OCCUPIED IDENTITY:

The Russification and the Reclamation of Ukrainian Personal Names

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Vienna, 10 Jun 2025 Ani Saakyan

Abstract

This study examines the phenomenon of Russification of Ukrainian personal names under the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, and explores how this process is remembered, interpreted, and challenged by contemporary Ukrainians. Situated at the intersection of the sociology of names, (post-)memory studies, and identity studies, the research is structured around these questions: (1) What were the common pathways leading to the Russification of personal names of Ukrainians? (2) How is the knowledge about these changes transmitted, remembered, and discussed within families? What intergenerational differences emerge in how these changes are perceived, and how do they affect personal and collective identities? (3) What motivates individuals today to reclaim their Ukrainian personal names, and what social, psychological, or bureaucratic barriers complicate or prevent this process? Between the lines, it investigates the notions of agency vs. structure, and resistance.

The study draws on 30 in-depth interviews with Ukrainians who shared stories of Russification of personal names in their families. The findings reveal that for many, personal names function as deeply symbolic markers of identity and memory, the legacy of Russification evokes different emotional responses across generations, and the act of reclaiming Ukrainian names often becomes an emotionally charged expression of cultural resistance, self-determination, and the effort to restore cultural continuity disrupted by imperial violence. At the same time, many encounter significant mental and bureaucratic barriers along the way.

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Introduction

For generations, people have lived on this land – here they loved, here they died. ... And here am I – living on my land, carrying my name, and remembering the names of those who came before me.

Mariia R., 25

Before anything else, I need to say where I'm writing from – not just geographically, but emotionally and historically, as it is a mental space, repeatedly wounded by genocides, wars and the loss of language. Before I ever knew the word "Russification," I had already seen what it does – in the names of my family members and people around, in the language I spoke at school, in the silence surrounding certain histories. So this work is not just about administrative policy and linguistic shifts, it is about how people live with their consequences.

Ethnically, I am largely a Ukrainian myself, even though my own personal name reflects the Armenian part of my heritage, and I often catch myself thinking that I wouldn't have existed if my Ukrainian great-grandmother didn't manage to survive as a child during Holodomor, an artificial famine created by the Soviet authorities in Ukraine in 1932-33. Now I find myself having to spend my youth in another genocide caused by the Russian invasion into Ukraine.

I see the cycles of Russian occupation and the systemic erasure of the non-Russian identities repeating in real time. I see how important the language is in a war of cultures. Even though I've been raised in a prevailingly Russian-speaking environment, both me and my close circle have switched to Ukrainian in public as well as in private – it is our mental shield from the Russian narrative and the

invasion of their mental space into ours. Abroad, I sometimes get addressed by people from other former Soviet republics (oftentimes they also bear Russified personal names) in Russian language, assuming that "we all know it" – all I can reply is "I don't speak our shared colonizer's language, not anymore". I see how the diversity of different cultures and languages has been artificially reduced in so many places through the homogenizing policy of Russification, and it hurts to observe how so many peoples have been robbed of their right to self-identification.

Several personal names in my family have also been affected by the Russification, including my Armenian great-grandfather, who, after fleeing from the genocide of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire to the USSR, had to change his given and patronymic names from Suren Poghosi to Sergey Pavlovich. Later in life, he became a renowned academic, and everywhere outside our family, he is now remembered by this Russian name. My family name – Sahakyan in Armenian, has lost two letters due to being transliterated first to Russian, and then to Ukrainian; had it been transliterated directly into Ukrainian, it would have sounded much closer to the original. Since the cases of Russification of personal names in my family are not of Ukrainian origin, they do not fall into the scope of research; and yet, they only prove how ubiquitous the phenomenon has been.

All of this hurts deeply. I believe people should have the right for self-determination, and however heterogeneous the population would not be, directing the state policy at homogenization at the expense of the cultural diversity is never the right solution. Of course, I am biased by this pain, so to keep the text scholarly, I have been peeling off the layers of emotions surrounding the topic of study for over a year – and I am deeply thankful to both of my supervisors, Prem Kumar Rajaram and Balázs Trencsényi, as well as many people from the Invisible University for Ukraine and CEU community, for

reviewing my texts and helping me sharpen my points. But after all, I can't pretend to have fully detached from the emotional weight of this topic – especially after speaking to so many people who carry the pain of having their names altered. Their voices deserve space.

Now, coming to the topic. This study discusses the Russification of personal names, so it's important to define what these are:

Personal names, whenever mentioned in the text, shall include given *and/or* patronymic *and/or* family names of people, for the sake of brevity. In linguistics, they are also called anthroponyms.

Russification is a historical concept by which scholars usually refer to a complex set of official policies and informal practices of bureaucrats and institutions within the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, foremost regarding language and culture. These policies were intended to strengthen administrative cohesion, facilitate centralized governance, and promote a unified state identity across the diverse populations of the state (see, for example, Weeks, 2010). The mechanisms of Russification policies could be both *restrictive* and *incentivizing*. On the one hand, they could impose limits or outright bans on the use of non-Russian languages in the public sphere, including administration, education, publishing, the arts, public events etc. On the other hand, they promoted the *perceived prestige and universality* of the Russian language, and fueled the *cultural inferiority complex* regarding the non-Russian languages and cultures, depicting them as 'rural', or not as 'literary', 'universal', etc. as Russian. This made it advantageous for individuals of non-Russian origin to switch to Russian language in the public life, and acquire a 'Russian' identity – in particular, through making their names 'sound more Russian'. See more in section 1.2.

The questions guiding the research are the following:

(1) What were the common pathways leading to the Russification of personal names of Ukrainians?

Or *How did it happen?*

(2) How is the knowledge about the Russification of personal names transmitted, remembered, and discussed within families in Ukraine? What intergenerational differences emerge in how these changes are perceived, and how do they affect personal and collective identities?

Or *How is it remembered?*

(3) What motivates individuals to reclaim their Ukrainian personal names nowadays, and what social, psychological, or bureaucratic factors discourage or prevent them from doing so?

Or *How is it challenged and changed?*

The topic of the Russification of personal names remains insufficiently researched in the whole post-Soviet space. The existing literature focuses much more on the topographic Russification and the contemporary movements advocating for the de-Russification of the names of places; much less frequently does it come to the alterations in the names of people. This gap in the literature has informed the methodological approach of this study, which relies primarily on the semi-structured oral history interviews, which engage with the *memory* of individuals that have a *first-hand experience* of Russification (i.e. those whose personal names were Russified), as well as the *post-memory* of those with a *second-hand experience* (who inherited a Russified personal name or are aware of such cases in their family history).

Hirsch (1992) defined post-memory as "that of the child of the survivor whose life is dominated by memories of what preceded his/her birth ... distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection" (p. 8). Her reading of it is connected to the survivors of the Holocaust and their successors, which is a context with its own peculiarities, but it can help to explain some aspects of how the contemporary generation of Ukrainians sees its mostly second-hand experience of the Russification of names. The peculiarity of this case, however, is that the collective trauma associated with imperial violence was reactivated with Russia's invasion into Ukraine, and suddenly, the Russified names have taken on more importance, as a part of what is seen to constitute one's national identity.

Oral history as a method has been described by Field (2007). Semi-structured oral history interviews allow for the flexibility in capturing both factual details and subjective interpretations. Individuals can recount inherited narratives, as well as provide the documents preserved in the private family archives, which enables these stories to be collected. This, however, makes the research focus on the microhistory rather than macrohistory, tracing the individual paths and stories to talk about broader historical issues. For a more generalizable picture, more data needs to be collected, however, even in the conducted interviews, patterns can already be seen. Frequently, these interviews are the only way to revive certain cases of the Russification of personal names, especially if the change occurred many decades ago and the official records are not to be found and accessed for whatever reason.

The interviews were guided by a core set of questions (see full guide in Appendix 1), which were organized around the following thematic clusters, each linked to the research questions outlined earlier:

Circumstances of name change: Participants were asked to identify who in their family had a Russified name, what the original and changed forms were, when the change occurred, and whether documentary evidence survives. These questions addressed RQ1 by tracing the concrete paths and mechanisms of Russification.

Causes and motivations: Questions explored whether name changes were initiated voluntarily, under societal or economic pressure, due to bureaucratic error, or under perceived or actual coercion. This question in particular investigated agency vs. structure. It also addressed RQ1 and provided insight into the broader political and social rationalities behind such decisions.

Persistence of the original name in use: Participants reflected on whether the original name continued to be used in informal or private contexts. This theme opened a space for discussing the tension between imposed identity and personal or familial resistance.

Impact on daily life: To address RQ2, participants were asked how Russified names shaped experiences in education, employment, everyday communication etc. – providing material on how naming affected access, perception, and belonging.

Personal discovery and historical (re)interpretation: These questions were addressed to those with a second-hand experience of Russification, and explored when and how they became aware of the name change, to trace whether this knowledge is consistently transmitted in the families. These questions also aimed to trace how the participants' perception of Russification evolved, particularly in relation to key political events, e.g. after 1991 (Declaration of Independence of Ukraine), 2004-2005 (The Orange Revolution), 2013-2014 (The Revolution of Dignity / Russian invasion into the

Crimean Peninsula and the east of Ukraine), 2022 (Russian full-scale invasion into Ukraine). This cluster illuminated the temporal dynamics of (post-)memory and contributed to RQ2.

Family discourse and intergenerational attitudes: Participants were asked to discuss whether name changes were openly talked about within the family, and how attitudes varied across generations. This helped assess the intergenerational patterns of memory, silence, and identity negotiation, and contributed to RQ2 as well.

Reclamation and resistance: In relation to RQ3, participants were asked about attempts to reclaim original names, the motivations behind these efforts, and the practical (namely, bureaucratic) or psychological barriers encountered.

Comparable cases in social networks: Participants were also invited to share whether they knew others with similar experiences and whether this topic is discussed in their broader social circles, helping contextualize individual stories within wider cultural patterns.

Identity and belonging: Finally, all interviews included a reflection on how name changes or reclamations affected participants' sense of connection to family, culture, nation etc., addressing RQ2 and RQ3 at the level of symbolic and affective identification.

While this method allowed for rich and layered narratives, it also came with some limitations. The fact that many participants had only second-hand knowledge introduced the questions of memory accuracy and interpretive framing. Additionally, the interviewees were mostly self-selected into the study: the recruitment happened via posts on my personal pages in social media (Facebook and Instagram), as well as public groups on Facebook dedicated to genealogy in Ukraine, and Ukrainian

student group chats on Telegram, which gathered at least 10 thousand views, over 110 comments and over 60 personal messages, all telling different stories of the Russification of personal names (due to the limited access to the analytical data given by these platforms, the actual number may be even higher). This approach enabled a form of network-based sampling that offered greater diversity than traditional snowball sampling typically allows, as reflected in the broad geographic distribution, wide age range (though inclining a bit more towards the younger generation), and varied perspectives of the participants (see list of participants in Appendix 2). Personal details of the participants were used with permission and cited in the format: Name, Age. The interviews captured not only explicit reflections, but also moments of ambivalence, silence, and contradiction, all of which are analytically valuable when working with post-memory and contested historical narratives. Still, given the self-selective nature of participation, there may be a bias toward individuals who are more critically engaged with their family history or more willing to reflect on questions of national identity.

Out of the described pool, 30 individuals were invited for in-depth interviews using the semi-structured guide, with some participants recounting multiple relevant cases within their family histories. The remaining responses, while not formally interviewed, were used to contextualize and enrich the empirical material, providing additional detail and breadth to the overall findings.

Given the lack of consistent research on this topic during the Soviet period, when such inquiry would have required implicit or explicit criticism of official policies, oral history interviews with contemporary generations of Ukrainians have become one of the few remaining means of accessing information about the Russification of personal names. These interviews reveal not only the linguistic transformations, but also into the social, emotional, and intergenerational impacts of these changes.

The broader aim of this research is to help address the artificially constructed gap in knowledge, by documenting personal and intergenerational experiences that were long excluded from public discourse and academic inquiry.

One factor that makes this research particularly relevant to the contemporary Ukrainian context is the ongoing effort to assert the agency and distinct identity of Ukrainians, both domestically and on the international stage, after it has been blotted out for centuries. In this process, personal names also gain importance, as they function as powerful markers of identity, influencing how nationality[1], ethnicity, and cultural belonging are perceived. When we encounter someone, we frequently form initial assumptions about their background based solely on their name – and sometimes walk away without verifying them with the person. If it doesn't align with the nationality a person identifies with, it can prompt seemingly 'harmless' jokes, skepticism, or even subtle social exclusion and 'cancelling'. Someone who identifies as Ukrainian but has a clearly Russified personal name may be mistaken for being Russian. In Ukraine, this can result in suspicion towards the person's reliability (especially since the Russian Federal Security Service and other special services invest a lot of resources into curated spy networks in Ukraine, aimed at destabilizing state and society), questioning their right to belong to the imagined national community, to represent it, or to voice opinions on its internal matters. Abroad, it may lead to confusion and misrepresentation, conflating Ukrainian and Russian identities, where similar-sounding names are taken as evidence that the peoples are essentially

[1] While I am aware of the critiques associated with methodological nationalism – that is, the tendency to treat the nation-state as the natural unit of analysis in social sciences – I use the category of nation here intentionally. In contemporary Ukrainian society, national identity remains a highly salient and politically charged category, shaping both personal self-understandings and collective imaginaries. Thus, I find it necessary and appropriate to engage with the concept on its own terms in this context.

the same, obscuring real historical, political, and cultural differences, as well as the reasons for which these names came to look similar.

This rhetoric can also be politically instrumentalized by the Russian Federation to justify aggression and sustain imperial ambitions. After all, what are Ukrainian people, if even their names sound Russian? Of course, this is ultimately a question of appearance rather than essence – what truly matters is a person's beliefs and sense of belonging, not the name they carry. Yet for the Russian state's strategy of global positioning, as is often the case with authoritarian regimes, appearing a certain way takes precedence over being. And if the surface suggests Ukrainians are already "Russian," it becomes easier to deny their distinctiveness and sovereignty altogether.

Finally, there is one more point of significance of such research: the Russification of personal names of Ukrainians continues even now in the Russian-occupied territories. Due to the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war, many Ukrainian children are being abducted and deported from the territorries occupied by the Russian Armed Forces into the Russian Federation. In July 2023, Grigoriy Karasin, the Chairman of the Federation Council Committee on International Affairs of the Russian Federation, announced that 700 thousand Ukrainian children, "fleeing bombings and shelling from conflict areas in Ukraine, ... found refuge with us" (de facto they were deported, likely without consent, under the premise of physical danger – the danger coming from Russian military aggression towards Ukraine) since 2014 (Espreso TV, 2023). At the same time, Dmytro Lubinets, the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine has been continuously claiming that there is a high risk of deportation for another 1.5 million children from the temporarily occupied territories (Albul, 2024). Many of these children get illegally adopted by Russian families, have to be

"reeducated" to "develop a Russian identity" and "erase their Ukrainian past"; and their personal names often get changed, too, which makes it much virtually impossible to trace the children down and enable their return to their original families (Lambrecht, 2024).

In 2022, a group of intellectuals and child psychiatrists, including Bernard Golse and the anthropologist Véronique Nahoum-Grappe, published an open letter on Le Monde claiming that "[d]eporting Ukrainian children and "Russifying" them is jeopardizing the future of Ukraine", and a part of Vladimir Putin's project "to erase the Ukrainian identity and nation" (Le Monde, 2022). In 2023, Pre-Trial Chamber II of the International Criminal Court issued warrants of arrest for Vladimir Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova (Commissioner for Children's Rights in the Office of the President of the Russian Federation), as allegedly responsible for the war crime of unlawful deportation of population (International Criminal Court, 2023).

Now it remains virtually impossible to get in touch with these children and gather data about their personal name change, unless they are returned to Ukraine; but highlighting the historical patterns being repeated now could possibly inform the efforts to prevent future repetitions from happening.

Chapter 1. Conceptual and Historical Foundations

Russification of names concerned both the names of places (toponyms) and of people (anthroponyms). While the former can affect the individuals only partially, or not affect them at all, the names of people are a *highly personal* matter. Governing the names can grant greater power over the individuals: since a personal name is often the first marker of identity used in both formal and informal interactions, shaping how a person is recognized, categorized, and remembered by others makes it a deeply embedded site of symbolic control. This chapter discusses the power of naming and renaming practices (in the text collectively referred to as (re)naming), and overviews the Russification policy as one of such practices.

1.1. (Re)Naming and its Symbolic Power: Theoretical Framework

Let us start with considering some of the arguments about the power of names and (re)naming. A personal name is commonly the first thing a person presents themselves with. It is also the basic common signifier which other people have to mention in a conversation or a text, denoting that they want to refer to a particular person. As Finch (2008) aptly puts it:

> Personal names are a core marker of the individual.... I must provide my name – Janet Finch – in order to be able to transact even the most mundane of everyday tasks. My name has two dimensions. It marks me as a unique individual, and it also gives some indication of my location in the various social worlds which I inhabit – it encapsulates my *legal persona* as a British citizen, it reveals my *gender* and probably my *ethnicity*, it documents something of my *family connections* and, in my case, if I add my title 'professor' it states my *occupation* (p. 709, my emphases).

Given this, a personal name, from the beginning of the life, is a basic right of a human. This has been reflected in the Article 8 of The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child:

> 1. States Parties undertake to respect the right of the child to preserve his or her identity, including nationality, name and family relations as recognized by law without unlawful interference.
> 2. Where a child is illegally deprived of some or all of the elements of his or her identity, States Parties shall provide appropriate assistance and protection, with a view to re-establishing speedily his or her identity (The United Nations, 1989).

As Herring (2013) notes, such a legal notice exists to prevent child abuse, abduction and trafficking, child labor etc., since a child that does not have a personal name, or has undergone an involuntary name change, is harder to be traced and identified both by the state and non-state actors (p. 311).[2]

The very fact that people *have* personal names, through which the latter obtain property-like characteristics, creates the potential for them not only to be given, but also to be shared, taken away, altered, appropriated etc. Numerous authors, including Valentine (1998), Benson (2006), Vom Bruck and Bodenhorn (2006), Finch (2008), and Herring (2013), agree on this. Benson, for instance, argues:

> [N]ames are never simply *our own*: they are conferred on us, and demand *recognition by others* to operate as names at all. As such, they are constituted within and are ratified by the symbolic order, the order of power and its inscriptions. ... We are named by others and, in many naming systems, for others: in a critical sense, then, names belong as much, if not more, to the givers of names as to those that bear them. In many contexts, personal naming practices not only reflect and constitute relationships among the living but also act as bridges between past and future, *linking the living and the dead* (2006, pp. 179-180; my emphases).

[2] This once again highlights the risks posed by the Russification of personal names of Ukrainian children, who are deported from the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine, as stated in the Introduction.

As seen from this statement, personal names have quite a relational nature, being dependent from the very birth not on the choice of the person to call themselves in a certain way, but on the choice of others: parents or other caregivers – to give the name, and other people who the person interacts with – to use this particular given name when referring to the person, not distort it or substitute it for another one, which would be easier for them to pronounce. In some legislations, a person can change their name to the one of their preference, but mostly only once they reach the age of legal capacity.

The above quote opens up a few more paths for discussion. Firstly, as well noted at the end of the provided excerpt, naming issues do not concern just the living people. A personal name, especially, a family name, is also a way to link people to their familial and social histories, and it often indicates their ethnic roots. Apart from that, it is a way of *remembering* the person after they pass away. Personal name is usually one of the few details about the individual that are put on the tombstone. And if there is no name to be identified (e.g. when the grave is collective, or just nameless, which often happens during wars, genocides, natural disasters and other atrocious events, and is also quite likely to happen in a colonial setting), the memory about the person has fewer chances to survive for long.

The second aspect connects the ideas above to the notion of *personal name change*. Such changes, be it a marital change of a family name, an adjustment done by a colonial administration or by the name bearer themselves for the name to 'sound more English/French/Dutch/Russian etc.', or any other sort of alteration, creates a *rupture*, since the name is no longer passed on in its original form. The personal name that does get passed on thus carries symbolic power, as it determines the personal names of the successors. This, in turn, creates the potential for the following generations to grow up deprived

of the possibility to have knowledge about their roots, unless someone in the family makes the effort to collect and pass on a private family archive, or at least to tell the family history orally. Yet this is often not done: earlier generations frequently remain silent and avoid speaking about painful or politically sensitive pasts, shaped by fear, trauma, or a belief that such details are irrelevant for the following generations; and for the latter, the realization that they should talk to their relatives to find out more sometimes arrives too late. When those who held the knowledge pass away, the opportunity to reconstruct certain elements of the family's history is lost.[3]

Norbert Elias (2001) describes first names being the signifiers of a person's "I-identity", a "symbol of his or her uniqueness and an answer to the question who that person is in his own eyes" and "in the eyes of others" (p. 184). The surname, then, denotes the "we-identity", the collective and social part of one's identification, which shows "that each individual person emerges from a group of other people whose names he bears in combination with the individualizing forename" (2001, p. 184). In the following chapters, the effects of the Russification of personal names on the identity will be discussed extensively.

But what comes to be the foundation for the particular schemas of how personal names are changed? Personal names are a component of language, so they shall be viewed in the larger framework of *language policy*. As Walkowiak (2016) explains, language policy lies at a tripartite intersection with the language practice (what the language users actually do) and language ideology (what they think should be done). The policy is the expression of this ideology in the official legislation. She reflects on this further:

[3] This dynamic has been observed in the case of Russified Ukrainian personal names, too; see discussion in Chapter 3.

> Language ideology refers to the *relative value* that people attach to a particular language as opposed to other languages. It is about beliefs and language myths. It is also about which language is considered to be more dignified, cultured, better suited to be taught and/or used as medium of instruction at school, or chosen as a state language. It is even about the gut feeling as to whether a language is really a language in its own right at all, or just 'the way we speak' and thus not worthy of codification or use in the media (p. 198).

As will be demonstrated, much of the broader process of Russification, as a shift to Russian in the public sphere, and especially in the domain of personal names, was rooted in the belief that Russian was a more 'dignified' and 'appropriate' language, offering greater social prestige and economic opportunity in contrast to other languages of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, particularly Ukrainian. This internalized hierarchy of languages gave rise to two interrelated phenomena discussed in Chapter 2, which might need additional introduction here. First, what may appear as voluntary assimilation, such as modifying one's name to sound more Russian, often functioned as *strategic or conformity-driven self-assimilation*. Following Antonio Gramsci's (1929/1971) theory of cultural hegemony, these decisions were shaped not by free choice, but by the pervasive and normalized dominance of Russian as the cultural standard, making assimilation appear both desirable and necessary for survival, acceptance, or social mobility.

Secondly, this dynamic also produced *internalized cultural inferiority complex* – a psychological and social condition in which individuals come to devalue their own cultural or linguistic background in comparison to the dominant one. In such cases, Ukrainian names, language, and identity markers were not only suppressed externally, but came to be viewed by their bearers as less

refined, less modern, or even shameful or dangerous, thus reinforcing assimilationist behavior from within.

1.2. A Historical Overview of Russification Policy in Ukraine in the Russian Empire and the USSR

The Russification policy started back in the Russian Empire, gaining systematicity around the 18th century. Edward C. Thaden (2016) classified the Russification of that time into three forms: unplanned (done "naturally ... as a result of serving in the army or bureacracy, marrying Russians, or simply by residing and working where Russian was spoken"), administrative ("a more deliberate and conscious policy", launched with Catherine II coming to power, and aimed at bringing Russian institutions, laws, bureaucracy, and teaching Russian language at schools to the "borderlands"), and cultural (a strategy which considered simple integration of non-Russians into the Russian administrative system insufficient, and aimed at the complete assimilation of their cultures; pp. 8-9). He writes about the gradual shift from the more voluntary processes, with initiative coming from the individuals, as in the Russian verb *obruset'* (to become Russian) into the more forcible form *obrusit'* (to make somebody Russian).

The introduction of Russian pushed away the local languages and cultures, aiming for a universal means of communication, but thus radically decreasing the linguistic diversity. Olena Siruk (2023) provides over 65 examples of when the Ukrainian language was limited or banned due to the Russification policies, namely in printed literature and the press, education, theater, church services, dictionaries and so on, among them:

- The 1863 Valuev Circular, banning Ukrainian book printing and postulating that "there was, is not and could not have been a separate Little Russian[4] language", and that "their dialect, used by the common people, is the same Russian language, only corrupted by the influence of Poland" (para. 37);
- The 1876 Ems Decree, which expanded earlier restrictions by banning not only Ukrainian-language publications, but also translations into Ukrainian (except for historical documents and fiction, which could be published only using standard Russian orthography, not the Ukrainian spelling), as well as Ukrainian-language theatrical performances and the printing of Ukrainian texts in musical notation, including folk songs (para. 43);
- The 1888 decree by Alexander III prohibiting the baptism of people with Ukrainian names and the use of Ukrainian language in official institutions (para. 50).

Noteworthily, since the different parts of the contemporary Ukrainian territory used to be ruled by different empires, there were overlaps of various influences on the Ukrainian language at different time periods, yet among them the Russian rule held perhaps the longest and most systemic character. Siruk also refers to Russia as "one empire in three guises", by which she means its different political forms of existence: the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and the contemporary Russian Federation (2023, para. 57).

Admittedly, the continuity between the Russian Empire and the USSR might initially appear as contested, since Russian socialists were criticizing and opposing many of the earlier imperial policies

[4] Little Russian or Malorussian was how Ukrainian would often be called in the Russian Empire, which, to a certain extent, depicts the derogatory attitude towards Ukrainians. However, there are different ways to read it.

at first. In 1910-1930s, there was even some movement towards recognizing the oppression non-Russians had been facing in the Russian Empire. The leader of the Great October Socialist Revolution, Vladimir Lenin, wrote in 1914: "A difficulty is to some extent created by the fact that in Russia the proletariat of both the oppressed and oppressor nations are fighting, and must fight, side by side. The task is to preserve the unity of the proletariat's class struggle for socialism" (Chapter 10, para. 3). The policy of "korenizatsiia" (Russian for "indigenization" or "nativization") was also launched in the 1920s, and at first, it seemed to be aimed at providing political rights to non-Russians by integrating them into the local governments of their Soviet republics. However, by the 1930s, as state repression intensified, it became increasingly clear that these efforts were designed to secure broad support for socialism, grow loyal cadres in the Communist Party in every Soviet republic, and thus make the socialist state established firmly in all of them, as if sprouting through their local sociopolitical structures. There are records of that period stating that the Russification of personal names intensified in some regions as well, especially during the processes of mass passportization:

> When in 1932–1933 passportization was carried out, all Ukrainians in the Kuban were simply registered as Russians. Then no one even asked about nationality. If according to the census of 1926, there were more than three million Ukrainians in the North Caucasus, then during the census of 1947 they were counted to around 100 thousand. ... They even changed surnames during the census (Lubyanov, 2012, para. 28).[5]

After the October Revolution of 1917, the policy of Sovietization also gained momentum. It was directed at the making of the Soviet New Man – "perhaps the most radical of modernist projects", according to Vujošević (2017, p. 1). At its core, Sovietization was a project of ideological and cultural transformation, fostering identification with the Soviet system by developing a unified collective

[5] All translations from Ukrainian are my own unless otherwise indicated.

mindset and constructing a new model of the Soviet person. It reshaped multiple dimensions of human experience and fundamentally reorganized social life. While grounded in Soviet ideology, the process was also deeply influenced by underlying Russian cultural norms and values (Zhu, 2023). Comparing it to the Russification policy, Weeks (2010) states:

> While [S]ovietization never overtly advocated cultural assimilation, it did presume that Soviet citizens would use the Russian language as the primary "all-union" language and expected Soviet citizens to adopt "modern" lifestyles that often drew on Russian models. ... Sovietization did not strictly imply forcing the populace to adopt the Russian language and culture, [but] in practice the process of Sovietization between 1917 and 1991 was far more successful than tsarist Russification in spreading the Russian language and Russian cultural norms (p. 1).

These and many other scholars argue that Russification, understood as the expansion of the Russian language into various domains of social life, continued in practice and even intensified, despite not being explicitly labeled as such by the state. Hence, this study considers *Russification* as an overarching process that overlaps with Sovietization, defining it as *a general process of increasing Russian influence over personal names, language, cultural practices etc., through both state policies and individual acts of self-assimilation.* Russification cannot be easily reduced to a single explanatory framework: it contains elements of national homogenization and imperial domination, and parts of it can also be understood through the lens of settler colonialism. The entanglement between Russian and Ukrainian histories complicates a straightforward colonizer-colonized binary. Shared religious, linguistic, and cultural legacies have historically blurred the lines of subjugation and affiliation. However, these very narratives often served to mask or justify hierarchical relations and policies of assimilation. The recent reassertion of colonial framing, particularly since the full-scale invasion in

2022, reflects a growing recognition within Ukraine of the asymmetrical nature of this relationship, and a shift toward naming it as such. This reframing is not merely rhetorical; it marks an effort to deconstruct inherited identities and reclaim agency over national memory and belonging.

Similarly, Russification mustn't be seen as a completely uniform process – it unfolded in waves, becoming more or less intense at different historical moments, but its cumulative effect is unmistakable today. Across different regions of Ukraine, many people share familial Russification stories, often multiple, and it is this widespread, lived legacy that ultimately matters.

As a policy, Russification was directed at cultural centralization, alongside the economic and the political one. However, it went beyond simple imposition of the official language of the state for the sake of universal bureaucracy. It reaffirmed the social inequalities, making the person's ethnic origin affect their material conditions, the education and job prospects for them and their children. A prominent Ukrainian literary critic, activist and dissident in the Soviet times, Ivan Dziuba, observed in his magnum opus, *Internationalism or Russification?* (1965/1998):

> ...we see that the Ukrainian language in urban life in a certain sense, as the language of the "lower" strata of the population (janitors, servants, menial workers, newly hired labor, ordinary workers, especially in the suburbs), opposes the Russian language as the language of the "higher", "cultured" layers of society ("commanders of production", employees, intelligentsia) ... The linguistic division makes the social division more painful and infuriating (chapter 10, para. 11).

Unsurprisingly, such an unbalanced division of labor created an incentive for the individuals to adapt, change names, learn and use a different language, and "become" Russian. For many, such assimilation seems to have been a mere means of survival. Although the adoption of Russified personal names was often presented as an individual choice, it can be argued that it occurred within a

framework of *conformity-driven self-assimilation* both in the times of Russian Empire and the USSR, since in both cases Russianness was systematically constructed as the cultural and professional standard, making deviation both risky and disadvantageous. The next chapter builds on this framework by analyzing empirical data that reflects these assimilation mechanisms.

Chapter 2. Stories of the Russification of Ukrainian Personal Names

I can see that it often really depends on how comfortable
it is for a Russian speaker to pronounce it.

Daniel Onipka, 25

This chapter delves into the complex history and lived experiences behind the Russification of Ukrainian personal names. It begins by examining the nature of Ukrainian names and their Russian/Russified counterparts, and goes on into exploring the circumstances that led to the widespread Russification of names. Together, these sections reveal how personal names became entangled with broader processes of cultural assimilation and identity transformation.

2.1. Ukrainian Personal Names Before and After Russification

Before turning to the specific patterns of Russification of Ukrainian personal names, it is important to outline what constitutes a typical Ukrainian given and family name.

2.1.1. Given Names

Ukrainian given names historically developed through a synthesis of Christian, pre-Christian (pagan), and folk naming traditions. Many names are derived from Orthodox saints and biblical figures, but often appear in phonologically localized forms *distinct* from their Russian counterparts. For instance, Ukrainian speakers typically use Mykola (not Nikolai), Petro (not Pyotr), Oleksandr(a) (not Aleksandr(a)), Kateryna (not Ekaterina). Another layer includes names of Old Slavic origin, such as Bohdan ("given by God") or Lyubomyr ("peace-lover"), which express ideals or virtues.

Some examples of how Ukrainian given names may get distorted due to the Russification include:

Male Names	Female Names
Mykhailo → Mikhail	Halyna → Galina
Dmytro → Dmitriy	Daryna → Dariia
Petro → Piotr	Oleksandra → Aleksandra
Pavlo → Pavel	Kateryna → Ekaterina
Andriy → Andrey	Iryna, Orysia → Irina
Oleh → Oleg	Vira → Vera
Kostiantyn, Kost' → Konstantin	Hanna → Anna
Oleksandr, Les'→ Aleksandr	Olena → Lena, Aliona
Oleksiy → Aleksei	Khrystyna → Kristina
Danylo → Daniil, Danila	Olesia → Alesia

Figure 1. Comparative table. Ukrainian Given Names And Their Russian Counterparts

2.1.2. Family Names

The Ukrainian family names, like in many other languages, developed through consistent derivational mechanisms, often reflecting family lineage, geographic origin, or personal traits, as a linguist Ivan Khomiak (2024) points out. For instance, while German surnames often use suffixes like -son or -mann, and Romanian ones may end in -escu, for the Ukrainian surnames, there are a few distinctive and widespread suffixes, namely:

-enko, commonly seen in names such as Petrenko, Hryshchenko, or Vakulenko;

-uk / -iuk, often used in patronymic or matronymic forms like Ivaniuk or Myroniuk;

-iv, frequently found in Western Ukraine, e.g., Mykhasiv, Ponomariv.

Ukrainian language also features vivid surnames formed from imperative verb stems, which often carry metaphorical or expressive meanings, such as Krutivus ("twist-a-mustache"), Tiahnyriadno ("pull-the-harness"), or Ubyivovk ("wolf-slayer"). These naming patterns show the distinctiveness of Ukrainian onomastic tradition. Understanding them allows us to better recognize the distortions introduced through Russification, some examples of which can be seen in the table below (typology based on Popovskyi (2015), complemented with examples found through interviews and my explanations):

1) **Changes in vocals**

Type of change	**Examples**
[o] → [a], [e]	Oladko → Aladko, Oliinyk → Alieinik, Omelchenko → Amelchenko(v), Borshchevskyi → Barschevskyi, Chornohuz → Chernoguz
[i] → [e], [ie], [o]	Riabiichuk → Riabeichuk, Bilodid → Bielodied, Didushenko → Diedushenko, Sirostan → Seroshtan, Nezdoiminoha → Nezdoimenoha, Piddubnyi → Poddubniy
[y] → [e]	Pyshchymukha → Pishemukha
[y], [o], [i] → [i]	Hospodydai → Gospodidai, Kryvoshapka → Krivoshapka, Pryishlyak → Prishliak, Prydybailo → Pridibailo, Semenih → Sieminog, Pidopryhora → Podoprigora
Dropped [i], [o]	Karnabida → Karnabda, Pesyholovets → Pesiglavets

2) Changes in consonants

Type of change	Examples
[m] → [n]	Mykolenko → Nikolenko, Mykolaienko → Nikolaienko, Mykolaichuk → Nikolaichuk, Mykytenko → Nikitenko, Mykytchuk → Nikitchuk
[v] → [l], [h] → [g]	Honyvovk → Gonivolk, Ubyivovk → Ubeivolk, Vovkohon → Volkohon (from *vovk/volk* ('wolf') in Ukrainian and Russian), Dovhoshapka → Dolgoshapka (from *dovhyy/dolgiy* ('long') in Ukrainian and Russian), Pivtorabatka → Poltorabatka, Pivtorakozhukha → Poltorakozhukha (from *pivtora/poltora* ('one and a half') in Ukrainian and Russian)
[shch] → [sch]	Schaslyvets → Schastlivets

3) Morphological changes

Type of change	Examples
-iv → -ov	Borshchiv → Borshov(a)
-enkiv → -enkov	Chabanenkiv → Chabanenkov(a)
-shkiv → -shkin	Hrechyshkiv → Hrechyshkin
-ii/-yi → -oi	Kozodii → Kozodoi, Riabyi → Riaboi
Addition of Russian-style suffix -ov/-ev	Bohdan→ Bohdanov(a), Vedmid → Medvedev(a) (from *vedmid/medved* ('bear') in Ukrainian and Russian), Mieshko → Mieshkov(a), Shpyn' → Shpiniov(a)

Figure 2. Comparative table. Ukrainian Family Names Before and After Russification

Notably, some personal names (like Iryna → Irina, Vovkohon → Volkohon) may show minimal difference due to vowel shifts that are spellable/audible in Cyrillic but less visible in Latin

characters. Sometimes, they may differ in just one letter in Cyrillic, too; but a Slavic-speaking (and in particular, Ukrainian / Russian-speaking) person usually can tell the difference right away, and on the level of political symbolism, it carries a lot of weight for many to be correctly rendered by their ethnicity and not mistaken for someone else, especially for someone they're at war with. Whenever I see a Russian-seeming personal name, especially abroad, I wonder: is this person Russian, or are they a Russified representative of some ethnic community within the former USSR? And so, should I be careful around them, as potential carriers of the neoimperialist narratives; or vice versa, might we both have similar experiences of nearly losing our native languages and the right of self-determination to the idea of paragon Russianness?

Even these minor, one-letter changes explain where the Russification of personal names often departs from: it's designed to make it easier for Russian speakers to hear and pronounce. Multiple participants, including those who were later reclaiming their names and going through a long bureaucratic procedure for the sake of it, agreed that even one letter already matters, because there was something larger behind this seemingly minor difference for them.

2.2. The Various Paths Leading to the Russification of Personal Names

2.2.1. Administrative Organs, or "That's Just How They Recorded It"

As has been stated before, Russification happened both in voluntary and involuntary ways. It could take an unplanned manner, be done by administrative organs, or be a more deliberate strategy of the cultural assimilation of non-Russians into the Russian/Soviet administrative system. The reason

that was mentioned most frequently in the interviews was the administrative one: the Russified names frequently appeared, for instance, when the person was recorded in the metric book in the church in the imperial times (many churches were Russian Orthodox, so the metric books would be written in Russian), or when the personal documents were issued for the first time or reissued due to the expiration of the previous ones. Sometimes, the personal name would be recorded in the Russified version from the very birth; and some people would run in the official records under their Ukrainian name for some years, and then, out of the blue, it would be changed. Vasyl Oleksiienko, 73, recalled how it happened to him and the members of his family:

> When we lived in the town of Narodychi, Zhytomyr region, the one that emptied out after Chornobyl, there was no issue. Everyone knew us as Oleksiienko. My parents, me, my younger brother and sister – that's what we were called. But in the documents, it varied. The earliest record I found about my father was his military ID; it already said Alekseiienko. His marriage certificate from 1951 was filled out by hand in Russian, even though the form itself was bilingual. It read Alekseiienko too. My own birth certificate from 1952 was written the same way, by the same hand – Alekseiienko. But at school, from the first grade through to graduation, all my certificates said Oleksiienko. ...
>
> When I applied to study in Kyiv, at the Ukrainian Agricultural Academy, I was Oleksiienko. But in 1979, they reissued our passports. The process was that the dormitory warden collected all the passports, took them to the passport office, and brought them back.
>
> In my old passport, the Ukrainian page said Oleksiienko, and the Russian one said Alekseiienko. But in the new version, both were changed to Alekseiienko.
> Since I was registered in the dormitory, it was handled without my involvement.

This excerpt illustrates a recurring case of workers of the administrative bodies changing or 'correcting the spelling' of the personal names of Ukrainians without receiving neither a request nor at least the consent from them to do so. If the person being recorded or receiving the document didn't

have access to the education and wasn't literate, they couldn't even check the spelling – and then, the family name would be passed on according to this altered spelling. Some share of cases, assumingly, might have also been a misspelling done by the clerk – but mostly, then, the mistake happened due to the fact that the administrative workers were Russian and didn't speak the Ukrainian language to know the nuances of the spelling. The bureaucrats' intentions and agency (i.e. whether they were just following orders, or sometimes could initiate the changes on their own, or maybe even thought they were acting in favor of the person being renamed) remained unclear due to the lack of data, and is something yet to be researched.

Similarly, in some cases, it might be hard to locate the agency of the person whose name was being changed: if, say, they came to the administrative office in person, were literate and noticed the misspelling right away, they could, theoretically, oppose to it more assertively. A few of my interlocutors told that it was possible to insist on the Ukrainian spelling, but these successful examples only involved receiving the documents in the independent post-1991 Ukraine; before that, it seems, it was much harder (but there is also a kind of survivorship bias at play here: individuals who managed to preserve the original names during the Russian or Soviet rule may have felt less urgency to pass down stories about the challenges they faced, meaning that the silence of resistance may also distort the historical picture). Some participants expressed a degree of understanding or resigned empathy towards their ancestors, recognizing the severe historical pressures they faced. As one of them put it:

> I'm proud that they survived all those horrors: the war, the postwar famine of 1947-48, the repressions... And I'm grateful to exist at all, no matter what surname I carry. But yes, there is a kind of lingering feeling, because I know that my surname wasn't supposed to be this

> way. It's just the result of a split-second decision made by some clerk during a population census. Someone who was definitely Russian-speaking, and literate" (Malcheva Anna, 28).

On the other hand, there were some frustrations expressed, too, about ancestors not insisting on the right spelling (and, what's interesting, it also mentions the mere seconds that it takes to make a change, which is much harder to be reserved later):

> This is, well, an illustration of how karma works. My grandfather would have needed just a few seconds to insist on his dignity, but for me, it took nearly six months of changing everything, running around to all those different passport offices and so on" (Yurko Vovkohon, 42).

Still, it is important to remember that these are retrospective interpretations, filtered through the lens of contemporary values and personal identity work. In many cases, the person whose name was first Russified is no longer alive, and their motivations, constraints, and emotional responses remain unrecoverable. Anticipating this gap, I invited participants to feel free to say they did not have the information, rather than attempting to reconstruct their ancestors' reasoning – and many did choose to leave some questions unanswered, acknowledging the limits of familial memory.

2.2.2. Army

Another common mechanism of Russification was the army: as a strict vertical system of subordination, which demands obedience, especially from the newcomers, it was a particularly efficient tool of homogenization and making non-Russians conform to a single, unified mold, as Stovall (1988) points out. In the Russian and Soviet armies, the soldiers were expected to know and operate one language – unsurprisingly, if was Russian, and since in a securitized and bureaucratized structure like that, people would certainly need to be recorded, many got one of their only documents, and a

Russified personal name, from there. As Gvozd (2005), quoted in Popovskyi (2015) states, men would enter the Soviet army with Ukrainian surnames and return with Russian ones: Havryliv came back as Gavrilov; Shvets was turned into Shevtsov, even though the Russian equivalent of *shvets* (meaning cobbler) is *sapozhnik*. Or the name Chumakov could emerge from Chumak, despite chumak being a distinctly Ukrainian cultural term, historically referring to long-distance wagoners or salt traders who traveled in caravans across Ukraine, particularly in the 16-19th centuries, and played an important role in Ukraine's economic and cultural history, which made the term carry strong national associations (p. 189).

Some of the participants also provided extended reflections on how the Russification due to the military service affected the whole family. Angelika Kozoriz-Sakhatska, 53, described her case:

> My grandfather, after he joined the army, had his Ukrainian surname changed to a Russian one so he could move up in rank. They adjusted names to make them sound Russian. His surname was *Kozoriz*, and they changed it to Kozorez. He went through denationalization and dekulakization.[6] That's the surname my father inherited – and he was in the military too. So when I was born, my surname was Kozorez.
>
> My grandfather was from Volyn, so *Kozoriz* was a purely Volynian, likely Cossack surname, and it was changed. I only started to understand this when I got older and began wondering why my name sounded so strange. Older – like, 15 or 20 years ago.
>
> You see, the thing is: a Ukrainian family, both parents ethnically Ukrainian, was completely Russified. That was very common in military families. We were told that children of servicemen could only attend Russian-speaking classes, no matter the school. And I went to eight of them. Wherever a father was reassigned, in any Soviet republic, the child had to speak a shared language. That "shared language" was, of course, Russian.

[6] The process of property expropriation of the formerly wealthy or prosperous peasants at the beginning of the USSR, as a means of ending the 'class conflict'.

> There must be some documents from my grandfather... But again, because he never wanted to talk about it, I wasn't interested back then. Now I'd like to find the archives – but I can't, because they're all in Russia. Do you understand? I just can't trace the paper trail. And that's very, very sad. Because I've tried. I really tried to find some documents. But there's nothing in the Ukrainian registry. It must be all classified somewhere in Russia.

The army's Russifying effect often had very long-standing consequences, and an internalization of the idea of superiority of Russianness, even by the non-Russians. Daniel Onipka, 25, (his family name was changed from a more typical Ukrainian Onipko) told a story of his grandfather, who grew up with his mother on a farmstead and spoke Ukrainian throughout his early life. However, after joining the military, he spent years in predominantly Russian-speaking environments, and now speaks mostly Russian, or a combination of Russian and Ukrainian (for example, he could greet people with a "Privet,"[7] even mid-sentence in Ukrainian). Daniel recalled:

> When I introduced my wife to my grandfather, I told him: "Her name is Olenka."
> He said: "Alyonka."[8]
> I said: "No, Olenka."
> He repeated: "Alyonka." And he was even speaking Ukrainian at the moment.
>
> That moment really stuck with me. I think it's kind of a mindset – this quiet insistence on shaping things to fit one's own standards. Because, after all, he served in a totalitarian structure. He was in the naval fleet, where the service term was longer than in the infantry. He served for quite a while, and it was very isolating – they were at sea, he only saw land a few times during the whole deployment. It was a closed, rigid, totalitarian system.

Another participant recounted the story of his brother, who, raised under the influence of their Soviet army officer father, became a military officer himself and began his career in Moscow and Lithuania. After the collapse of the USSR, although he returned to Kharkiv, he maintained strong

[7] Russian for "Hello".
[8] Alyona/Alyonka is the Russian counterpart to the Ukrainian name Olena/Olenka.

allegiance to Russia, and a negative attitude to Ukraine. When Ukrainian passports were being issued after 1991, their mother was ill and asked him to handle the paperwork. He arranged with a passport officer to have the family surname recorded in the Russian-style transliteration *Niemchenko* (as opposed to Ukrainian *Nemchenko*) for himself, his wife, and even their mother, believing it to be the 'proper' version. Their father's passport, in the meantime, still used the Ukrainian spelling Nemchenko, which led to legal inconsistencies in the family's documents.

The mother always kept introducing herself as *Nemchenko*, and kept this family name on other documents. The fact that her had been changed only came to light after her death, when the family began the process of settling her estate. It turned out that the surname listed on her death certificate, which matched the spelling in her passport, differed from the name under which the apartment was officially registered. As a result, she was legally considered a different person than the property owner. To resolve the issue, the family had to go to court and open a separate case to officially establish her identity in order to obtain the necessary documents.

These cases suggest how the Soviet army functioned not only as a military institution but also as a powerful site of ideological socialization. It sought to instill a sense of the cultural and political superiority of Russianness in its members, and often fostered disdain toward non-Russian identities – even among those who themselves came from non-Russian backgrounds. This, in particular, can be viewed as a component of settler colonialism. As Patrick Wolfe (2006) famously argued, "invasion is a structure not an event ... elimination is an organizing principal of settler-colonial society rather than a one-off (and superseded) occurrence" (p. 388). The army thus served as a tool for shaping 'loyal agents

of the system', prepared to enforce its norms and hierarchies, including through personal decisions like the Russification of names.

2.2.3. Strategic or Conformity-Driven Self-Assimilation

To describe this pattern, I borrow the term *strategic assimilation*, as developed by Lacy (2004), who used it in the context of middle-class Black Americans navigating between white and Black spaces while maintaining ties to their minority identity. Although the empirical basis and cultural setting are very different, the term is useful in highlighting selective self-assimilation for specific instrumental purposes, such as career advancement. However, I use the term more narrowly: my focus is not on identity duality or community affiliation, but rather on the aspect of assimilation driven by practical conformity – what might be more precisely described as *conformity-driven self-assimilation*. Notably, though, some participants even framed the name as a matter of survival for their ancestors, suggesting that the choice was shaped by strong pressures of cultural othering rather than aspiration alone.

Ihor Odynets, 29, spoke about the case of his great-grandfather on the maternal side, in Kharkiv region in the 1920s. This region, being just at the border with contemporary Russian Federation (and back then – Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic), became one of the most affected by the Russification; and now it's one of those that suffer the most from Russian attacks. Ihor, who grew up in a Russified environment in Donets'k, switched to Ukrainian as a means of protest and started learning more of Ukrainian history, recalled discovering that in the first decades of the 20th century in Kharkiv region it was quite common – even fashionable – to Russify Ukrainian surnames in order to advance professionally. His great-grandfather was a schoolteacher, and his original surname

was Odynets, but he changed the ending to Odyntsov. This Russified version of the name was then passed down to the participant's grandfather and later to his mother. Ihor already presents himself mostly as Odynets and is planning to switch to it legally from his current surname, inherited from his father – Masiakin, which is a Russian-sounding one, too.

A depiction of these dynamics, set in the same time and region, appears in Ukrainian literature – particularly, in Mykola Kulish's 1929 satirical play *Myna Mazailo*. I will take a moment to describe it in more detail, because it is an apt reflection of the Zeitgeist of that era. In the play, each character represents a different attitude toward language, identity, and assimilation. Myna, the father, is ashamed of his 'provincial' Ukrainian surname Mazailo and wants to change it to a more Russian-sounding Mazienin to improve his career. His wife Lina supports this, believing the Russified name sounds more prestigious. They both thus embody internalized cultural inferiority complex. Their son Mokii, by contrast, is deeply committed to Ukrainian language and identity, and dreams of giving his surname even more Ukrainianness, changing it to Mazailo-Kvach. His passion influences Ulia, a friend of the family, who begins to adopt his views. Aunt Motia from Kursk is the voice of aggressive Russian chauvinism, dismissing Ukrainian as a fake language and famously saying, "It's better to be raped than Ukrainized." In opposition stands Uncle Taras, a romantic defender of the Ukrainian Cossack heritage, who sees value in the linguistic roots of their name.

Kulish's play, despite being comedic in form, gives a sharp critique of the ideological environment of the 1920s, when policies of korenizatsiya (indigenization) coexisted with rising cultural Russification. It mocks the internalized inferiority complex that made individuals willingly discard their cultural heritage to align with the dominant Russian-centric norm. Through the absurdity of

Myna's desperation, Kulish exposes the deep psychological toll of how the Soviet structures incentivized people to abandon their linguistic and national identities in pursuit of safety, success, and approval.

2.2.4. Avoiding Harassment and Persecution

Several interlocutors from different regions of Ukraine recalled their parents or older generations telling them about how they could get mocked and harassed, called *seliuk*[9] or *kolkhoznik*[10], or hear Ukrainian being called *calvish tongue*, when they were using it. Consider this excerpt from the interview with Anna Malcheva, 28:

> I am a Russified Ukrainian because... my father, his native language wasn't Russian, but when he went to study in Odessa, they forcibly Russified him. And the same with my mother – her family was from Western Ukraine, and in Odesa, Ukrainian was heavily oppressed, they called it the *calvish tongue*, and my mother was made to learn so that she would be natively Russian-speaking. ... My grandmother thought it would be better for her because all schools, all universities, everything was in Russian, and at her job in the Odessa port, she was forced to speak Russian, because there were a lot of Ukrainian speakers, and they were constantly being reprimanded.
>
> It was very... I don't know, bullying, as you would say now, because from some of the things my parents told me, the Ukrainian language was very much suppressed, and now in Odessa this is a very sensitive issue. So it happens so that my parents are Russified, and my native language is Russian.

Not just harassment, but also criminal persecution – this could be another 'motivating factor' for Russifying oneself. Oleksandra B., 22, told a story about her great-grandfather on her mother's side. He was originally from a village in Zhytomyr region and was only ever known in the family as *Shpiniov*.

[9] Russian for "redneck".

[10] Russian for "collective farmer", sometimes used in a derogatory way to point out the 'rurality'.

However, based on records from the database of Soviet repression victims, where one of his executed brothers is listed under the double form *Shpin'–Shpiniov* (the first family name is Ukrainian, the second is Russified), she suspects her great-grandfather may have once used that version too, before fully switching to *Shpiniov*. Given that two of his brothers were sentenced to death penalty (one – for "anti-Soviet agitation", another – for "treason") and executed in 1938, the participant believes this likely convinced her great-grandfather to assimilate completely. According to the family accounts, he was fully Russified: his daughter-in-law (the participant's grandmother) recalled that she never heard him say a single word in Ukrainian, despite his rural Ukrainian origins.

She also mentioned her mother's experience in 1994, when applying to Lviv Medical University. The admissions committee of the university asked, "How come you're Ukrainian, but your surname is Shpiniova?" Her mother didn't respond – she didn't know how to answer, either.

2.2.5. Internalized Cultural Inferiority Complex

The Russification of personal names could also be initiated by Ukrainians, stemming from a deeply internalized belief that Russian-sounding names were more "urban," "refined," or "cultured," while Ukrainian names were associated with rurality, backwardness, or lack of prestige. Such perceptions were a product of long-standing cultural hierarchies cultivated during imperial and Soviet times, in which Russianness was positioned as the normative standard. The resulting sense of cultural inferiority complex persisted in Ukraine well beyond the collapse of the Soviet Union, influencing how people presented themselves socially and professionally. Choosing a Russified name could thus

function not only as a survival strategy or career move, but also as a form of self-distancing from one's own perceived marginality – a quiet act of assimilation born from centuries of structural pressure.

Hanna Mieshkova, 25, from Dnipro, shared how her mother avoided giving her a more Ukrainian-sounding name Hanna, and instead called her Anna. Although she has embraced the Ukrainian version of her name since the Russian full-scale invasion in 2022, and now presents herself as Hanna, Hania, Hannusya, Annychka, Ania[11], the version in official documents still reflects that earlier mindset:

> When I was born, my mother decided it would be better to write Anna, in the Russian manner[12], instead of Hanna. My mom and grandmother were very Russified, and they thought Hanna didn't sound nice – they had absorbed those stereotypes. ... Ukrainian was somehow ugly and unprestigious for them. I think they wanted the best [for me]. ... As a child, it was somehow instilled in me that I was special and cool because I had the Russian *Anna*. When filling out documents, I was often asked: Anna or Hanna? And until around 2020, I would happily and condescendingly say: *Anna, like in the passport*. And now, on the contrary, I don't really like Anna in the passport.
>
> Since childhood, I understood it was the incorrect form, but I thought it was cool, because I consumed a lot of Russian [content] and wanted to go to [St. Petersburg].

Unironically, I myself heard similar reasoning, almost word for word, from my mother, explaining why she agreed to give me an Armenian name Ani: "I didn't want people to call you Hania. You are not from a village."

To sum up, this chapter has explored the various forms and mechanisms of the Russification of Ukrainian personal names as a tool of assimilation and homogenization. It began by mapping the

[11] All of these versions of names, except the last one, which is similar in Russian, are distinctly Ukrainian

[12] Notably, Anna is a widespread international name, but apparently, in this case people associated it with Russianness

changes in given names and surnames, comparing the Ukrainian and the Russified/Russian ones. It then traced the multiple paths that led to these changes – from administrative practices and military service as more coercive mechanisms to strategic self-assimilation, avoidance of persecution, and the internalization of cultural hierarchies as more 'voluntary' practices, which were still caused by structural pressure. What emerges most clearly is that Russification was not always overtly forced, but often normalized, to the point where Russian-sounding names came to be seen as "standard," acceptable, and desirable, and the non-Russian ones – deviant or marginal, creating social pressure on individuals to adapt. This phenomenon aligns, for instance, with Gramsci's (1929/1971) theory of cultural hegemony, according to which the decisions can be influenced by the normalized dominance – in this case, of Russian language.

Chapter 3. The Intergenerational Impact and Attitudes Towards Russified Names

Although in many families, the Russification of personal names took place generations ago, its impact continues to shape how Ukrainians understand their family histories and identities today. For some, these changes were never discussed, buried under layers of fear, trauma, or disinterest. Others grew up with fragmented stories, occasional mentions, or active engagement with the topic. As the following typology shows, families remember and talk about these histories in very different ways: from silence to shared reflection and rediscovery.

3.1. Known But Treated as a Simple Fact

In some families, the topic is remembered, and accepted as something that happened, as a historical fact, without a deep emotional investment or critical reflection:

> The topic comes up occasionally – not in the context of Russification itself, but as a natural part of discussing family history. It's mostly seen as a fact: "this is just how it was," and "it could've been worse" (Mariia R., 25).
>
> We more or less, let's say, discuss it regularly. I don't know – maybe once a year. Not frequently, but it comes up from time to time (Mariia Pluzhnikova, 22).
>
> It's not something we bring up often at the family table, but sometimes grandpa still jokes about it, saying, "stupid Moskals[13] couldn't even pronounce Subotyk" (Olena Sobotyk, 20).

[13] A derogatory term for Russians, used particularly in Ukrainian, Polish, and Belarusian languages.

Notably, quite a few participants mentioned gatherings at the family table, the so-called *zastillya*,[14] being a common site of talks about family history, sometimes even about the traumatic parts of it; apart from the more intimate settings, often one-on-one with a particular relative.

3.2. Clear Negative Consensus Within the Family

Some families agree on seeing the Russification of names as a symbol of loss or injustice, and meet it with shared disapproval.

> Of course, it was a topic of discussion – about how to live with it. The attitude was clear and understandable: this was Russification, plain and simple (Kukhtyn O., 36).
>
> [The topic] came up briefly, mostly to explain why there's a negative attitude in the family toward Russia and Russification (O.I., 49).

In these cases, the topic appears to be mentioned openly, and rather than being a point of tension, it functions as a shared reference point for expressing broader discontent with the legacy of Russian or Soviet influence. While not always discussed in depth, the agreement in tone and framing suggests a common understanding shaped by historical and political awareness.

[14] Shared table gathering in Ukrainian, derivative from the word *stil* (table).

3.3. Conflict Between Generations or Family Members

By contrast, in certain families, the issue has been divisive, with different generations or individuals holding opposing views on whether the name change matters or is even worth discussing. Older generations often show less critical or emotional engagement with the topic and may be more influenced by internalized cultural inferiority complex shaped during Soviet times. Younger generations, born after the dissolution of the USSR, by contrast, are more likely to view the Russification of names as a form of imposed identity and to assert their right to cultural and national self-determination.

That said, this generational divide is not absolute. Many individuals who were educated and socialized during the Soviet Union, where history was taught through the lens of state propaganda, have begun re-evaluating the Soviet past, particularly in response to pivotal moments in Ukraine's contemporary history. Key events such as the Declaration of Independence (1991), the Orange Revolution (2004–2005), the Revolution of Dignity and initial Russian invasion (2013–2014), and the full-scale invasion in 2022 have prompted deeper reflection, shifts in perspective, and in some cases, a growing desire to reclaim suppressed or distorted aspects of Ukrainian identity.

> There were never any open conflicts in the family, but my relatives were always insisting that our surname should be spelled with [Russian] "ye". Even though my passport had one version on the first page using [Ukrainian] "i", and "ye" in the Russian-language section, I would always insist that all documents, even those filled out in Russian, should reflect the version with "i," staying true to the original name (Angelika Kozoriz-Sakhatska, 53).
>
> My family now holds a clearly pro-Ukrainian position, but I notice that the emotional response to this topic is not as strong for my parents as it is for me. Even before the war,

> when we would talk about this in a lighthearted way, I once joked with my father that maybe we should restore our original surname. He reacted negatively. For him, the name he has lived with his whole life now feels natural, anything else would sound strange, even alien. If I were to change my surname now, he would likely see it as a kind of betrayal. ... Soviet propaganda shaped the worldview of our parents' generation, and we, the younger generation, tend to think about these issues more critically (Anna Malcheva, 28).

> This is quite an emotional issue, because there's always been a contradiction in our family: my grandfather deeply loved and admired his own grandfather, Mytrofan Vedmid, and took pride in his roots. At the same time, he spoke just as fondly of Moscow, where he had served, and often regretted not having stayed there when he had the chance (Svitlana Vedmid, 40).

These excerpts also reveal the complex emotional tension between personal attachment to family members and the political meanings their choices carry. Sometimes, the personal affection overpowers the discomfort or disagreement over the identities and values, but multiple participants also reported having their ties cut with such relatives.

3.4. Silence(d)

While sharing the stories from their families, a lot of my informants emphasized not only the opposing views coming from the older generations, but also the silence. The emotional weight of both the Soviet and Russian imperial pasts – wars, famines, surveillance, repressions, imprisonment – created conditions in which speaking openly about one's identity or family history was often impossible. And because much of this silence began generations earlier, so few of my interlocutors had access to direct or detailed accounts. The past was not only painful, but also largely unspoken, even within the families.

These absences, evasions, and half-told stories have their fair share in shaping how contemporary Ukrainians relate to their personal names and histories today. The following excerpts illustrate this intergenerational silence. They also show that the stories of name changes, especially, when knowledge about them was partial, triggered two other topics: the broader sociopolitical context (namely, the traumatic events) that the ancestors went through, which explained why they stayed silent about many things, and the question of language as both a marker of identity and a site of tension:

> No, the change happened at the end of the 19th century, and among the living relatives I know (my grandfather's brother, my grandfather, and my father), no one knew about the surname change before reading the book [which their distant relative wrote about the family history], because they didn't live during that time, and the older relatives probably didn't talk about it. (Kateryna Kasianova, 21)

> To be honest, I don't know for sure, because my grandfather, after the war, had a concussion and never brought up these topics. And if you asked, he would immediately start crying. (Angelika Kozoriz-Sakhatska, 53)

> – My grandfather died in 1987. ... I was already eight years old. ... Well, he didn't really want to tell me anything. I was really curious about the war, but he said, "the war – I don't want to talk about it at all," because he had spent several years in captivity in Germany. And after returning, well, he didn't talk, but I later realized he went through filtration here. They put him in prison right after his return from captivity, and then kept him under surveillance.
> – So they treated him as an enemy of the people?[15]
> – Yes. And then kept him under surveillance: he had to check in, to show he wasn't doing any anti-Soviet activity. And they gave him the lowest job possible, he worked as a driver in a village.

[15] After World War II, many individuals who had been held in German captivity or lived under German occupation were treated by Soviet authorities as "enemies of the people." Rather than being seen as victims of war, they were viewed with suspicion and accused of disloyalty for having been captured. Upon returning to the USSR, they were sent to so-called filtration camps, where their actions during the war, including how they had been taken prisoner and how they had behaved while in captivity, were checked. Many of them later ended up in the Gulag, where they were already serving another imprisonment – this time from the Soviet state.

– And that was on your mother's side?
– Yes, my mother's side – and he didn't tell her anything either. It was taboo, we were a repressed family. My great-grandfather was sent to the camps twice by the Soviet authorities, first in 1937 for anti-Soviet agitation, that's what they charged him with, and the second time for religious reasons: they said he was conducting anti-Soviet agitation in a religious context. And my grandmother never wanted to talk about it, because it was really a kind of black mark for them. My grandmother used to say that they gave her the worst work, didn't pay her properly, and humiliated her because of it. ... They just said: "You live your life, don't pay attention to it, the government will pass, just don't go against it." She saw these intense repressions. And they survived three famines: the 1920s, 1932–33, and 1946. (Yevhen Kokhan, 46)

I barely knew anyone who remembered him [the great-great-grandfather Herasym Kozakevych, whose surname got Russified to Kazakievych] or even those times. No one in the family ever talked about it. My grandmother, the granddaughter of Herasym, who went through so much that it's clear why she chose silence, always told just three stories about her life – all superficial and from the communal era. That's it. Nothing more. (Kseniia Melnyk, 23)

When it happened – I don't know, and probably neither did his children or grandchildren who knew him. He wasn't a very open person. (Oleksandra B., 22)

I only managed to ask my grandmother a bit about her move from the village to the city where I'm from. We're all mostly from eastern Ukraine, though there's one relative from Kuban and a few on my mother's side from central Ukraine. Eventually, everyone ended up living in Kharkiv region. I don't really know of anything else that influenced things. Mostly, what mattered was what language you spoke – that had a big impact in terms of work.

My grandmother had to learn Russian to work at the bus station, because they didn't want to hire Ukrainian-speaking *khokhly*.[16] As for surnames – well, she never mentioned anything. ... But what's interesting is that she's the only one who never told me anything about the Holodomor. And she had lived through it as a child, at least partially. So she didn't like to bring it up. I can't say more than that. My whole family isn't exactly nationally conscious, I'd say they're just ordinary Ukrainians.

[16] A derogatory term for Ukrainians, used particularly in Russian language, initially referring to Cossack topknots.

> They just live, work. If you ask them directly – like my parents, grandparents – they'll tell you. But on their own, they never bring things up. I was the one always asking questions. (Daniel Onipka, 28)

Oleksandra B., 22, also shared how devastating the experience of a transgenerational trauma has been for her. According to her, it affects not only the emotional well-being within families and communication across generations, where parents, grandparents, great- or even great-great-grandparents remain emotionally closed off; it also creates a *large blank space in personal identity*. This and a few other quotes resemble what Fanon (1952) was describing as a dislocated sense of self, leading to alienation from one's cultural roots and psychological fragmentation, even though the context of observation was different (p. 138).

The silence weighs heavily on the generations that follow, growing like a snowball over time. Something that added up to Oleksandra's frustration was that until 2021, she knew significantly more about the side of her family that came from Russia, which reveals that the histories of Russian urban families might be much better preserved than the Ukrainian rural lineages.

> No one knows what actually happened, and there's no one left to ask. My grandfather has been living with progressive dementia for years. And even if there were still someone to ask, perhaps nothing would have been said anyway. ...
>
> It's from that blank space – the Russified surname of one of my two Ukrainian family lines – that my desire probably arose: to understand why, to uncover more of that hidden history, and to consciously reclaim my Ukrainianness. To understand why that part of the family, at some point, turned away from it.

3.5. Actively Researched or Recovered From Silence

Due to this silence, some of the participants recall discovering the fact(s) of Russification of personal names in their family by accident, often through conducting archival research about their lineage, or overhearing it from some of their relatives, who talked about it as a casual thing. Some even say that seeing my open call searching for study participants made them realize that the name change in their family was a Russification, or became an incentive to turn to their relatives and find out some new information – this I consider particularly valuable, as one of my aims in doing this research is to bring more attention to the topic. Many of them took steps to dig into their family history and uncover what had long been unspoken:

> Yes, I went to the Kharkiv regional archive. Basically, no one else in the family had ever done that. I was the first one to start digging there (Yevhen Kokhan, 46).
>
> My mother's maiden name is Fomenko. But I found this out literally before we met with you now. I was talking to my father, he got inspired and told me – my mother never told me about it. He got to know from her father that they were originally Khomenko. Well, I thought, it actually sounds quite logical. Now that I think of it, I recall that something seemed suspicious to me when I previously overheard her mention Khomenko multiple times in conversations (Daniel Onipka, 25).
>
> I've been researching relatives for two years. At some point, I found that for children from the same parents, there were records with altered surnames. At first, I was searching for Shevtsov family members, then I found records where the first children were registered under the surname Shvets, and the later ones – under Shevtsov(a). I didn't find separate records of a name change.
>
> The change happened between 1884 and 1886. Since the surname change occurred over 100 years ago, no one mentioned the previous name, and I wouldn't have known myself if I wasn't interested in genealogy. ... I was surprised by the discovery, but I didn't think it was

due to Russification. When I saw your post [about search for study participants] with an example similar to mine, then I thought the reason was exactly that.[17] Before, I didn't pay attention to the reasons for the change (Shevtsova Anna, 34).

Anna was one of the few participants who found the official records, which can be seen below.

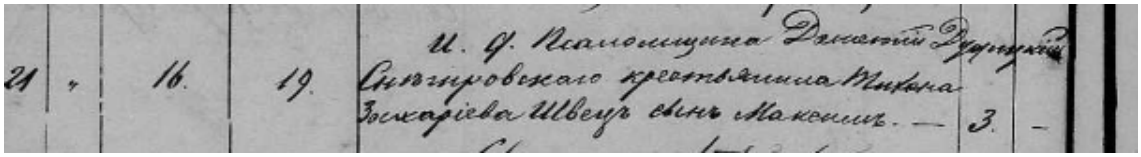

Figure 3. Excerpt from a record in a metric book, dated 1884, about the death of Maksym Shvets. Courtesy of Anna Shevtsova

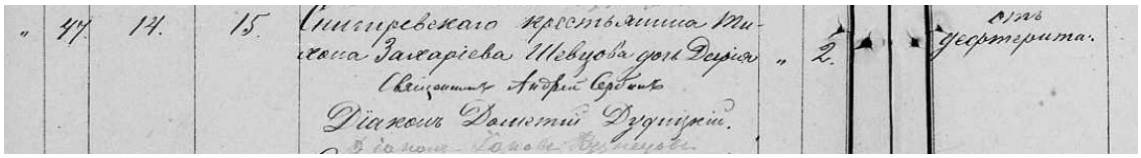

Figure 4. Excerpt from a record in a metric book, dated 1886, about the death of Daria Shevtsova. Courtesy of Anna Shevtsova

This chapter has given an overview of the complex intergenerational dynamics surrounding the Russified personal names, revealing a spectrum of responses within families. While in some cases the Russification of names was simply recognized and accepted as a matter of fact, in others it led to the establishment of a clear consensus, critical to the issue, or provoked conflict between generations or family members. Quite often, the topic was met with silence, whether as a form of avoidance or unspoken understanding, but in many instances, efforts were made to actively research and recover these suppressed histories. This chapter underscores how Russified names are not merely linguistic shifts but are deeply embedded in family memories, relate to people's identities and produce tensions, shaping how individuals relate to their past and each other across generations.

[17] In the post, I was giving examples of the Russification of Ukrainian personal names, and one of them indeed was Shvets → Shevtsov(a)

Chapter 4. Reclaiming Ukrainian Personal Names

I wasn't a nationalist, but I wanted a Ukrainian to be a Ukrainian
Vasyl Oleksiienko, 73

After centuries of imperial and Soviet linguistic assimilation, contemporary Ukrainians are increasingly engaging in the personal and political act of reclaiming their original Ukrainian names. This chapter explores the motivations, barriers, and symbolic strategies behind this movement, drawing on interviews with individuals who have considered, attempted, or enacted changes to their personal names. Whether it is correcting the spelling of a given name, reviving a surname lost through Russification, or simply using a preferred form in public, these acts reflect a broader cultural shift towards removing the linguistic legacy of imperial domination and identity restoration.

Figure 5. A picketer near the Ukrainian parliament with a banner "Derussification = Deoccupation = Decolonization" during the adoption of the language law on April 25th, 2019. Serhii Nuzhnenko/Radiosboboda.org. April 26th, 2019. https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/29904646.html

While for some, reclaiming a name becomes a form of resistance and memory work, for others, the weight of documentation, family history, and perceived stability delays or even prevents change. This chapter examines these dynamics to understand not only how personal names are reclaimed, but also why, despite widespread desire, many Russified forms may persist, posing a significant challenge to the authenticity and diversity of Ukraine's cultural onomastic landscape.

4.1. Legal Procedure for Name Change in Ukraine

First, a small legal note on how Ukrainians can change personal names. As stated on the online portal of state services Diia, any Ukrainian citizen[18], 16+ in age, is legally entitled to change their name at their own discretion without needing to state a reason. Minors (14+) may also initiate a name change under parental consent. The application must be submitted to the local Department of Civil Status Registration (DRACS) along with a standard set of documents: a Ukrainian passport, a birth certificate, and a photograph.

The procedure is relatively straightforward, though time-consuming. The legal timeframe for processing a name change is up to 90 calendar days, and it involves paying a modest administrative fee of 5.10 UAH (€0.11) for the first name change, or 51.00 UAH (€1.08) for a repeated one. In wartime conditions, particularly in regions where access to national registers is restricted or for internally displaced persons, this fee is waived, though the 90-day processing period still applies.

[18] On the one hand, there doesn't seem to be a pathway for those without Ukrainian citizenship; on the other, those affected are likely to already have it.

A name change can only be refused if the applicant is under criminal investigation or administrative supervision, has an outstanding or unexpunged criminal record, is subject to an international search request by foreign law enforcement, or submits false information (Diia Ukraine, n.d.).

4.2. Motivations for Reclaiming Ukrainian Names

Across the interviews, participants described a range of motivations for reclaiming Ukrainian personal names, each rooted in personal experience, collective memory, and political context. While for some, it was a more quiet correction of history, for most, it was a deeply symbolic act of resistance and restoration. This section outlines several recurring reasons individuals gave for changing or considering changing Russified names.

4.2.1. Removing the Russian Marker

For many, the most immediate motivation was a desire to shed the imposed Russian identity encoded in the name itself. Some participants emphasized that they had never wanted to be identified as Russian, and considered Russified names an external imposition that misrepresented their cultural background. As Angelika Kozoriz-Sakhatska, 53, put it, “we never wanted to be identified as Russians, the Ukrainian language is very different from Russian.”

Some, like Yurko Vovkohon, 42, reported that they knew from the very childhood that they would switch back to a Ukrainian personal name. For some, the motivation to reclaim a Ukrainian

name developed gradually. Vasyl Oleksiienko, 73, recounted how, when his surname was Russified in official documents in 1979, he didn't initially protest. He noted he wasn't "particularly nationalist at the time" and didn't anticipate the Soviet Union's collapse. But by the late 1980s – early 1990s, the mismatch between his identity and his name became more difficult to ignore:

> Then the fact of the Russification of the surname started to affect me, even more than the Pioneer necktie.[19] [My daughter] Halya still wore this attribute, and I told her – enough of wearing that dog collar, and she was the first to come to school without the tie, the teachers didn't understand. That was around 1990, Ukraine's independence hadn't happened yet.
>
> I wasn't a nationalist, but I wanted a Ukrainian to be a Ukrainian. I suggested to my wife that the whole family should change the surname [back to Oleksiienko] – she categorically refused, didn't explain in any way. When I moved in 2006 to Brusyliv, Zhytomyr region, I thought – I need to become Oleksiienko... And Kolia's [my son's] details – I don't know, he just proudly told me when he changed (Vasyl Oleksiienko, 73).

His son, Mykola, 35, also participated in the study. He recalled that his decision to reclaim the family name followed a few years later, and father's reclamation reassured him: "I had always known the name was distorted, but I got used to it. When my father corrected his, I started to think I should, too."

Vlad Yefimchuk, 28, shared: "The only thing I feel is that this surname makes me closer to our enemies. I wouldn't say that it sounds so Russian when you say it. But realizing that it was Yukhymchuk before, it sounds much more natural and correct to me". He had initially considered reclaiming the Ukrainian version of his surname but was deterred by the idea of breaking away from

[19] A red necktie worn by members of the Young Pioneers, a Soviet youth organization. It symbolized loyalty to communist ideals and was commonly worn by schoolchildren in the USSR.

the rest of his family. He noted that in his lineage, around 50-60 people have carried the Russified name over the generations, with 20-30 still living today and using it. This gives a feeling of how vast the influence of the Russification of a single person might be a few generations later.

4.2.2. Restoring Historical Justice, Asserting Truth and Freedom

Several participants described their motivation as a form of restoring historical justice: an effort to undo the effects of past repression or assimilation. Mariia Pluzhnikova, 22, whose family name had been Russified from Pluzhnyk, noted that she had not yet changed her name officially but felt that doing so would be a meaningful way of reclaiming some control: "I think that it will help me somehow…you know, to restore historical justice … it will feel like whatever Russian I can remove from my life, I will remove at least somewhere, at least where I control it".

Olena Bohdan, 45, who changed her family name from the Russified Bohdanova, reflected on her motivation and the path to reclamation. For her, it was a matter of asserting truth and freedom today, and showing respect to the memory of her ancestors:

> Several events coincided. My close senior relatives with whom I shared the surname passed away and shortly after that the Russian aggression started in 2014. I remained the only one alive in the family with that surname, so there was no question about changing it together with other family members or alone.
>
> At the same time, there was an enormous fake propaganda about the "oppression of the Russian speakers". Thus, from 2014 onward, the feeling that such a Russified surname is a symbol of unfreedom became very acute. It is clear that people had their names changed because they were not free. Someone was just handed in a document with a Russified surname without having taken a slightest part in this decision, someone saw a better

> opportunity of employment, someone – a chance for survival. All of those diverse stories have one thing in common: lack of freedom.
>
> And in the context of the Russian aggression accompanied by such lies, I had a very acute feeling of how absurd the whole situation was: here, in Ukraine, we were walking around with artificial surnames, adjusted to sound Russian, while being told that Russian speakers were oppressed. My decision did not depend any longer on other family members, since no close relatives directly connected to that name were alive. For me, it was a way to honour the historical memory of my family, to affirm that the truth still matters, and to remove this symbol of unfreedom.
>
> If my surname had been Russian by origin, I would not have changed it. For me, it was not about the -ov/-ova ending itself but about the fact that it had been imposed artificially through all kinds of pressure on people, essentially through conditions of unfreedom (Olena Bohdan, 45).

4.2.3. Avoiding the Transmission of Russified Names to Children

Changes to the given name primarily affect the individual name bearer. If the bearer is male and the naming tradition is patrilineal, as is the case in Ukrainian, the change will also influence the patronymics of his children. The same works for the family name, except it can be passed down even further in the lineage. For this reason, some participants, particularly male, were motivated by a forward-looking concern: the desire to prevent the transmission of Russified names to future generations. Yurko Vovkohon, 42, explained his decision in terms of breaking the chain. He also shared:

> I still feel some kind of, you know, how it is... It was one of those decisions in my life that I consider right. You know, I'm as happy about it as I am about quitting smoking. Well, maybe I'm even more proud of it.

4.2.4. Making the Name Reflect Ethnic Belonging

Another mentioned reason was the desire for one's name to reflect ethnic and cultural identity more accurately. Anna Malcheva, 28, who has both Ukrainian and Romanian roots, said she would like her surname to be more indicative of her ethnicity, because now it still has a very Russian sound and does not reflect the national composition of her family. She said she decided to stick to the current surname because otherwise her father might "see this as a betrayal".

Svitlana Vedmid, 40, whose surname had been changed to Russian Medvedeva, said she is very glad to have learned about the Ukrainian origins of her family name, given these memories from her childhood:

> I remember how in my childhood times, whenever you're asked "Who are you? Where are you from?", it was very "cool" to answer that you're "not from here". ... So it was difficult for me to formulate who I was: my surname is Russian, and my grandfather told me that I was Ukrainian, because my father was Ukrainian, my grandfather was Ukrainian...

In many other interviews, this motivation was frequently implied, though not expressed overly.

4.2.5. Aesthetic or Symbolic Appeal of the Ukrainian Form

Finally, for some of my interlocutors, the Ukrainian version of the name simply resonated more, either in sound, cultural symbolism, or perceived dignity. Angelika Kozoriz-Sakhatska, 53, shared that since there were only daughters in her father's family, three in her own family and two in her uncle's, her maiden name was on the verge of disappearing. She believed it would likely end with her. However, her younger daughter, at the age of 24, decided to adopt a double surname, adding

Kozoriz-Sakhatska in honor of her Ukrainian ancestor. The mother was deeply moved by this decision: "I was so happy, because the surname will live on, because it's Ukrainian, because I love everything that's Ukrainian. And I want to be identified specifically as Ukrainian."

Ihor Odynets, 29, also started presenting himself with his mother's maiden name Odynets, partly because he had researched it and discovered noble connotations and even a historical coat of arms associated with the name. He said that initially, he was even ready to take another surname of Ukrainian descent, if it sounded beautiful to him. Having grown up in a fully Russian-speaking environment in Donetsk surrounded by strong Soviet nostalgia, he described how he started deliberately distancing from that context. He graduated from school in 2013, where most subjects were still taught in Russian, but a passionate Ukrainian-speaking history teacher and his own deep interest in history sparked a personal shift. As a teenager, he developed a strong desire to push back against the dominant Russian-language environment and began embracing all things Ukrainian: language, culture, and history. This protest was further reinforced when he moved to Kyiv later that year to study law at Shevchenko University. The onset of the Euromaidan deepened his commitment even more. Around 2013–2015, he began seriously considering changing his surname to a Ukrainian one. Like the previous speaker, he initially even thought about simply choosing a beautiful Ukrainian surname, regardless of whether it was connected to his family history.

> When the Maidan started, it gave me additional motivation, and I was actually thinking about the fact that I wanted a Ukrainian surname throughout 2013-2015 already, pondering how to go about it. First, I thought about taking, or just making up a beautiful Ukrainian surname. And so this idea was somewhere at the back of my mind. And then the

> invasion in 2022 made everything crystal clear, and I decided to reclaim my family's Ukrainian surname.

Similarly, Mariia Pluzhnikova, 22, said, "Pluzhnyk sounds beautiful and somehow familiar, native. That's why I personally want to change my name."

4.3. The Effects of the Successful Name Reclamations

For those who have successfully reclaimed their Ukrainian names, either in documents or in their self-presentation as a starting point, the outcomes are often deeply emotional and identity-affirming. In many cases, it's not just correction but a symbolic act of resistance and restoration, reconnecting individuals with their family history, national identity, and a sense of self that had been diluted or lost through earlier Russification.

Svitlana Vedmid, 40, described how discovering the original Ukrainian form of her surname became a powerful anchor in the face of war and uncertainty:

> My surname, the Orange Revolution, and Ukrainian folklore awakened me, made me Ukrainian. I'm very glad I didn't have to search far – just to find out the surname had been translated and a suffix added. That connection really supports me, it helps me a lot during the war, it grounds me.

Another participant, O. Kukhtyn, 36, recounted her journey of reverting to her rightful surname with the support of her father, while also sharing the anxiety that it might come with pitfalls:

> In my passport, I "returned" to my surname Kukhtyn. This also happened thanks to my father's memories, efforts, and a sense that I should be Kukhtyn (like his mother), not Kukhtyna (like my mother on her marriage certificate). That is,

> because of inattention or unwillingness to fight, I could continue to be Russified Kukhtina as in the birth certificate.
>
> But I do not feel that this is a clear victory and that this ghost will not catch up with me someday. … Maybe when it comes to inheritance, or some documents where I have to show my birth certificate and explain the difference, or prove that Kukhtyna can be a mother to Kukhyn. … When you have to prove that you are you, what reaction can you have? Rage.

As for the reactions from others after the name change, the participants reported that people tend to be surprised at the beginning, sometimes even scared that the person started 'radicalizing'. One participant recalled that some people became tense after she changed surname, as if wondering what they can expect from her, thinking that maybe she would aggressively react to them still sticking to Russian language or identity. Similarly, she noted, a friend of her, who changed his name from a Russified one, initially started explaining himself, as if she would suspect him of this 'radicalization'. According to her, before 2022, even people who understood the problem of forced Russian assimilation were sometimes scared of this change. This, I can presume, is an extension of the internalized cultural inferiority complex, which has been dictating to Ukrainians that it might be a right decision to assimilate into being Russian, but not vice versa; combined with the contemporary Russian propaganda about the 'oppression of the Russian-speaking population' in Ukraine. Reclamation of the Ukrainian names, as can be observed from the data in this study, is primarily directed at self-determination and getting rid of the imperial legacy.

At the same tame, there were positive reactions. As Mykola Oleksiienko, 35, observed:

> People around me reacted surprised, but positively. They quickly switched to the new version… At first, it felt strange to me, but now I wonder – how did I ever live with that mutilated version?

Coming back to the intergenerational aspect, some of the interlocutors confirmed receiving passive support or indifference from their family members towards their decision to reclaim the Ukrainian name, even though the older generations mostly chose not to change their names themselves:

> They supported my decision… Not with strong enthusiasm, but overall they did. But they themselves – no. You know, for reasons like documents, and 'why bother, we're already this age' (Ihor Odynets, 29).

Ultimately, successful reclamations carry an empowering, if bittersweet, effect. They offer a sense of rectification and cultural alignment, but also highlight how far the Russification process once went, and how long its shadow may linger. The process may be resolved on paper, but emotionally and intergenerationally, it remains complex.

4.4. Unfulfilled Attempts: Bureaucratic and Mental Barriers

Despite a growing awareness of the symbolic and personal significance of reclaiming Ukrainian names, many participants described a persistent gap between intention and action. This hesitation was most commonly linked to the burdens of bureaucratic procedures, legal complications (especially regarding inheritance documents), psychological doubt, or a sense of potential disconnection from one's family and/or the person's existing social image, associated with a certain name, upon the change.

One of the most frequently cited deterrents was the administrative complexity of changing official documents. For some, the process felt so daunting that it prevented even starting. Hanna Mieshkova, 25, reflected on this clearly:

> I would like to change my name, but I haven't even started because we're currently renewing other documents, and changing it is a real hassle... I even thought about taking my great-grandmother's surname, Matsiehora, but again – it's a big deal, a lot of bureaucracy, I think.

Similarly, Svitlana Vedmid, 40, spoke about how these challenges become even more complicated when living abroad, which many Ukrainians are now forced to do due to the war:

> For now, I don't want to get involved with all that bureaucracy: all my documents are in the name Medvedieva, and there are a lot of them. Plus, I'm currently in Germany – I can't even imagine what a headache it would be here.

Instead of going through legal channels, she found a symbolic alternative – using her family name Vedmid as a literary pseudonym when translating books, and on social media.

Intergenerational dynamics also played a significant role in delaying or abandoning name changes. Daniel Onipka, 25, reflected on how no one in his extended family had ever taken steps to restore the family's original surname, which was Russified four generations ago. Each generation, he said, was discouraged by the legal and financial complications, especially the fear of not being able to inherit something from the older generations later. Noteworthy, other respondents shared the experience of not having any problems with inheritance documents after changing the personal name; so this barrier might as well be a misconception.

Although Daniel had often considered reclaiming his name, his parents discouraged him, and the situation became more entangled with marriage: "My parents mostly talk me out of it... My wife now shares part of my surname too... the further you go in time, the harder it becomes to actually do it." As a result, he sees his role now as preserving the memory and passing on the story to the next generation, "so they'll know how it was supposed to be from the very beginning."

Beyond the bureaucratic hurdles, psychological barriers and concerns about social recognition also played a role in delaying change. Multiple participants worried about disrupting their personal or professional continuity, or being the only one 'disconnected' from the rest of their family. As Hanna Meshkova, 25, noted, "People already know me by my surname, it's like it's become a part of me, my history... I'm still thinking about it."

Anna Shevtsova, 34, expressed similar hesitation. As the only one in her family who even considered changing her name, she ultimately decided against it due to the volume of paperwork involved: "I'm the only one in the family who even thought about it, but I won't do it – there are just too many documents to change."

In some cases, anticipated social discomfort, just like the imagined bureaucratic limitations, proved to be less significant than expected. Ihor Odynets, 29, initially had concerns about explaining the change to others, but later realized it was easier than he thought: "At first I had some thoughts like – how will I explain this to friends... But actually, when you're in real conversations, not just imagining it, it's received much more easily."

Thus, even though the desire to restore Ukrainian names remains emotionally resonant and symbolically important, it often encounters a mix of institutional, familial, and psychological constraints. Some participants find partial alternatives through symbolic means, others postpone indefinitely, and some shift the focus toward transmitting memory to the next generations as a form of resistance and cultural continuity. Still, this shows that once done a few generations ago, these changes are actually quite hard to reverse and require a conscious effort, time and patience to handle the documents. Which, in my view, reflects a deeper systemic issue: the longer these personal names remain in their Russified form, the more entrenched they become, effectively erasing layers of Ukrainian identity from public and private life and preserving the linguistic legacy of imperial domination.

Conclusion

This study has examined the complex trajectory of Ukrainian personal names, focusing on two interlinked processes: the historical Russification of names and the contemporary efforts to reclaim them. Together, these processes demonstrate that personal names are not as neutral and purely personal as they might appear at first – they reflect histories of domination, assimilation, and, on the other hand, resistance and recovery.

As has been explored in Chapter 2, the Russification of Ukrainian personal names occurred through a complex interplay of coercive systems, institutional pressures, and internalized language hierarchies. While recording the population, issuing or reissuing documents, administrative organs frequently imposed Russian-style spellings or morphological alterations of Ukrainian names without consent, taking advantage of illiteracy of the receivers, indifference, or the power relations which made it unfavorable to protest the wrong version of the name. The army served as another powerful agent of assimilation, enforcing linguistic uniformity and fostering loyalty to a Russian-centered identity. These processes were deeply systemic, rooted in hierarchical institutions that shaped generations through everyday decisions like how a name was recorded or pronounced.

Beyond institutional mechanisms, many cases of Russification reflected strategic or conformity-driven self-assimilation. Individuals and families adapted their names to align with what was perceived as culturally superior or professionally advantageous: sometimes to avoid harassment or persecution, and sometimes due to deeply internalized ideas of Russian cultural prestige. These choices, though appearing voluntary, were often responses to structural inequalities and social stigmas attached to Ukrainian identity. The cumulative effect was a normalization of Russian-sounding names as markers of urbanity, modernity, or safety, and a marginalization of Ukrainian ones, ultimately reshaping not only personal identities, but broader understandings of cultural legitimacy.

Chapter 3 explored how families in Ukraine have remembered, ignored, debated, or rediscovered the Russification of personal names across generations. The chapter has outlined a

typology of responses: some families acknowledge it as a neutral historical fact; others view it as a shared injustice; still others experience conflict, particularly along generational lines, where younger individuals are more likely to question or reject the imposed identity. A significant number of participants described intergenerational silence, shaped by trauma, repression, or fear, which created gaps in family knowledge and identity. These silences were often linked to broader historical traumas such as war, political persecution, and famine.

Yet this silence also sparked a drive in some to uncover the truth, leading participants to conduct genealogical research, revisit family conversations, or reflect on memories in new ways. The overview of the participants' stories in this chapter showed that Russified names are not just linguistic remnants but carry emotional, historical, and political weight. They shape how people relate to their family history and national identity, often becoming catalysts for reflection, conflict, or rediscovery.

Finally, Chapter 4 explored the motivations, experiences, and obstacles faced by Ukrainians reclaiming their personal names from Russified forms to their Ukrainian versions. The reasons for these changes have shown to be varied and deeply personal, including the desire to prevent passing Russified names to future generations, affirm ethnic and cultural identity, reclaim familial heritage, and embrace the aesthetic or symbolic resonance of Ukrainian names. Participants shared powerful stories of pride, emotional resolution, and identity restoration upon reclaiming their names, often framed as acts of resistance against historical and ongoing assimilation pressures. For many, this process was sparked by pivotal events such as the Euromaidan or Russia's full-scale invasion, reinforcing the name change as not only personal but also political.

The ways of thinking about the Russification of personal names and the acts of name reclamation also reflect broader social dynamics. While the ages of those reclaiming Ukrainian names vary, certain patterns emerge. Younger individuals, especially those born after 1991, educated and socialized in independent Ukraine, tend to be generally more active in being critical towards Russification and initiating such changes. Having grown up in an environment where Ukrainian national identity was more visible and less suppressed, they often approach these decisions with

confidence and political clarity. Middle-aged and older individuals, particularly those who spent formative years under Soviet rule, often describe becoming politicized more gradually, sometimes, in a decade or a few. For many of them, key political events for contemporary Ukraine, such as the Declaration of independence, the Orange Revolution, the Euromaidan and the beginning of the war in the east of Ukraine, or the full-scale Russian invasion, served as turning points that reshaped how they understood their identity and the meaning of their names (the last two mentioned events worked similarly for the younger generation, too). This phenomenon can be explained by the waves of heightened national consciousness, emerging in response to these significant political events, and each acting as catalysts that might spur individuals and communities to revisit and sometimes reclaim their cultural heritage. This interplay of structural and personal factors highlights the complexity of decolonial efforts and situates Ukraine's experience within broader post-imperial and nation-building processes globally, showing that (re)naming, as a powerful symbolic tool, can be used to reclaim autonomy and rewrite identity narratives.

Across generations, those who do choose to reclaim their names tend to be well-educated, articulate their motivations with historical and ethical awareness, and often express a strong sense of national belonging or civic responsibility. In this sense, while the process is deeply personal, it is also embedded in wider structures of education, memory, and political transformation.

The barriers that prevent many from completing the process of name reclamation were also given an overview. Legal bureaucracy, particularly for those living abroad, concerns about inheritance documents, emotional attachment to one's existing name, and fears of disconnection from the family often lead to hesitation or abandonment of the effort. In some cases, individuals resort to symbolic reclamation through pseudonyms or storytelling to preserve cultural memory. Ultimately, while reclaiming Ukrainian names is an empowering form of decolonization, the process reveals the lasting impact of Russification and the systemic difficulty of undoing even personal elements of imperial legacy.

The stories shared by participants have revealed that names are not just labels but repositories of memory, identity, and power. They have shown to be one of the factors of national identity reconstruction in contemporary Ukraine, amid the persisting Russian military aggression. What emerges is a social and cultural transformation in which naming becomes both a personal decision and a form of collective reorientation. The growing momentum behind the name reclamations suggests a cultural shift: Ukrainians are increasingly asserting the right to name themselves on their own terms, transforming private acts into collective resistance.

Epilogue

As I am finishing writing this text, staying up all night to add the final touches, I take a 5-minute break, unlock my phone and go on social media, not expecting to see anything new in the feed during the night. But I do see – lots of fresh videos from my friends in Kyiv, one after another, recording how kamikaze drones are flying over just over their heads and hitting residential buildings nearby. These sounds and pictures of the sky, covered in thick gray smoke, sound and look all the same from different locations they're recording from. One after the other, they write that this is their scariest night so far, and they hope to survive it. They are staying up as well, but the reason is different.

In the morning I get to know from the news that while this was happening in Kyiv, in Odesa Russian forces hit a maternity hospital.

These are the sounds of liberation of the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine.

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Appendix 1. Interview Guide

Notes for the participant: If you don't have an answer to a particular question, just say so; I understand that you may not have all the information. However, if you do have a lot of information, please don't hesitate to share – the more data for this research, the better. If there are several such stories in your family, it's best to answer these questions separately for each one (or at least for one of them).

0) Please state your full name and age.

1) Which of your relatives had or still has a Russified given name, patronymic, or surname? What was the change? Do you know when it happened, and do any documents confirming the change still exist? (For example, my great-grandfather had a certificate where both the original and Russified versions of his name were listed – the original in brackets. Or perhaps there are separate documents with different name versions?)

2) What were the reasons behind the Russification: was it the person's own decision (many did this to avoid persecution, to get a better job, etc.); someone else's suggestion; imposed forcibly; a mistake/typo; or another reason?

3) Was the "original" name still used informally: at home, among friends, or even publicly?

4) How did the Russified name affect (or not affect) the person in everyday life, for example, in education, employment, documents, or communication?

5) When and how did you find out about this Russification? If you remember, what was your reaction at the time? Did your attitude change later — for instance, after 2014 or 2022?

6) Was this topic ever discussed in family conversations? If so, how often, and what was the general attitude of your relatives toward this part of your family history? If there are different views within the family, feel free to share.

7) Was there ever a desire in your family to return to the original name or surname: any thoughts, attempts, or conversations about this? If so, but it hasn't been done yet, please explain why — are there specific obstacles, or is it just a matter of time? If it was done, please share that experience: how difficult was the document change, how did people around you react, and were there any issues afterward?

8) Are there people around you now (friends, acquaintances, relatives, colleagues, etc.) who have gone through a similar experience? Do you talk about it with them, and if so, how?

9) Do you feel that this name change (or reclamation) influenced your sense of belonging — to your family, your country, your culture?

10) Feel free to add any other details or memories that come to mind. Thank you!

Appendix 2. List of Participants

For ethical reasons, some personal names have been replaced and/or shortened to initials at the request of the participants. However, the Russified name has been preserved throughout, and some of the participants (including all those represented by initials only) tell stories of Russification in their family that do not specifically relate to their personal name. In the study, I use the personal name which the participant prefers (e.g., if they haven't changed their legal name back to Ukrainian yet, but are presenting themselves with it, I use this Ukrainian name) – out of respect for their choice and right for self-determination. The participants are listed in the alphabetical order.

№	Participant's Personal Name	Age
1	B. Oleksandra	22
2	Batalova Liudmyla	26
3	Bohdan K.	45
4	Flerchuk Maksym	27
5	Humenna M.	23
6	K. Mariia	22
7	Kasianova Kateryna	21
8	Klymenko Danylo	23
9	Kokhan Yevhen	46
10	Kozoriz-Sakhatska Anzhelika	53
11	Kukhtyn O.	36

№	Participant's Personal Name	Age
12	Lohvyn Ihor	26
13	Malcheva Anna	28
14	Melnyk Kseniia	23
15	Mieshkova Hanna	25
16	O.I.	49
17	Odynets Ihor	29
18	Oleksiienko Mykola	35
19	Oleksiienko Vasyl	73
20	Onipka Daniel	25
21	Pluzhnikova Mariia	22
22	R. Mariia	25
23	Radibov Mykola	79
24	Sh.D.	50
25	Shevtsova Anna	34
26	Sobotyk Olena	20
27	Vedmid Svitlana	40
28	Vorobii Ostap	34

№	Participant's Personal Name	Age
29	Vovkohon Yurko	42
30	Yefimchuk Vlad	28