*, 2018, 20.
[59]Shevchenko, T., "My Testament," *Poetical Works*, Taras Shevchenko Museum, *Shevchenko's Poetry* (Online Anthology), 1845.

environmental nationalism. The steppe was not merely a physical space; it was a liminal and spiritual realm—where history, identity, and divinity were converging to anchor a fledgling nation. It is this convergence that defines the irrepressible "spirit of the steppes": a holy ground whose memory cannot be erased by conquest, and whose spirit endured in ruin, song, and wilderness.

The Steppes in Conflicting Literary Narratives

Concurrently, the spirit of the steppes was taken up by Ukrainian intelligentsia as a nation-building tool. Despite restrictive policies and Russification, Ukrainian artists and writers retold the story of the steppes in an act of brazen reclamation of identity. They sought to oppose the emerging harmful view of the steppes touted by foreign occupants that deemed them empty, desolate, and wicked. Such previous narratives featured primarily negative conceptions of the steppes, as demonstrated by Lord Byron's 1819 poem, *Mazeppa*, based on the popular legend of Hetman Ivan Mazepa[60]. Philosopher Volodymyr Yermolenko notes the misrepresentation of the steppe in Byron's poem:

> Byron tells the story of the young Ivan Mazepa, caught at the Polish court for adultery, tied naked to a wild horse, and sent out into the Steppe. He took this story from Voltaire, but turned Voltaire's few lines about the "young Mazepa" legend into a big romantic epic. What is striking in this story now is how Byron imagined the Ukrainian lands: tied to a horse, Mazepa was riding through Ukrainian Steppe for three days without meeting a single human being, or even any sign of human settlement. Even for the mid-17th century, which Byron describes in his story, this perception of imagined de-population in Eastern Europe was an enormous exaggeration[61].

The characterization of the steppes as empty wastelands was indeed quite pervasive in Russian literature, and can be traced in various seminal works. Leo's Tolstoy's *The Cossacks* features the following description:

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[60]Yermolenko, V., *Steppe, Empire, and Cruelty*, in *Ukraine in Histories and Stories: Essays by Ukrainian Intellectuals*, Кафедра літературознавства імені Володимира Моренця, 2019, 107.
[61]Yermolenko, *Steppe, Empire, and Cruelty, Ukraine in Histories and Stories: Essays by Ukrainian intellectuals*, 107

> Three miles beyond the village the steppe spread out and nothing was visible except the dry, monotonous, sandy, dismal plain covered with the footmarks of cattle, and here and there with tufts of withered grass, with low reeds in the flats, and rare, little-trodden footpaths, and the camps of the nomad Nogay tribe just visible far away. The absence of shade and the austere aspect of the place were striking.[62]

In the novel, Tolstoy frames the steppes and the Cossack frontier as uncultured, untamed, and spiritually empty—a foil to the supposedly more refined Russian soul. The main character Olenin seeks "escape" from society in the steppes, but finds little purpose there either. The excerpt typifies the spiritual and cultural void that Russian authors often projected onto the steppes: they were a place *beyond moral structure*, detached from civilization and divine presence. Another example is found in Mikhail Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time (*1840), which portrayed steppe landscapes as dramatic, wild frontiers, spaces that serve as backdrops for the Russian characters' emotional turbulence and moral ambiguity:

> I was left alone in the steppe, my last hope gone; I tried to continue on foot, but my knees gave way and exhausted by the day's anxieties and the sleepless night, I fell onto the wet grass and wept like a child"[63]

Seen here, the emptiness of the steppe becomes a projection of the Russian character's internal void—particularly Pechorin, the disaffected protagonist. The setting also reinforces a sense of "otherness" and danger just beyond the empire's edge. From the Russian perspective, the steppe was not only viewed as free from any notable populace, but this emptiness extended even to a spiritual and cultural level. This narrative allowed for a trifold erasure–ecological, cultural, and spiritual. From this view, the steppes were void of people (seen in imperial maps that omitted native Ukrainian settlements), without culture (seen in the barbaric portrayal of steppe nomads), and godless (seen in the suffocating emptiness that marked Russian descriptions of these regions).

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[62]Tolstoy, L. *The Cossacks: A Tale of the Caucasus*. New York: W.S. Gottsberger, 1887.
[63]Lermontov, M., *A Hero of Our Time*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1840, 175.

However, despite this harmful erasure, Ukrainian artists and writers set out to provide a contrasting account of the steppes. Through cultural mediums, they resisted Russian reduction of the steppes and resurrected them in the national psyche. They recounted a different story of the steppes, imbued with such pride and beauty that rightfully placed them in the very soul of Ukraine. This was evident even in the 1790s, when the steppes featured as the setting of Ivan Kotliarevsky's *Aeneid* (a replica of Virgil's epic), accepted as the inaugural work of Ukrainian modern literature[64]. This poem held crucial significance in Ukrainian state-building, as it situated the Ukrainian language as a medium for sophisticated literature, defying its perception as a folk dialect as it recast classic Trojan heroes as rowdy Cossacks[65]. Crucially, the Ukrainian steppe allegorically took the role of Rome's River Tiber, the birthplace of nomadic settlements that would someday be great powers[66]. Through his work, Kotliarevsky cemented a distinct Ukrainian identity in the realm of high culture that was at the time dominated by Russia and Poland. In the decades that followed, such depictions gained traction, embedding the steppe in collective memory as a symbol of homeland and pride. Myroslav Shkandrij aptly describes this phenomenon:

> Literary myths of the steppe have played a fundamental role in defining Ukraine, its historical origins and cultural characteristics. Depictions of a wild, beautiful, and dangerous borderland appeared in Polish literature as early as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries but were particularly prominent in Polish romanticism. In the 1830s and 1840s Ukrainians who wrote in Russian, such as Nikolai Gogol (Mykola Hohol) and Evgenii Grebenka (levhen Hrebinka), reworked this myth into that of a colourful and vigorous frontier land settled by a sister-nation to the Russians. Shortly thereafter, several classics of Ukrainian literature, notably Taras Shevchenko and Panteleimon Kulish, again refashioned the literary image of the steppe into a foundation myth of a subjugated people and a colonized land. And in the post-revolutionary "cultural renaissance" of the 1920s, Mykola Khvylovy, Volodymyr Vynnychenko, Valeriian Pid-mohylny, Levhen Kosynka, Geo Shkurupii, Maik lohansen, and Luriilanovsky reinterpreted it either as an

[64]Yermolenko, *Steppe, Empire, and Cruelty, Ukraine in Histories and Stories: Essays by Ukrainian intellectuals*, 112
[65] Yermolenko, *Steppe, Empire, and Cruelty, Ukraine in Histories and Stories: Essays by Ukrainian intellectuals*, 112
[66] Yermolenko, *Steppe, Empire, and Cruelty, Ukraine in Histories and Stories: Essays by Ukrainian intellectuals*, 112

anarchic zone of conflict or a fertile and mysterious realm that incubates rebellious natures. These constructs were reflected in paintings, notably by artists such as Shevchenko, Ilia Repin, Arkhyp Kuindzhi, Serhii Vasylkivsky, and Fotii Krasytsky. Their iconic images of the steppe, reproduced countless times, are deeply ingrained in contemporary popular consciousness[67].

The Steppes in Conflicting Visual Representations

As Shkandrij describes, steppe imagery indeed featured as a prominent channel of eco-nationalism in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century paintings. Serhii Vasylkivsky's *Cossacks in the Steppe* (1915) and Arkhip Kuindzi's *Steppe* (1875) are both iconic landscapes that place the steppe in the foreground and celebrate its rugged beauty.

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These images actively contrast depictions of the steppe produced by artists closer to the Russian imperial center, such as Ivan Constantinovich Aivazovsky's *Carts in the Ukrainian Steppe* (1888) and Isaak Levitan's *Vladimirka* (1892). The former depicts intensive agriculture processes that obscure the landscape itself, while the latter's central focus is a well-worn road dissecting the steppe, indicative of Ukraine's prescribed role as a transit land for resources.

[67]Shkandrij, M., *The Steppe as Inspiration in David Burliuk's Art*, Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 2005, 51.
[68]Kuindzhi, A., *Steppe*, 1875, oil on canvas
[69]Vasylkivsky, S., *Cossacks in the Steppe,* 1915, oil on canvas

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The depictions by Russian artists reflect a more one-dimensional perspective of the steppes that fails to grasp their inherent ecological and cultural value. Vasylkivsky and Kuindzi, both ethnically Ukrainian, depict the steppes in a more complex, intricate, and poetic manner, their love and admiration for the land bleeding through the canvas.

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[70]Aivazovsky, I.C.,*Carts in the Ukrainian Steppe*, 1888, oil on canvas
[71]Levitan, I., *Vladimirka,* 1892, oil on canvas
[72]Kuindzhi, A., *The Rainbow*, oil on canvas, State Russian Museum, 1900–1905.

Similarly, David Burliuk's paintings venerated the steppes as a hallmark of Ukrainian identity. Burliuk himself recounts how he decorated old Zaporozhian homes and painted hundreds of canvases of "Zaporozhian mazanki [cottages of daubed wood], azure horizons and willows, black poplars and steppe kurgans[73]". He spearheaded the Primitivism movement in Soviet Ukraine (which romanticized rural life) and his paintings and poems frequently depicted images of the steppes drenched in raw emotion. Just as Burliuk's art influenced perception of the steppes, the steppes reciprocally influenced his art—the horses in his paintings based on Scythian forms and the nudes based on the shape of steppe babas[74]. Buriuk's poems also featured Cossack references as he hinted at "dormant energies of the steppes" [75]. He embraced the steppes and their "borderline" ethos as a welcome contrast to the stifling Russian bourgeois society[76]. Over the course of his life, Burliuk drew from the steppes as inspiration for freedom and hope, an association so readily echoed by Ukrainians that it became ingrained in national mythology.

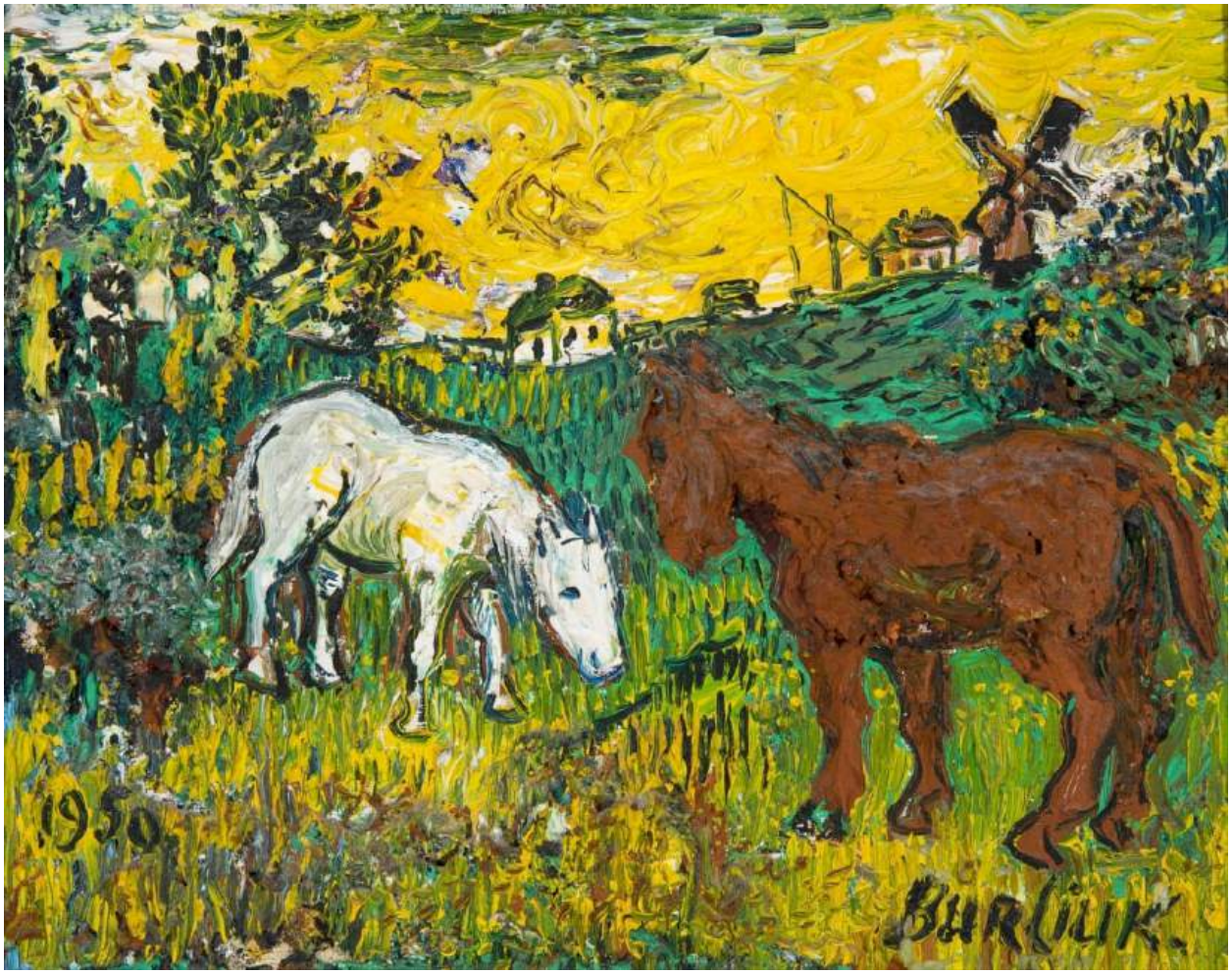
The fervent soul of the steppes was also echoed in the writing of Anton Chekhov, who was part Ukrainian and spent a lot of his life in the steppes. A revealing personal letter of Chekhov's reads as follows:

> "…I am living on the banks of the Psel in the wing of an old feudal home. I hired the place sight unseen, hoping for the best, and thus far have not regretted it. The river is wide, deep, teeming with islands, fish and crayfish, the banks are beautiful and there is much greenery. But its chief virtue is its sense of spaciousness, which is such that it seems to me my hundred rubles have given me the right to live amidst a limitless expanse. Nature and life hereabouts are of a pattern that editors are rejecting as old-fashioned, let alone the nightingales, which sing day and night, the distant barking dogs, the old neglected gardens, the tightly boarded, very sad and poetic country places, where dwell souls of beautiful women, the venerable, doddering feudal retainers and the young girls athirst for the most conventional type of love; not far from here we have such a worn-out device of romance as a watermill (sixteen wheels), along with a miller and his daughter who keeps sitting at her window, obviously waiting for something to happen.

[73]Burliuk, D., *Fragmenty iz vospominanii futurista: Pisma, stikhotvoreniia*, St. Petersburg: Pushkinskii fond, 1994, 113.
[74]Shkandrij, *The Steppe as Inspiration in David Burliuk's Art*, 54
[75]Shkandrij, *The Steppe as Inspiration in David Burliuk's Art*, 54
[76]Shkandrij, *The Steppe as Inspiration in David Burliuk's Art*, 54

> Everything I see and hear about me seems like the ancient tales and fairy stories I have known for so long…"[77]

The themes of *Steppe*, one of Checkov's seminal plays, imbue the land with complex symbolic meaning, most prominently that the steppe constituted a liminal zone of beauty, desire, and pilgrimage, the site of transitional identities and broken boundaries[78]. As main character Egoruchka journeys through the steppe, he encounters natural spirit masters that since time immemorial have nurtured and razed civilizations by way of elemental forces[79].



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[77]Chekhov, A., *The Selected Letters of Anton Chekhov*, Farrar, Straus, 1955, 51.
[78]Bidoshi, K., "Folk Motifs and Rituals in Chekhov's 'Steppe,'" *Ten Steppes Along the "Steppe"*, 2017, 134.
[79]Bidoshi, Folk Motifs and Rituals in Chekhov's "Steppe", 136
[80]Burliuk, D., *Untitled*, 1950

Buriuk and Chekhov's soulful account of the steppes resonated in the work of so many other artists of the era. Taras Shevchenko's iconic collection of poetry, titled *Kobzar,* would inspire numerous pro-Ukrainian poets and musicians to laud Cossack legends in their work[81]. The supra-historical Cossacks would simultaneously feature prominently in traditional oral stories, where they were recounted in a part-historic, part-allegorical fashion, embodying and legitimizing the country's ongoing independence struggle[82]. Such sentiment was depicted visually in Ilya Repin's *Reply of the Zaporozhian Cossacks* (1891), Serhii Vasylkivsky's *Cossacks in the Steppe* (1915), and Fotti Krasitsky's *Guest from Zaporozhye* (1901). Repin's painting portrays a wiley Cossack bunch writing an ultimatum to the Turkish Sultan as an act of resistance against Russian invaders[83]. In Vasylkyvsky's painting, two Cossacks gaze bravely into the horizon, and in Krasitsky's painting a peasant family hosts two Cossacks for an outdoor picnic. In each image, the Cossack figures command respect and are inseparable from the steppe landscape that surrounds them. The artists behind these works have been canonized as the great painters of Ukraine, and their iconic depictions of the steppes do more than just cement the landscape in Ukraine's artistic heritage—they weave the steppes into a divergent narrative about Ukraine's history and identity, shared in the national imagination in defiance of imperial erasure.

Another prominent channel of nation-building could be found in Ukrainian folk tradition and rural culture. The village writers literary movements, led by Ivan Drach, romanticized Ukrainian rurality and boldly rejected materialism[84]. And in oral tradition and folk songs, the steppes feature perhaps even more vividly than in the realms of literature and fine art. The steppes were ubiquitous to Ukrainian folk songs and patriotic anthems, almost always backdropping motifs of loss, hope, valor, and freedom. These associations are demonstrated through many examples:

When the stormy winds blow forth from the wide steppes,
They will glorify, throughout Ukraine, the Sich Riflemen [85]

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Across the steppe there is rye harvesting for the people.

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[81]Swietlicki, *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Children's Literature*, chap. 1.
[82]Swietlicki, *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Children's Literature*, chap. 1.
[83]Swietlicki, *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Children's Literature*, chap. 1.
[84]Nonjon, *The new path of Ukrainian eco- nationalism*, 3
[85] Antonovych, V., and Drahomanov, M. (likely), "Ой у лузі червона калина," 1875.

The distant expanse is waving (with) its wing across the steppe.
A mother, mother is waiting for her soldier
But the soldier is sleeping an eternal sleep! [86]

—----------

Hey, by the steppes, and by the dark ravines
The campaign marches forth with iron pikes.
He who's brave, now, let him come on with us,
Let us all be knights, O you young men! [87]

—----------

Hey, there, somewhere near black waters
A young cossack mounts his horse.
Sadly he parts with his girl,
But even more sadly with Ukraine.
Hey, hey, hey falcons!
Fly past the mountains, forests and valleys.
Ring, ring, ring little bell
My little steppe skylark [88]

These songs, and many others, place the heart of Ukrainian resistance in the steppe lands, and the lyrics lend the steppes physical, spiritual, and emotional value. The steppe is the scene of battle, the comfort the soldier feels ringing from his saddle bell, the basin for the mother's grief, and the final resting spot of the fallen. It is also important to note that such folk songs were often sung among active soldiers, whereby steppe imagery quite literally fueled patriotic resistance. Folk songs and epics were composed and recounted in Ukrainian, which amidst Russia's language bans was an act of resistance and cultural preservation itself [89]. Importantly, the direction of these patriotic artistic and literary movements intertwined with the political resistance being put forth

[86] Nehoda, M., and Pashkevych, A., *Stepom, Stepom*, 1966. Available at: https://songs.in.ua/stepom-stepom/
[87] Malyuca, S. *Hey, By the Steppes,* 1944, https://lyricstranslate.com/en/%D0%B3%D0%B5%D0%B9-c%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%BF%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%B8-hey-stepps.html
[88] Uncertain Author, *Hey, Sokoly, 20th century Poland, https://lyricstranslate.com/en/%D0%B3%D0%B5%D0%B9-%D1%81%D0%BE%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B8-hey-falcons.html*
[89]Chaika, O., "The Impact of Russian Cultural Suppression on Ukrainian National Unity," *International Journal of Philology*, 28(3), 2024, 5.

in Ukraine's ecological fronts. As a result, Ukrainian nationalism aligned quite strongly with environmental stewardship, as preserving rural Ukrainian heritage and eschewing Russian industrial transformation were parallel goals. This dual resistance in the realms of nature and political identity is a hallmark of Ukraine's history as an independent nation. In the context of

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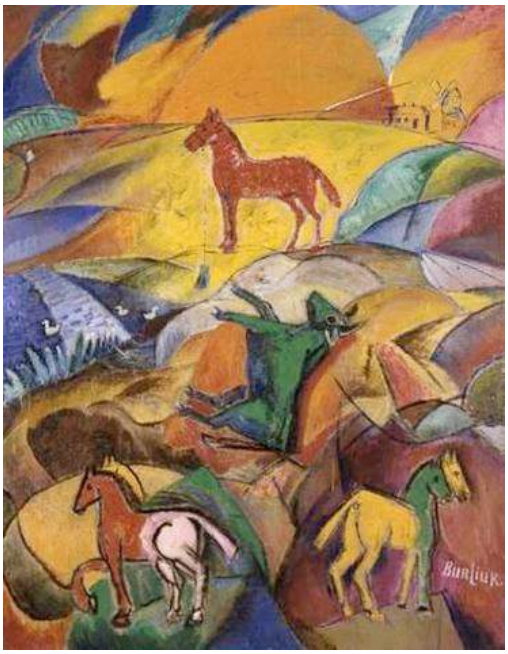

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this rising eco-nationalism, the glorification of the rural past and rejection of modernity reprimanded Western liberalism just as it did Soviet Industrialization[92], notably reinforcing Ukraine's divergent position between East and West.

Conclusion

The long nineteenth century marked a period of profound and lasting strife in Ukraine. Russian imperial expansion sought to dominate Ukraine, producing physical and ideological erasure aimed at destroying Ukraine's sovereign ambitions. At the core of the issue were Ukraine's abundant natural resources, especially the steppes, in which Russia put forth exploitative agricultural policies and rampant resource extraction. Across centuries, imperial and Soviet forces upheld centuries-old misconceptions of the steppes as frontiers to conquer, exploit, and transform—empty transit land waiting to be filled with canals, crops, and roads. However,

[90]Burliuk, D., *Song of Youth*
[91]Burliuk, D., *Sunrise*, 1911
[92]Nonjon, *The new path of Ukrainian eco- nationalism*, 7

despite being deemed vacant by foreign powers, the steppe landscape proved to be full of memory, resistance, and meaning, as Ukrainian rewrote the story of Ukraine's steppes through layered cultural, political, and spiritual contestation. The steppes bore witness to the dispossession of territory, the plundering of resources, and the degradation of ecosystems, but also to the endurance of Ukrainian identity and the tenacity of local communities to protect their land and their ways of life. They served as both the battleground and the prize in successive imperial campaigns, transformed by tsarist mapping, colonial agriculture, Soviet terraforming, and forced collectivization. These attacks on the land were deeply intertwined with attacks on cultural sovereignty—overlapping ecocide and ethnocide.

In the face of this aggression, the steppes became a vital medium for resistance, not only ecologically and economically, but also symbolically. They figured prominently in the rise of Ukrainian eco-nationalism, a political and cultural movement that positioned nature as both an emblem of national identity and a terrain of resistance. Artists, scientists, writers, and musicians—both elite and folk—reclaimed the steppes through imagery, word, and song. Figures such as Vasylkivsky and Burliuk rendered the plains not as empty spaces but as soulful realms, vibrant with history, heroism, and unbreakable ties to the people who inhabited them. Ukrainian literature and folk art exalted the steppes as witnesses to martyrdom and freedom, drawing on Cossack legends and historical suffering to craft a shared mythos of place and purpose.

Religious and spiritual dimensions further reinforced this sacred geography. Churches across the steppe, especially within Cossack strongholds, anchored the Ukrainian recognition of divine presence in the land. Even when dismantled or desecrated, these structures lived on in cultural memory and oral tradition. Religious songs and dumas imbued the steppes with sacramental power, while the mythology of the Cossack martyr cast the landscape as a holy ground of national crucifixion and resurrection. The convergence of Orthodoxy, folk belief, and nationalist imagination established a unique form of eco-nationalism—one that transformed the steppes from mere territory to spiritual homeland.

Ultimately, this chapter has aimed to illustrate that just as the Ukrainian steppes played a formative role in early Ukrainian identity, they were an instrumental driver of resistance and affirmation of distinct heritage in an era when it was threatened. As such, they helped define Ukraine's collective identity and legitimized its right to sovereignty against looming rival powers that sought to destroy its any inkling of nationhood. They were an active force in Ukrainian

imagination—a space of struggle, sacrifice, and regeneration. Through cultural memory, art, science, and spiritual life, Ukrainians continually returned to the steppes to claim their history and assert their future. The steppes therefore endure not just as ecological zones, but as sacred sites of national becoming, as in the face of domination they bolstered the Ukrainian spirit. Their power is perhaps no better illustrated than in their legacy, continuously reconfigured to guide Ukraine through novel challenges, including the very war occuring at the time of this writing. The vital position of the steppes in the Russia Ukraine War will be explored in the following chapter.

Chapter 3: Steppe Legacies Unearthed in the War

"It is impossible to take the beautiful sunrises and sunsets of [the steppe] away, no matter where it is, no matter under whose control. You can send away Chapman's zebras or Przewalski's horses, but not stop the sun or turn it around so that it rises from the other side. Thank God, that is beyond the power of man."

-Mykola[1]

Present-day Ecocide in the Steppes

Since its outbreak in February 2022, the Russia Ukraine War has wrought unprecedented destruction on Ukrainian nature. With pollution, habitat destruction, and secondary impacts such as lack of governance paving the way for over-extraction, the extent of war-related environmental degradation is gravely alarming. Concerning images continuously surface, such as the recent figure documenting how over 50,000 endangered dolphins have been killed by Russian submarines and are washing up on the shores of the Black Sea[2]. The nation-wide destruction is occurring in a critical ecological region, as the territory of Ukraine contains habitats home to 35% of Europe's biodiversity,[3] and now more than 30% of the country's protected areas have been destroyed.[4] Bombardment, fires, heavy military equipment, chemical pollution, and poaching are driving ecocide in Ukraine[5]. Russia carried out active combat operations on the territories of over 900 sites of Ukraine's nature reserve fund, encompassing an area of over 12,000 kilometers, about a third of Ukraine's protected areas. Alongside this, about 200 territories of Ukraine's Emerald Network are under threat of destruction[6]. The steppes, comprising numerous frontline regions, have borne a heavy brunt of this destruction. Due to their location on the border, their rampant destruction actually began earlier, during Russia's 2014

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[1] UNICEF, "Voices of Askania: Steppe Lost,"
[2]Pipia, S. *The Effect of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine on Non-Human Animals: International Humanitarian Law Perspectives*, Israel Law Review, *57*(2), 2024, p.266.
[3] United Nations Environment Programme, *The Environmental Impact of the Conflict in Ukraine: A Preliminary Review, 30*
[4] Hryhorczuk, D., B.S. Levy, M. Prodanchuk *et al.*, *The environmental health impacts of Russia's war on Ukraine*. J Occup Med Toxicol 19, 1, 2024, 1
[5] Hryhorczuk, *The environmental health impacts of Russia's war on Ukraine*. p.2
[6]Tsaryk, L., Kuzyk, I. *RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR: ENVIRONMENTAL ASPECT* // Scientific notes of Ternopil National Pedagogical University.Taip, 2022. Isusl. 2. (53), p.103

invasion[7]. Stony steppes, a biome endemic to Ukraine, have shrunk significantly as a result[8]. In the Donbas region, fighting took place on the territory of the branches of the Khomutovsky and Kalmiuske steppe reserves, as well as in the national park "Meotyda"[9].

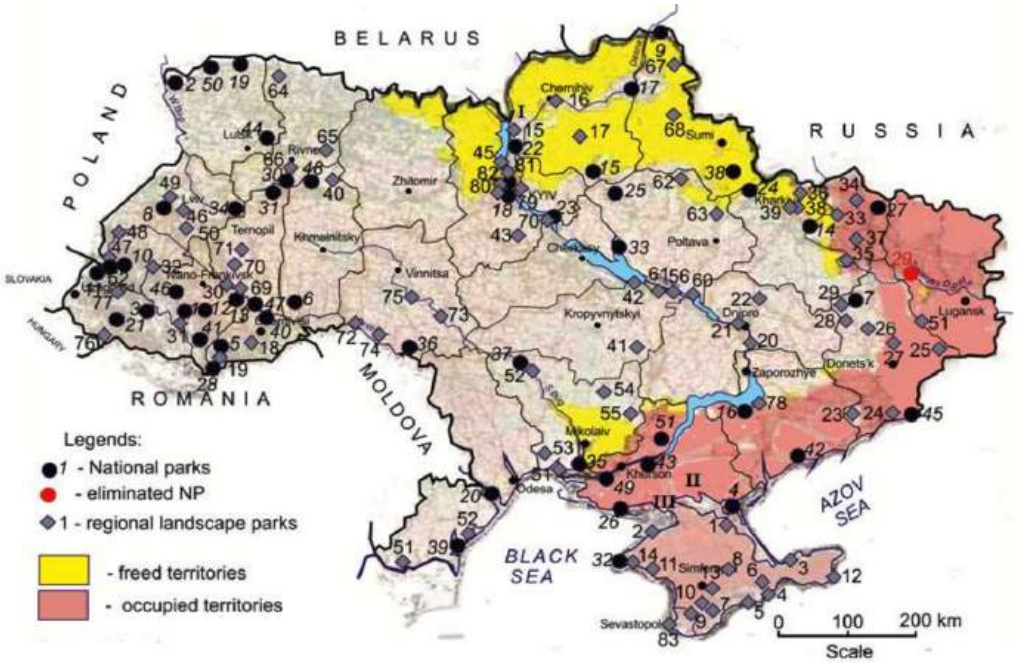

Fig. 1. Network National Natural Parks and Regional Landscape Parks in the occupied and liberated territories of Ukraine, as of September 1, 2022

[10]

Military operations inflict direct physical damage to the steppes as heavy equipment moves across the ground, explosives destroy vegetation and lead to sulphur and heavy metal contamination in soil, and the construction of trenches and fortifications disrupts land. As a result of constant shelling, fires broke out in the Donetsk region and have damaged local steppe reserves, including Provalny Steppe[11]. Military aggression has also caused extensive increases in large-scale steppe fires, caused by explosions and tactical arson, made worse by lack of resources to effectively extinguish fires. Though steppe grasses are to some extent resilient to fires, if they occur during spring (when grasses are in the growing stage and heavy rains typically prevent

[7]Novakovska, I. Belousova, N.,Hunko, L., *LAND DEGRADATION IN UKRAINE AS A RESULT OF MILITARY OPERATIONS*, Acta Scientiarum Polonorum Administratio Locorum, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warmińsko-Mazurskiego w Olsztynie, 2024, 137

[8]Mammadov, S. Luhovyi, O. Starodubets, H. Kalynychenko,R.Trybrat. Collateral Ecocide. *The Impact of War on Ukrainian Flora and Fauna*. International Journal of Environmental Studies, 81, 2024, 446–54

[9] Tsaryk, *RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR: ENVIRONMENTAL ASPECT*, 102

[10] Tsaryk, *RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR: ENVIRONMENTAL ASPECT*, 103

[11] Tsaryk, *RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR: ENVIRONMENTAL ASPECT*, 103

naturally-occurring fires), the habitat can be destroyed for decades[12]. Such fires destroy flora and fauna even in the microbiome and threaten species that are already rare due to the shrinkage of natural steppe[13]. Military operations have also led to the destruction and plundering of national parks offices, resulting in loss of documents and conservation archives, as well as the inability to continue long-term monitoring and stewardship activities[14]. Even beyond direct physical destruction, harder to monitor is dispersed pollution of air and fertile soil, along with lack of environmental governance leading to increased illicit activity like unauthorized open-pit mining on steppe territories. Scientists from Ukraine's agrarian universities describe a further harmful phenomenon: "Ecologically, the cessation of traditional activities like mowing or grazing in inaccessible (potentially mined) areas disrupts natural succession, leading to overgrowth by shrubs, transforming steppe landscapes. Conversely, the extensive disturbance creates ecological niches that favor the invasion of alien and invasive species, which can outcompete native flora and alter plant communities, a threat significantly increased by military operations and global warming[15]." In addition, the flat open landscape of the steppes has in the eyes of the aggressor made them ideal sites for military exercises, as exemplified by the brutal destruction of Meotyda:

> A special place is occupied by the national nature park «Meotyda», the territory of which is torn in half by the front line. Today, «Meotyda» is the only institution of the nature reserve fund that left the occupied territory. Park workers left occupied Novoazovsk. The new park office was established in Urzuf in 2015. Unfortunately, the national park suffers not only from military operations. The most valuable part of the park, with Europe's largest colonies of rare aquatic birds, was damaged by «military exercises» in the self-proclaimed «DNR». As a result, bird colonies left the territory of the national park. The occupiers turned this part of the national park into a center of illegal fishing. The occupation of the central administration of the Ukrainian steppe Nature Reserve («Khomutovsky Step» department), which housed the reserve's archives, herbariums, documentation, and library since 1926, is also an extraordinary loss. Thanks to these

[12]Tomchenko, O. et al, *Assessment and Monitoring of Fires Caused by the War in Ukraine*, Journal of Landscape Ecology, Vol: 16 / No. 2, 2023, 19
[13] Tomchenko, *Assessment and Monitoring of Fires Caused by the War in Ukraine*, 19
[14]Hsiao, E. et al, *Protected zones in context: Exploring the complexity of armed conflicts and their impacts on the protection of biodiversity*, International Review of the Red Cross, 105 (924), 2023, 1434
[15]Antonik, I. et al, *Prospects for Post-War Livestock Recovery in the Ukraine Steppes*, Proceedings of the I International Scientific and Practical Conference, Pomeranian University in Słupsk, 2024, 28

> materials, the reserve remained a unique territory of Ukraine, where environmental monitoring was carried out continuously for almost 100 years.[16]

Since 2014, it also appears that steppes have been arbitrarily plowed as Russian forces enact new terraforming projects[17]. Unfortunately, the situation is also complicated by the fact that the steppe is a more foreign landscape from the European perspective, leading to some stagnation when it comes to steppe conservation. Unsurprisingly, EU environmental networks that have promised multilateral aid and resources are concentrated in the Transcarpathian Region and focus predominantly on forestry[18]. All of these events directly and indirectly have led to ecocide in the steppes and exemplify a resurgence in historic erasure of Ukrainian landscapes at the hands of Russian imperialism.

A History Stolen

Of course, as the steppes come under fire, so too do the rich cultural and archeological sites embedded in them. Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, many artifacts and places of cultural importance in the steppes have been appropriated and harmed by the occupation. In some instances this is collateral damage of the fighting, but in others it is from deliberate attempts to erase Ukrainian heritage and redefine Ukrainian identity. Such acts of deculturation and appropriation have occurred particularly frequently in the steppes. One example occurred at "Кам'яна Могила" (Stone Grave), a monument in the Zaporizhia region. The monument is composed of an isolated mass of sandstone containing many caves and grottos that have preserved millenia-old petroglyphs—-archeologists have deduced that this site was most likely used as a sanctuary. In ancient times, such a stone hill rising out of the steppes would have been a fantastic phenomenon, leading nomadic steppe peoples to deem it a sacred place of worship and a dwelling of the gods[19]. In the present, the Stone Grave Museum rests nearby and houses many exhibitions detailing the monument's fascinating past. However, since the beginning of the

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[16] Tsaryk, *RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR: ENVIRONMENTAL ASPECT*, p.102
[17] Tsaryk, *RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR: ENVIRONMENTAL ASPECT*, p.103
[18]Egerer, E., *Nature and Biodiversity Panel*, First Stakeholder's Forum, Platform for Action of the Green Recovery of Ukraine, Kyiv, Ukraine April 7, 2025
[19]Dublyansky, V.N., *Caves of Kamennaya Mogila (Stone Grave)*, Пещеры: Сборник научных трудов. Выпуск 31, Пермский государственный университет, 2008 p. 156

war, Russian authorities have seized large quantities of artifacts and have displayed them in their own exhibition, under a Russian narrative, in Crimea[20].

[21]

At the same time, following the invasion reports came in of Russian forces mining territory in the vicinity of the site and digging trenches in the land surrounding the reserve[22]. While extensive details on these activities remain unclear, it is possible that the Russians were hoping to take advantage of the rich mineral reserves underlying the location[23]. Another report describes the construction of a landfill on the territory of the reserve[24].

The war has also degraded “Хортиця” (Khortysia), the largest island on the Dnipro River and a location important to Ukrainian history for a variety of reasons. Most famously, this is the site of the historic Zaporozhian Cossack Sich, though the island has been inhabited for millennia and contains relics of Scythian tribes. Remnants of the Kamianska Sich fortress still remain, and

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[20]Господаренко, О., *Привласнення культурної спадщини України: як росіяни перетворили Кам’яну Могилу на військовий трофей*, Новинарня, 2023

[21] Тертишник, В., Власна робота Кам'яна́ Моги́ла, 2020

[22]Кізілова, С. . *Запорізька область: росіяни намагаються закріпитися, мінують околиці заповідника*, Українська правда, 2022

[23] Господаренко, *Привласнення культурної спадщини України: як росіяни перетворили Кам’яну Могилу на військовий трофей*, 2023

[24] Господаренко, *Привласнення культурної спадщини України: як росіяни перетворили Кам’яну Могилу на військовий трофей*, 2023

the territory has been made a national nature park[25]. Within its bounds, a museum educates visitors on the rich history of the island, hosting dynamic cultural programs including a Cossack Horse Show[26]. The island is also a critical ecological zone, home to rare Red Book species of flora and fauna as well as meadow and steppe habitat[27]. But alongside celebrations of Ukrainian heritage, the island also stands as testament to the destructive terraforming Soviets enacted in the steppes– the Dnipro Hydroelectric Station, which was constructed in the 1930s and caused massive changes to local hydrological and ecological cycles, is still visible from the museum[28]. It is this history that makes present events so striking, as the injuries of Russian ecological manipulation resurface today in dual cultural and environmental erasure. During the events of the war, shelling of heritage forests surrounding Khortytsia has disrupted wildlife, as has shelling, building of fortifications, and soil contamination in Kamianska Sich national park[29]. However, the most drastic ecological impacts followed the June 2023 destruction of the Kakhovka Dam, targeted in a deliberate act of environmental warfare by Russian forces. Downstream of the dam, the release of 18 km³ of water resulted in severe flooding of wetland habitats and introduced dangerous pollutants fatal to aquatic life, including heavy metals and chloro-organic compounds, into the Dnipro River and Black Sea[30]. The event led to drastic ecological imbalance, stressing marine life in the Black Sea and enabling growth of harmful microalgae that threaten biodiversity. Upstream from the dam, where Khortytsia is located, the draining of the Kakhovka reservoir dried up waterways, leading to the death of tens of thousands of fish and altering the landscape, which then jeopardized dozens of land species such as the Caspian whip snake and Nordmann's mouse[31]. As the water receded, among the animal corpses were hundreds of artifacts and even whole stretches of land that used to belong to the Cossacks, long since drowned in the flooding caused by Soviet dam construction in the mid-twentieth century[32]. At the same time, the "Great Meadow" south of Khortytsia, a lowland area historically consisting of rivers, reed beds,

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[25] Kamianska Sich National Nature Park, Nature Reserve Fund of Ukraine, 2025, https://wownature.in.ua/en/parks-and-reserves/kamianska-sich-national-nature-park/
[26] Khortysia National Preserve, 2025, https://ostriv.org/tourist/museum/
[27] Kamianska Sich National Nature Park, Nature Reserve Fund of Ukraine, 2025, https://wownature.in.ua/en/parks-and-reserves/kamianska-sich-national-nature-park/
[28]Ponedilok, N. *Khortytsia. A Reserve in the Middle of the City*, Ukrainer, 2019
[29]Pendiur, N. *Steppe on Fire: How the War is Transforming the Kamianska Sich National Nature Park*, UAnimals Media, 2024
[30]Solnik, A. *Ecological consequences of dam destruction: A focus on the Nova Kakhovka Dam.* Climatalk, 2024
[31] Solnik, *Ecological consequences of dam destruction: A focus on the Nova Kakhovka Dam*
[32]Palikot, A., *A Drowned World Exposed: Receding Dnieper River Reveals Remnants Of The Past After Dam Breach In Ukraine*, RadioFreeEurope, 2023

swamps, flooded forests, and meadows which has similarly been flooded since the 1950s, has also begun to reemerge following the Kakhovka incident[33]. The sudden reappearance of this nature and history lost to Soviet land transformation, amidst a humanitarian and ecological crisis caused by the violent and uncontrolled incident, aptly illustrates the historic political, social, and environmental power dynamics resurfacing during the war.

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Of course, the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam impacted far more than just Khortytsia as it unleashed a slew of destruction upon the Kherson region. The Tiahynka Fortress, a 14th–15th-century architectural monument located in the village of Tiahynka, was bombed and mined following the invasion and completely flooded in the aftermath of Kakhovka[35]. This is a grave loss, as the fortress presented a unique blend of Ukrainian, Lithuanian, and Crimean culture. Archeologists documenting damage to the site expressed concern for many other regional cultural relics that were threatened by the flooding, including Scythian and Cossack Kurgans, Bronze Age and Medieval Monuments, remains of the old city of Burhun, and the

[33]Shubravska, O., Popova, O., Prokopenko, K.. *Consequences of the Destruction at the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant for Agriculture in the South of Ukraine.* Acta Scientiarum Polonorum Administratio Locorum 23 (4), 461

[34] Ponedilok, *Khortytsia. A Reserve in the Middle of the City*, 2019

[35] Ukrainska Pravda, *Unique cultural heritage sites destroyed by Kakhovka flooding*, Ukrainska Pravda, 2023 https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2023/06/6/7405573/

Vytov Tower of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania[36]. Once again, this cultural erasure of the warfare is not inadvertent, as Russian forces have also illegally exported collections from museums in Kherson[37]. As of January 2025, more than 33,000 artifacts had been removed from sites including the Kherson Art Museum and have been transported primarily to Crimea[38]. The emotional value of these losses resounds in the words of Father Vitaly of Saint Catherine's Cathedral: "History is in the heart of the people, the memory of people. A lot of things were lost but the major part is we should remember who we are. History is good but the main thing is life[39]." The Cathedral housed the bones of Grigory Potemkin, the founder of Kherson, which along with sacred relics were looted in the aftermath of shelling[40]. Father Vitaly assured his parish not to despair, as true value far surpasses such physical remnants and survives embedded in the hearts and memory of Ukrainians.

Other tragic examples can be found in Ukraine's southeastern cities, cultural hubs in the steppes with close proximity to the frontlines. The city of Izium, a historically significant center of commerce linking Kharkiv and Donbas, was occupied for six months following the invasion in 2022. During the occupation, several ancient stone statues called kurgan stelae were destroyed[41]. These statues likely served as memorials to honor the dead and were found in the Ukrainian steppes; they date back to the 9th-13th centuries[42]. Further losses occurred in the coastal city of Mariupol, which was subject to mass destruction following the invasion. Troves of cultural relics were stolen from local cultural institutions, including works of renowned steppe landscape painters Arkhip Kuindzhi and Ivan Aivazovsky from the Mariupol Local History Museum (Hyde, Politico). This Museum also housed collections of prehistoric burial items from the steppes and several steppe "babas" (another name for kurgan stelae)[43]. News articles reporting the events detail the valiant and at times life threatening efforts put up by curators and

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[36] Ukrainska Pravda, *Unique cultural heritage sites destroyed by Kakhovka flooding*
[37] Кізілова, *Запорізька область: росіяни намагаються закріпитися, мінують околиці заповідника*
[38] Кізілова, *Запорізька область: росіяни намагаються закріпитися, мінують околиці заповідника*
[39] Bell, S., Semple, J., *Art heist at the Louvre of Kherson: Russia's war on Ukrainian identity,* Global News, 2023,https://globalnews.ca/news/9494509/ukraine-war-anniversary-kherson-art-museum-heist-russia-attacks-culture-identity/
[40] Bell, *Art heist at the Louvre of Kherson: Russia's war on Ukrainian identity*
[41] Kiskkovsky, S. *Ukrainian steon statues-likened to Easter Island's Moai—destroyed during Russian invasion*, The Art Newspaper, 2022 https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/09/21/ukrainian-stone-statueslikened-to-easter-islands-moaidestroyed-during-russian-invasion
[42] Kiskkovsky, *Ukrainian stone statues-likened to Easter Island's Moai—destroyed during Russian invasion*
[43] Hyde, L. *Culture war: Russia ransacks art to rub out Ukraine's history*, Politico, 2022 https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-fights-back-as-russia-aims-to-rub-out-its-history/

docents in attempts to save this history from Russian hands[44]. Both in the ceaseless attempts of Russian forces to deface and alter this history, and in the ardent efforts of Ukrainians to preserve it, the ideological power of the steppes is revealed.

Such instances mark just some of the unfathomable cultural erasure occurring in the steppes as a result of the war and demonstrate the great lengths Russia will go to redefine Ukraine, even at the conceptual level. Though Russian propaganda efforts are directed at all regions of Ukraine, the extensive targeting of cultural relics from the steppes implicates them in the foundation of Ukrainian identity—that which Russia is so trying to destroy. Such dual exploitation of environment and heritage reveal how deeply intertwined Ukrainian culture is with the steppeland, the vast fields from which Ukrainian identity has partly been molded. Their destruction is inherent cultural erasure. This ethnocide is made even more glaring by the intentional destruction of archeological monuments that evidence the steppes' cultural value, and the warnings sounding from these incidents must be heeded as the stakes of unchecked domination grow ever higher.

The Steppes in Contemporary Resistance

Quite strikingly, the scientific and cultural routes of resistance displayed by patriots in Soviet Ukraine are being echoed in the war today. And just as in the imperial past, the steppes are close to the heart of the opposition. Threads of steppe identity, history, and tradition are resurfacing through various channels in the wake of the war. Tracing the motif of the steppes in these instances reveals them firmly anchored in a distinctly Ukrainian identity, upheld in the face of Russification narratives. Connections to the steppes in the current cries for Ukrainian independence can at times be fleeting and easily overlooked, but their significance cannot be overstated.

The Heroic Stands of Environmental Resistance

To illustrate this phenomenon, one may first turn to the events that have since the war unfolded at the Askania Nova biosphere reserve. Remarkably, for over a year after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion, the Ukrainian administration of the Askania-Nova Biosphere Reserve continued to operate the reserve despite being located in the occupied Kherson region.

[44] Hyde, *Culture war: Russia ransacks art to rub out Ukraine's history*

From February 2022 until March 2023, Ukrainian scientists, ecologists, and staff upheld the core functions of the reserve—protecting endangered steppe ecosystems, caring for the diverse animal population, and maintaining ecological research infrastructure[45]. Working in a climate of fear and under immense pressure from the occupying forces, they refused to collaborate with Russian authorities and actively resisted attempts to co-opt the institution. Their persistence preserved vital parts of the reserve's biodiversity and quickly became recognized as a quiet yet profound act of cultural and scientific resistance[46]. The significance of this occurrence transcends far beyond the environmental sector, as the reserve became a political stronghold and site of vehement resistance—-for a time it was the only location in the occupied territory that remained under Ukrainian control. The heroic actions of the staff of Askania Nova have been echoed by hundreds of other reserve workers risking their lives to take care of nature during the war. Despite the incredible harm it has endured, workers at Meotyda continue preservation work through monitoring efforts and habitat restoration projects[47]. Similar efforts are continuously put forth by Nizhnodniprovsky park, despite its territories essentially constituting one of the war's most active frontlines[48]. Interestingly, such preservation efforts have also taken on a political strategy, as ecocide becomes an avenue of future accountability in international law. Since the early days of the war, Ukraine has taken measures to collect evidence of ecocide with the eventual goal of pursuing legal action against Russia. It established the Operational Headquarters at the State Environmental Inspectorate of Ukraine to collect such evidence.[49] This body coordinates with scientific organizations, NGOs, nature reserves, and even normal citizens (an app has been developed through which environmental damage may be reported), in an effort to build a case against Russia and eventually file it with international courts.[50] At the same time, there have been efforts by Ukrainian environmental lawyers and legal scholars to redefine

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[45] Hubareva, V., *Life of Askania-Nova natural reserve under Russian occupation and hopes about the future liberation: Interview with director Viktor Shapova*l, Rubryka, 2023

[46]Mankovska, V., *Steppe under threat. What is happening in the occupied Askania-Nova reserve?*, Svidomi, European Endowment for Democracy, 2024

[47] National Parks Association, *Meotyda National Park*, 2025, https://nationalparksassociation.org/ukraine-national-parks/meotyda-national-park/

[48]Balchinos, A., *The fire in the national park in the Odessa region caused damage to the environment by 32 million*, Intent Press, 2025 https://intent.press/news/war/2025/pidpaliuvacha-avtivok-viiskovikh-v-odesi-zasudili-na-piat-rokiv/

[49] Golovko, L., Gulac, O., Oleksenko, R., *International legal regulation of environmental protection during armed conflict and the possibility of its application in Ukraine*. International Multidisciplinary Scientific GeoConference: *SGEM, 23*(5.1), 2023, p.79

[50] Duiunova, T., Voznyk, M., Koretskyi, S., Chernetska, V. Shylinhov, *International humanitarian law and ecocide: The war in Ukraine as a case study*. European Journal of Environmental Sciences, 14(1), 2024, p.14

ecocide as a crime against humanity, and therefore have it specifically codified under international law making it easier for Ukraine to press charges[51]. The immense gravity of the situation can be observed through this phenomenon, as Ukraine mobilizes its environmental sector to reshape international legal norms. The intrinsic importance of these protected areas, particularly in the steppes, is evident as they become both strategic and symbolic points of Ukrainian resistance.

The Dissenting Voices of Cultural Resistance

While on-the-ground resistance displayed by reserve workers provides a physical defense of the steppes, equally vital are the symbolic and cultural dimensions of the present resistance. Across music, visual art, and community expression, the steppe has emerged as a powerful national emblem. For example, singer Anastasia Prykhodko, who has been named Honored Artist and Volunteer of Ukraine, has hosted benefit concerts to raise funds for the Ukrainian Defense forces titled “Степом” (Steppes)[52]. Prykhodko, nicknamed the “Muse of Ukrainian Defenders”, has also released a cover of the patriotic folk song “Степом, степом” (Steppes, steppes), accompanied by a music video set at the iconic Mother Ukraine monument in Kyiv, which has received almost a million views[53]. Comments posted to the video thank the artist for singing with the heart and soul of the entire Ukrainian people[54]. The choice of this patriotic anthem was no coincidence– the folk song was composed in 1966 by Nikolai Nehoda, who early in his life fought the Nazi as part of the Ukrainian Kholodnoyarsky guerrilla detachment that fought in the steppe region in WWII[55]. The song recounts a mother’s grief for her fallen son, inspired by the author’s visions of women reaping rye and finding the bodies of fallen soldiers among the grasses[56]. The song was first performed by Olga Pavlovskaya, and affected listeners recalled their reaction with deep emotion: “my heart was enveloped in pain... It seemed that this was not even a woman's penetrating voice, but the longing, suffering, and heartache of the earth itself, generous, life-giving, on whose golden ears the dead soldiers fall[57].” Quite strikingly, a

[51]Duiunova, *International humanitarian law and ecocide: The war in Ukraine as a case study*
[52]Приходько, А., *Степом*, Київська Консерваторія, 1-3/11, 2024
[53] Prykhodko, A. *Степом, степом*, YouTube video, 3:45, posted by "Anastasia Prykhodko Official," May 10, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mip5mqZCdBE.
[54]Prykhodko, *Степом, степом*
[55]Пономаренко, С. *«Степом, степом» українська пісня-реквієм*, Дніпропетровська обласна універсальна наукова бібліотека ім. Первоучителів слов'янських Кирила і Мефодія, 2024
[56]Пономаренко, *«Степом, степом» українська пісня-реквієм*
[57]Пономаренко, *«Степом, степом» українська пісня-реквієм*

song detailing Ukrainian sorrow and resolve in the steppes during WWII has once again become an anthem of resistance and identity. The simple yet powerful lyrics embed the sacrifice of the Ukrainian people in the emblematic land—-the utterance of just the word "steppes" is enough to evoke heavy emotion, solidarity, and spiritual defiance in the refrain of the song.

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A steep rise in popularity can also be observed in Ukrainian folk songs *Гей, Степами*, *Повіяв вітер степовий*, and *Ой у лузі червона калина*—all fueling the war effort and utilizing steppe motifs. The poignant imagery in these classic songs, ingrained in the Ukrainian consciousness and revitalized against current pressures, hints at a timeless ideological relationship with the steppes and exemplifies eco-nationalism. Even Ukraine's 2022 Eurovision entry, the Kalush Orchestra's *Stefania*, subtly calls out the steppes: "Mother Stefanie, the field is blooming, but your hair grays up[59]."

[58] Хор ім. Г. Верьовки, *Степом, степом…*, Youtube Video, Posted by "Astro", April 9, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=coTTPrwbGEM

[59] Eurovision Song Contest, 2022, *Kalush Orchestra-Stefania*, https://eurovision.tv/video/kalush-orchestra-stefania-ukraine-official-music-video-eurovision-2022

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Indeed, the associations between identity and steppe are often visible in artistic spaces. Mykhailo Alekseenko's exhibit, *Peaceful Landscape in a Nonexistent Museum,* part of a 2025 exhibition at the Pinchuk Art Centre, features fragmented walls and flat landscapes[61]. The work illustrates the destruction of Russian imperialism and challenges the Soviet notion of empty, apolitical spaces[62]. Even without the steppe specifically referenced, themes of Ukraine's timeless struggle to defend its land and culture against labels of emptiness are synonymous with the steppe's history. Another work in the exhibition is *Mud Hut* by Anton Saenko[63]. At first the exhibit appears to be a blank white canvas set on an off-white wall. However, after further examination, it is revealed that the backdrop is actually the texture of a Mazanka hut, a traditional Ukrainian steppe dwelling, forming a texture that is "saturated with various

[60] Хор ім. Г. Верьовки, *Степом, степом…*
[61] Alekseenko, M., *Peaceful Landscape in a Nonexistent Museum*, exhibition at Pinchuk Art Centre, Kyiv, 2025
[62] Alekseenko, *Peaceful Landscape in a Nonexistent Museum*
[63] Saenko, A., *Mud Hut*, exhibition at Pinchuk Art Centre, Kyiv, 2025

connotations[64].” Mazanka huts were a quite thorough product of steppe landscape and tradition–constructed from clay and straw (due to lack of timber), kneaded by footfalls of many horses, and plasticized by cow and horse manure[65]. This work once again challenges the notion of emptiness, forcing viewers to reconsider their initial assumptions of an “empty” space and instead grasp the rich sea of connotations visible upon more thoughtful engagement. In these contemporary art pieces, a deep-rooted and almost subconscious connection to the steppes is revealed in the artists’ conception of Ukraine’s current position. This phenomenon is also visible, and perhaps most moving, in the National Library of Ukraine children’s art competition titled “Green Recovery of Ukraine: Children's View[66].” The competition tasked children from all over the country with drawing their vision of the future of Ukraine’s environment—the published works of the100 finalists are rife with images of the steppe, inextricably woven into the fabric of Ukraine:

Polina Sukhova, 17 years. Dnipro Dnipropetrovsk region[67]

[64]Saenko, *Mud Hut*
[65]Eyvseyeva, G.P., *Construction technology of Ukrainian national housing (Prydniprovsk region is as an example)*, Вісник Придніпровської державної академії будівництва та архітектури, no. 3 (216), 2016, p. 69
[66] *Національна бібліотека України для дітей, ПЕРЕМОЖЦІ Всеукраїнського конкурсу дитячого малюнка «ЗЕЛЕНЕ ВІДНОВЛЕННЯ УКРАЇНИ: дитячий погляд», 2024, https://chl.kiev.ua/Default.aspx?id=11278*
[67] *Національна бібліотека України для дітей, ПЕРЕМОЖЦІ Всеукраїнського конкурсу дитячого малюнка «ЗЕЛЕНЕ ВІДНОВЛЕННЯ УКРАЇНИ: дитячий погляд»*

Konstantin Krymov, 14 years. Zaporizhia region[68]

Sofia Kirulyuk,15 years. New Kirovograd region[69]

[68] *Національна бібліотека України для дітей, ПЕРЕМОЖЦІ Всеукраїнського конкурсу дитячого малюнка «ЗЕЛЕНЕ ВІДНОВЛЕННЯ УКРАЇНИ: дитячий погляд»*
[69] *Національна бібліотека України для дітей, ПЕРЕМОЖЦІ Всеукраїнського конкурсу дитячого малюнка «ЗЕЛЕНЕ ВІДНОВЛЕННЯ УКРАЇНИ: дитячий погляд»*

These instances reveal the steppes weighing heavily on Ukrainian consciousness amidst the uncertainty brought by war. In her fascinating essay "I Dream of Seeing the Steppe Again," Darya Tsymbalyuk assembles an anthology of plant stories to help "narrate Ukraine as a living space[70]." Within these stories, she recounts an art exhibit she hosted at a Ukrainian heritage art festival in London in June 2022. In an effort to raise awareness for *Kreidova Flora*, a steppe reserve in the Donetsk region, she compiled artistic renderings of the reserve's plant species, and invited visitors to paint plants on a large blank canvas[71]. People contributed while enthusiastically sharing personal associations with different plant species they recognized, and slowly the canvas began to resemble a blooming steppe:

[72]

Through the process of creating this diverse, symbolic steppe, visitors bonded in their shared dream of one day seeing the steppe again and praying for its survival[73]. Perhaps counterintuitively, it is through their and Tsymbalyk's plant stories that Ukraine is humanized. Following Tsymbalyuk's example, immersing oneself into the steppes and their intricate tendrils

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[70]Tsymbalyuk, D., *I Dream of Seeing the Steppe Again: Plant Stories in the Context of Russia's War on Ukraine*, Narrative Culture: Vol. 10: Iss. 2, Article 6, 2023, p.249
[71]Tsymbalyuk, *I Dream of Seeing the Steppe Again: Plant Stories in the Context of Russia's War on Ukraine*, .257
[72]Tsymbalyuk, *I Dream of Seeing the Steppe Again: Plant Stories in the Context of Russia's War on Ukraine*, 258
[73]Tsymbalyuk, *I Dream of Seeing the Steppe Again: Plant Stories in the Context of Russia's War on Ukraine*, 259

of emotionally-charged history is a profound act of recognition–of the past and present Ukrainian identity.

It is also interesting to note that the steppes have even featured in a curious religious dimension of the war. The years since the invasion have seen a marked resurgence in Contemporary Ukrainian Native Faith movements. Paganism often features in nationalist movements as a means of reaching back to a common transcendent ancestry, which in turn builds collective identity and often includes a militant dimension. This is evident in contemporary Ukrainian Native Faith as it combines Pagan rituals with Cossack forms of military organization, both of which have intrinsic connection to the steppes[74]. As researcher Oksana Smorzhevska argues in her work on the hero-warrior archetype in Ukrainian contemporary Paganism, figures such as Prince Svyatoslav the Brave, the Cossacks, and soldiers of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army are remembered as glorious warriors of the past[75], romanticized into almost mythological figures embodying the sacred duty to defend one's land. Indeed, during the hybrid warfare that followed the 2014 annexation of Crimea, Pagan groups in Ukraine also led the charge, compelled by their religious values to sacrifice their lives fighting[76]. These Native Faith movements aim to rekindle a spiritual connection with the land and incorporate centuries of steppe heritage and rituals into their practice. In Ukraine, pre-Christian religion was concentrated in the steppes[77].

The Grief of Displacement

Finally, the steppes feature in intimate personal accounts by those most impacted by the war. As Darya Tsymbalyuk rightfully points out, it is crucial that such accounts are not left behind as the world processes the events transpiring[78]. Reducing the war to a series of geopolitical turns risks dehumanizing the conflict, failing to remember its many crucial cultural and emotional dimensions. For this reason, accounts such as the following are just as important in unpacking the complicated effects of the war on Ukrainian identity. A telling memento is

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[74]Bałdys, P., Piątek, K., *Society Under Construction - Opportunities and Risks.* University of Bielsko-Biala, 2015, p.66

[75]Smorzevs'ka, O. O. "The Hero-Warrior in the Worldview and Practice of Contemporary Pagans in Ukraine." *Online. Religio.* 31, no. 1, 2023, 17

[76] Grabovska, I., Talko, T.,Vlasova, T., *New religions as the postsecular epiphenomenon of globalisation in the contemporary Ukrainian society*, HTS Theological Studies, 76(1), 2020, p. 2

[77]Shilov, Y., Krasnoholovets, V., *Formation of Ukraine in the context of world civilization*, Published by the Caspian Research Institute, 2014, p.9

[78]Tsymbalyuk, D., *What Does It Mean to Study Environments in Ukraine Now?*, Environment and Society Portal, 2022

found in a letter sent from the front by Petro Garmish, a deputy battalion commander for moral and psychological support in the Armed Forces of Ukraine[79]. His letter ponders the conscious and subconscious mental conditions of a populace under duress. Fascinatingly, towards the beginning of his reflection he references the steppes:

> *Ukrainians have already gone through all of this horror a hundred years ago. Our defeat as a nation, both in having the very short-lived independent Ukrainian nation brutally absorbed by Russian Bolsheviks who then proceeded to execute millions and millions of Ukrainians in their pursuit of imperial control. History repeats itself again. I read, it seems, in Hudymenko, that the Wild Steppes of Ukraine are being recreated before us again: we watch as cities in Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, Mariupol, Mykolaiv, Donetsk and Luhansk regions are being raised to the ground. The Russians are erasing everything and everyone to re-create the Wild Steppe – the boundless empty fields as the territory of their war, where we Ukrainians can constantly experience their threat. Famed ancient Velykyi Luh of Ukraine or the Great Meadow, unlived and unoccupied, appeared again after the Russian destruction of the Kakhovskaya Dam in Southern Ukraine. Our history appears before us. Sometimes I feel as if I live in a nightmare, and it seems that I need to do something, make some effort so I can find some way to get out of it. This all feels like some insane lesson, a class for which I somehow signed up but which I want no part of. None of us Ukrainians wished it*[80].

For Garmish, the steppe represents an intrinsic part of Ukraine, ancient and renowned, that Russia has appropriated as a channel of erasure. He with anguish recalls the Russian imperial perspective of an empty steppe, a "wild" frontier ripe for conquest, and maligns the repetition of this historic affront on the Ukrainian people.

A final touching example comes in the words of Mykola and Maryna, a couple from Askania Nova (a settlement of 3,500 people located in the famous steppe reserve of the same name)[81]. Born and raised in the steppes, the invaluable beauty of this landscape and despair at its

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[79] Garmish, P. *A Letter from the Front: A Message from a Psychoanalyst Defending Ukraine from the Russian Invasion*. 2024, Psychoanalytic Inquiry 45 (4): 393–403

[80] Garmish,*A Letter from the Front: A Message from a Psychoanalyst Defending Ukraine from the Russian Invasion*, 394

[81] Unicef, *Voices of Askania: Steppe Lost*, Unicef, 2024

destruction rings through their voices in a 2024 interview. Maryna says, “When I get the opportunity to go back, I will go to that hill where we used to watch the sunrise and the stars. I’ll take the Ukrainian flag with me, sit there and look out into the steppe. I just miss it so much. I would never have thought that I would miss the steppe[82].” Mykola echoes how profoundly the environment shapes individuals, and how growing up in the steppes taught him to value all life[83]. Their article touches on the concept of solastalgia– a feeling of longing, sadness or anxiety caused by changes in the natural environment[84]. For Mykola and Maryna, ecocide in the steppes robs them of the dearest cornerstone of their lives. When the Kakhovka Dam was destroyed, Mykola lamented the loss of not only the bridge to the left bank of the Dnipro, but also a bridge to his childhood[85]. Hence, the steppe forms an intimate part of identity, values, and perspectives–Mykola even states it is part of his personality[86]. Mykola and Maryna’s story is echoed in those of thousands of Ukrianians who call the steppes home and evidences their deep immaterial significance.

Conclusion

Russia’s 2022 Invasion of Ukraine has introduced a grave new threat to the Ukrainian steppe and therefore national identity more broadly. The steppes’ location on the eastern borders of Ukraine have made them the site of some of the war’s most brutal destruction, and a slew of resulting harm, both direct and indirect, has led to ecocide in the steppes. As the condition of the steppes deteriorates and their mere existence is increasingly threatened, they have also catalyzed various forms of resistance in Ukraine. For one, the national parks that preserve and maintain the steppes have taken an impressive stand against occupation, with workers risking their lives to continue their crucial conservation work. Askania Nova provides the most ardent example of these efforts, as for a long time it stood as the sole Ukrainian administration within the occupied Kherson territory and became a symbolic beacon of national resistance. On the more ideological side, the steppes have featured in cultural currents that counter Russian narratives, and are prominently visible in the art, music, and and religious movements that give voice to Ukrainian resistance and express national identity. This is visible in the folk songs that have emerged as

[82] Unicef, *Voices of Askania: Steppe Lost*
[83] Unicef, *Voices of Askania: Steppe Lost*
[84] Unicef, *Voices of Askania: Steppe Lost*
[85] Unicef, *Voices of Askania: Steppe Lost*
[86] Unicef, *Voices of Askania: Steppe Lost*

patriotic anthems to lend morale to the war effort, in contemporary exhibitions that map elements of the present Ukrainian condition, and in the touching accounts of civilians displaced by the war who keep the steppe close in mind and heart. This chapter serves to thread together just some of these various strands of environmentally-driven resistance, revealing how the intrinsic value of the steppes as a sacred national landscape is quite visible in this current existential moment. As Ukraine rises to defend its sovereign identity and statehood, the ubiquitous presence of the steppes in this movement confirms their beyond-physical value as a cornerstone of national heritage and culture. From this perspective, it is evident that the war's current destruction of the steppes is in fact a deeply human loss– *the steppes are not merely land, but cultural and existential lifelines*.

Synthesis and Conclusion

The previous chapters have outlined the formative role Ukraine's southeastern steppe landscape has played in developing core aspects of Ukraine's national identity. An ancient landscape crucial to the earliest European settlements and a dynamic migration corridor whose impacts rippled throughout the whole continent, the significance of this unique biome to the disciplines of both human and natural history is paramount. Within this intricate array of developments, the story of Ukraine demonstrates a unique relationship with the steppes, one that contrasts many of the land-society relationships of cultures in its surrounding. Situated at the periphery of both Russia and Europe, and subject to the timeless push-and-pull factors of simultaneous foreign appetite and imperial erasure, Ukraine defiantly venerated the steppes as a sacred landscape and unifying symbol of cultural identity. For this reason, observing Ukrainian identity formation within the context of the steppes is extremely valuable, giving insight into not only events of the past, but also the country's precarious social and political climate today– and even into ideological drivers of the present global catastrophic environmental paradigm. Based on this understanding, the study set out to answer the following research question:

What meaning have the steppes held in Ukrainian collective imagination, and how does this historic relationship inform sovereign national identity in the present?

Such an inquiry requires a complex diachronic analysis of Ukrainian identity and collective imagination in the past and present. The objective of the study was to illustrate this meaningfully and accessibly, and to do so it examines the role of the steppes in Ukrainian identity from three distinct temporal and ideological contexts. It begins by tracing the formative role of the steppes in the emergence of Ukrainian culture, discussing key developments such as the impact of pre-Ukrainian nomadic tribes, Kyivan Rus, and the rise of the Cossacks. The analysis avoids comprehensive summaries, instead employing a thematic approach to elicit how aspects of these occurrences were inherently bound to the steppes and cemented elements of the steppe geography or lifestyle into collective memory that would permeate generations. The second chapter of the study shifts to examine the role of the steppes as a setting and ubiquitous symbol of Ukrainian resistance when external forces mobilized to erase the prospect of an

independent Ukraine. To help illustrate the subsequent surge of patriotic dissent, both at the physical and ideological level, the study employs comparative analysis of the steppes in Ukrainian versus external cultural outlets. The results reveal an authentic, critical understanding and appreciation of the steppes, celebrated as a tenet of Ukrainian identity–a sacred landscape *despite* the ceaseless attempts of others to commodify and transform it. Finally, the third chapter of the study jumps into the present, analyzing how various threads of Ukrainian steppe-derived identity are resurfacing in the current war. The disastrous status of the steppes following Russia's war, and the remarkable love for the steppes displayed by Ukrainians in such grim circumstances, aptly illustrates the country's long-standing cycles of oppression.

While the analysis of this study was presented chronologically, it is important to emphasize that the thematic findings overlap and feed into each other. The first chapter establishes how Ukrainian territory in the "prehistory period" saw a crucial divergence between the steppe hinterlands and the Greek coastal cities. This divide contributed to an ongoing, perpetual characterization of the steppes as barbaric and ruthless, despite novel discoveries evidencing that steppe peoples were in fact peaceful and innovative. This othering of course carried through to the long nineteenth century, when imperial powers sought to "conquer the steppes" and erase veneration of this landscape as it reflected a perspective unique to Ukrainian heritage. The religious practices of the Scythians, Gökturks, and numerous other steppe civilizations in the ancient period imbued a spiritual dimension to the steppe landscape, which endured in much later aspects of Ukrainian Orthodoxy and folk liturgy. The "warrior spirit" of the steppes, agrarian systems, military strategies, and trade culture exemplify other legacies of ancient steppe nomads that carried lasting influence. The emergence of the Cossack Sich as a dominant force in Ukrainian history culminated centuries of adaptation and resistance within the borderlands of the steppes and became a hallmark of Ukrainian independence movements. Peasant resistance in the steppes exemplified eco-nationalism in the Imperial and Soviet eras, and the symbolic value of steppe imagery as a manifestation of distinct Ukrainian nationality compounded resistance at the ideological level. And at present, the existential threat to the steppes posed by the Russia Ukraine War, met with the uptake of the steppes as a driver of resistance efforts, reflects extensive political, ideological, and environmental tensions that have long haunted Ukraine.

In summary, the key takeaways of the study are as follows:

- ➢ The steppes played a formative role in the development of Ukrainian culture and identity, leading them to become an iconic landscape of national mythology.
- ➢ Given Ukrainian's distinctive relationship with the steppes, contrasting that of rival powers, the steppes acquired political significance and became a beacon of independent identity.
- ➢ The steppes' pressing relevance in the current war as both a victim of imperialism and symbol of hope resurfaces historic cycles of oppression and resistance.
- ➢ The immeasurably resonant value of the steppes in Ukrainian consciousness renders their current destruction a deeply human tragedy.
- ➢ Mainstream discourse and research into environmental impacts of war often fail to properly address the cultural implications of ecocide, which is the effect of a wider, more systemic fallacy of environmental commodification.
- ➢ Interdisciplinary research into cultural aspects of the steppes is relevant immediately to understand the true impact of environmental warfare, and more broadly to uncover land ethics alternative to violent extractivism

This study has contributed to various fields adjacent to the Environmental Humanities by identifying commonly overlooked links between natural geography, culture, identity-formation, ecology, and politics. Dominant discourse on the environmental toll of the Russia Ukraine War retains a predominantly ecological perspective, often avoiding historical ideological drivers of present environmental relations, as well as sociological and anthropological impacts of ecological change. It is rare for example to find analysis on how scientific discoveries impelled literary movements as a parallel avenue of national resistance. And yet, a thorough understanding of the present critical moment in Ukraine requires such interdisciplinary exploration. The links between environment and culture are as complex as the innumerable ways human bodies interact with the environment. Critical understanding of this requires complete deconstruction of the environment as an external entity somehow removed from humanity, and instead understood as intricate and all-pervasive– significant at a physical, mental, and spiritual level. In order to grapple with this, the study employs a theoretical framework based on critical environmental and anthropological theories. It draws from deep ecology and the noosphere

concept to recognize the convergence of nature and culture, and more specifically the synergetic relationship between the steppes and Ukrainian national consciousness. Complementing this understanding are theories underpinning nationalism and memory studies, helping explain the ideological role of the steppes in collective identity construction and national building.

At its core, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse about the unseen environmental impacts of the Russia Ukraine War, including how environmental aspects of the conflict are crucially shaping and reinforcing power relations, identity politics, and intrinsic elements of Ukrainian livelihood. Environmental loss is too often an afterthought, viewed as collateral damage of war to be continually overlooked and taken for granted. This perception is problematic, as the environment is not simply a collection of natural resources, but rather a dynamic source of pain, devotion, hope, courage, identity, and values that are extremely relevant to human relations and as such, European politics. More broadly, this study challenges the dominant notion that crimes against the environment are separate from crimes against humanity, in that environmental crimes solely pertain to the non-human. This fallacy is reflected in the way environmental war crimes remain a legal gray area of international law and are usually treated with subordinate importance, separate from humanitarian law. Given the scale of ecological damage that modern warfare can incur, especially in the context of climate change and the current paradigm of capital industrial environmental catastrophe, this glaring issue requires critical reevaluation.

Though the research question was thoroughly explored, this study recognizes several limitations. For one, the notion of identity, and with it national imagination, collective memory, and shared consciousness, are intangible concepts prone to subjective interpretation. As such, measuring and evidencing them is an imperfect science, inherently speculative and carrying some bias based on the researcher's positionality. Though this ambiguity can also be read as a strength–particularly in that it can be highly generative and produce new ideas through inductive reasoning–quantifying the findings can be difficult due to the abstract nature of the phenomena being investigated. Along with this, the fluidity of the aforementioned principles makes the potential scope of such an investigation quite wide (a great number of sources could be viewed as indicators of identity), and the study was forced to narrow its literature significantly. Though effort was made to gather the most significant and directly relevant evidence, the study relied primarily on historical narratives, literature, artworks, song lyrics, and religious writing; there is

of course an array of interesting and relevant material beyond these categories that would make a valuable research subject. A further limitation lies in the fact that the events of the Russia Ukraine War are unfolding at the time of this writing, and the analysis is occurring in real-time. While this makes the discussion urgently relevant, it also prevents a "full picture" perspective of the war and its relevant impacts on environment and identity, as plenty of them are yet to be seen. Finally, the study recognizes that the majority of the research took place outside of Ukraine and from an English language perspective. While efforts were made to center Ukrainian voices and translate Ukrainian texts, the study is inherently situated outside of the events and culture being studied.

The execution of this project also brought attention to several potential areas of further study. As previously mentioned, the omission of other "identity indicators" linking the steppes to national identity leaves an incomplete picture. Studies into such further indicators, or examples beyond the ones selected, would make a valuable contribution to discourse on Ukrainian identity and the disciplines of Environmental and Memory Studies. The study also briefly touched on the treatment of ecocide by international law, which is a topic urgently requiring further study. Analysis into how public international law treats ecocide, and how to reform environmental law to converge with humanitarian law (based on recognition of ecocide as a deeply human loss) would be extremely valuable. Finally, while not discussed in the content of the study, background research revealed a correlation between environmental movements and anti-war sentiment in Russia, particularly among indigenous communities. The examination of transnational patterns linking environmental stewardship and resistance to conflict, particularly within the same geopolitical context, would offer a fascinating contribution to discourse on ecopolitics and alternative land ethics in modern society.

In closing, this study affirms that the Ukrainian steppe holds complex meaning far beyond just a geographic expanse– it is a cultural anchor, a sacred landscape, and a persistent source of resistance against imperial domination and environmental devastation. By tracing its influence across time, this study uncovers integral fragments of Ukrainian national identity, deeply interwoven with land, memory, and shared imagination. In a world grappling with climate catastrophe, cultural erasure, and geopolitical instability, the story of Ukraine's steppes sounds an urgent warning: the landscapes humans inhabit are not passive backdrops to history, but active agents in shaping human experience and consciousness. Understanding the steppes in this light

not only exposes the true cost of the current war's ecocide, but glimpses the potential of a more sustainable land ethic and harmonious interspecies condition.

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