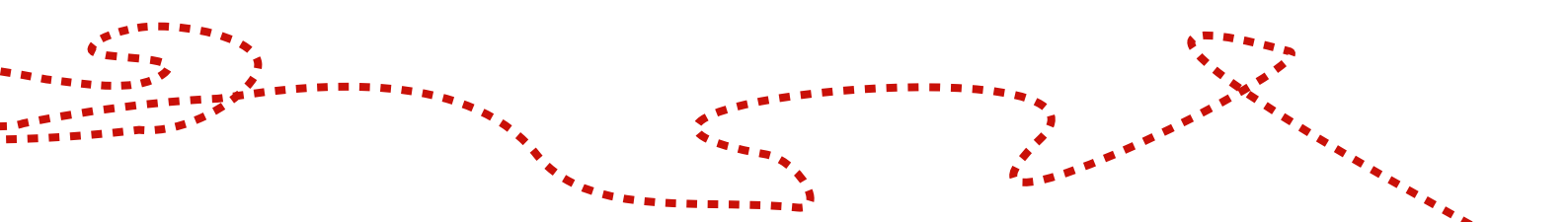




A primary school in Varvarivka in the Mykolaiv region was shelled from nearby Russian-held territory. While the city itself is not occupied, Russian aggression still impacts key areas of Ukrainian life, such as the education system, 16.07.2022. Photo: © picture alliance / NurPhoto | Maciek Musialek

Linguistic Violence: The “Russian World” Agenda and the Erasure of Ukrainian Identity

Liudmyla Pidkuimukha



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As of 2025, around 8,000 officially confirmed Ukrainian military personnel and 2,000 civilians are held captive by Russia.¹ Their captivity is not only a site of physical suffering but also a battlefield of identity where language becomes a tool of domination. Testimonies of former war prisoners demonstrate how daily rituals – such as compulsory memorization and performance of the Russian national anthem, chanting of patriotic slogans, reciting poems glorifying Russia, broadcasts of Soviet war songs, and transmission of propagandist literature – function as both psychological and physical torture aimed at dismantling Ukrainian identity and enforcing symbolic subjugation.

by Liudmyla Pidkuimukha

Introduction

According to the OSCE Human Rights Monitoring Mission, Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs) are systematically subjected to torture, abuse, and degrading treatment.² Inhumane conditions have been recorded in 32 out of 48 detention facilities, both in Russia and in the occupied territories of Ukraine.³ Victims of such illegal treatment are not limited to members of the military; many civilians have also been subjected to similar abuse. Russia, in gross violation of the Geneva Convention, does not distinguish between Ukrainian combatants – those directly involved in fighting as members of the armed forces, and civilians – non-combatants detained by Russian troops in occupied areas. Both groups are taken as prisoners.

Mykhailo Savva, a member of the Expert Council of the Centre for Civil Liberties, points out that “Russian prisons are places of abuse, very often of torture, and of constant humiliation. People are traumatized for life” [translation by author].⁴ As former prisoner of war Maksym Kolesnikov has noted, in addition to physical abuse, those taken captive by Russia experience “strong psychological pressure on their minds and mentality”.⁵ According to Maksym Butkevych, a Ukrainian human rights activist, journalist and member of the Ukrainian military who spent two years in captivity, “the Russian penal system reflects the values and methods of the ‘Russian world’. It reflects the fundamental view of humans as disposable material.”⁶ The professed foundations of the “Russian World” are the Russian language and culture, the Orthodox faith, and a view of the Great Patriotic War (Russia’s term for World War II) as the Soviet Union’s greatest military triumph.⁷

This Policy Brief seeks to investigate how language, history, and cultural symbols, as an inseparable part of the

“Russian World” ideology, are weaponized in Russian captivity and the occupied territories of Ukraine as instruments of psychological, physical, and ideological violence with the goal of enforcing symbolic subjugation and dismantling Ukrainian identity.

Box 1: The Sources

This Policy Brief draws on the following sources:

- first-hand testimonies, published by Ukrainian and international media, such as *Time*, *New York Post*, *BBC*, *The Guardian*, etc., as well as video interviews with released POWs and civilians;
- journalistic investigations;
- human rights reports, including *Human Rights Watch*, the *OSCE Human Rights Monitoring Mission*, and Ukrainian NGOs such as the *Centre for Civil Liberties*, which document the treatment of Ukrainian prisoners of war and civilians held in Russian-controlled facilities.

Russian Language and Culture as Tools of Mental Violence

Russia’s intent to erase Ukrainian identity is evident both in the occupied territories and in Russian prisons and detention facilities, where language has been weaponized as a tool of psychological and physical violence. This linguistic and cultural assault aims to impose Russian identity upon Ukrainian captives while forcibly erasing Ukrainian heritage. Reports show, for instance, that each morning, at 6 a.m., Ukrainian POWs in Russian captivity were forced to wake up and sing the Russian national anthem.⁸ Those who refused or failed to sing were beaten severely, and failure to remember the words resulted in further brutal punishment.⁹ Forcing detainees to sing the Russian

anthem imposes the Russian language and cultural dominance of the occupying country.

Such practices are not isolated but are part of a broader strategy of dehumanization. Testimonies from survivors reveal their systematic nature. Snizhana Ostapenko, a 23-year-old junior sergeant of the 56th Separate Mechanized Brigade who took part in the defense of Mariupol and the Azovstal steel plant, described experiences that echoed those of other Ukrainian prisoners of war. She recalled loudspeakers “blasting the Russian national anthem around the clock,” depriving detainees of any possibility of rest between torture sessions.¹⁰ This deliberate use of sound as a form of punishment illustrates the denial of silence and rest to prisoners. This practice clearly constitutes torture and physical violence.

The ritual of forced singing extended beyond the Russian and Soviet Union national anthem. Prisoners were also made to memorize the anthems of the so-called “DPR” (Donetsk People’s Republic) and “LPR” (Luhansk People’s Republic) – self-proclaimed entities in occupied parts of Ukraine’s Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. This ideological conditioning was intended to normalize the Russian occupier’s political narrative. Roman, who was held captive for several weeks during the occupation of Vovchansk (Kharkiv region) in 2022, reported that in addition to being tortured with electric shocks and forced to dig trenches, he was made to sing the “LPR” anthem multiple times a day. As he recalls, “The guard would come, and for his amusement, he’d line us up and make us sing that damned anthem [translation by author]”.¹¹ A similar account came from a civilian woman who could not memorize the “DPR” anthem by heart. The soldiers “went around threatening people, scaring the others, and the girls in the cell began to help her learn it.”¹²

Moreover, reports show that the humiliation of prisoners often took on gendered forms. Larysa Kycherenko, a 53-year-old member of Ukraine’s National Guard, told the New York Post about scenes of gendered violence and ritualized degradation where the line between torture and spectacle was blurred: “We had to walk naked in front of the men and everyone else, bent over, through freezing cold water,” she said. “Afterwards, we were forced to sing the Russian anthem while naked.”¹³ This testimony reveals how the body itself is instrumentalized as a site of Russian domination in captivity. The forced performance annihilates the women’s dignity and inscribes power through humiliation.

Ideological Coercion as an Element of Psychological Torture

In addition to the physical violence of these acts, ideological coercion is also omnipresent. One survivor remembered how Russian soldiers forced women to kiss St.

Box 2: The Anthem

The national anthem of the Russian Federation uses the same melody as the Soviet anthem. The lyrics were written by Sergey Mihalkov, who also wrote the lyrics to the Soviet anthem. It was adopted in 2000. The first stanza goes:

*“Russia is our sacred power,
Russia is our beloved country.
Mighty will, great glory –
Your heritage for all time!”*

George ribbons and photos of veterans of World War II. These acts are deeply symbolic: the St. George ribbon has become a symbol of Russian militarism and aggression.¹⁴ In Ukraine, since 2014, it has been associated with separatists and Russian troops, and since 2022, alongside the letters Z and V, it symbolizes Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine.¹⁵ The photos of World War II veterans have also been chosen with purpose, as Russia is famous for its “pobiedobiesie” (“victory frenzy”)¹⁶ and still relies on World War II narratives, repeating the slogan “We can do it again!”

Coercing Ukrainian POWs to kiss ribbons and photos is designed to enforce their submission and identification with the aggressor’s historical narrative. Under torture, Ukrainians were also forced to memorize “patriotic” poems,¹⁷ and agree with falsified versions of history.¹⁸ In the Kursk Detention Centre, prisoners were given printed texts of songs and poems glorifying Russia, which they had to memorize within an hour. Former detainees recounted that refusing to participate in these rituals of forced Russification often resulted in physical abuse, including broken ribs or legs. This underlines the interconnectedness of physical and psychological violence and ideological humiliation.¹⁹ Similar to the forced singing of anthems, this ideological conditioning aims to normalize the occupier’s political narrative of the “Russian World”.

Viktoria Andrusha, a 25-year-old teacher from Chernihiv oblast, detained and kept in Kursk, recalled that Russian captors expanded the repertoire of humiliation by forcing them to sing military and pro-Russian songs. Moreover, she mentioned how Ukrainians were forced to sing the song “We Are Russians” when new prisoners were brought, so they would learn it too.²⁰ The prisoners were compelled to take part in daily rituals of loyalty to Russia, as Oleksandr, the civilian POW, recalled “All day long we were forced to sing the Russian anthem, [along with Soviet-era military songs] “Katyusha,” “Den’ Pobedy” [“Victory Day”]. Early in the morning, they get you up, look through the peephole. You have to jump up at once, and immediately sing the anthem, and then – [Oleg] Gazmanov, “Uncle Vova [Putin], we are with you,” “Katyusha,” and all

these stupid songs”.²¹ Such practices were repeated every fifteen to twenty minutes, and failure to comply led to punishment: “If you sang badly, they came at night and made you recite it by heart, keeping you awake until morning.”²²

In addition to this treatment, the conditions inside the detention facilities have been unbearable. In the case of former POW Serhii Smyrnov, a major and head of the Marine Corps band, he and his fellow cellmates were confined to overcrowded cells where Russian music from World War II blared constantly. Radio broadcasts continued throughout the day, serving as another method of psychological torture. Books provided to prisoners were typically focused on World War II, reinforcing Russian historical narratives and national identity. Serhii remarked that upon reading these books, it became clear that “the methods of brutality used by Russian soldiers have remained unchanged since those times [translation by author].”²³ This continuous pressure serves to dismantle the prisoners’ sense of self and reality. In facilities such as Bryansk Detention Centre No. 2, particular emphasis has been placed on forced Russification. Detainees are compelled to shout, “Glory to Russia!” and speak only in Russian, while their captors relentlessly refer to them as “fascists” and “Nazis.”²⁴

These mechanisms of control and propaganda were also extended to foreign captives. A British citizen held by Russian forces reported being “starved of sunlight and only allowed out to film propaganda videos and take calls with the Foreign Office.”²⁵ According to his testimony, guards played the Russian national anthem on a continuous loop, forcing him to stand and sing it under threat of beatings. Whenever guards opened his cell grill, he was ordered to shout, “Glory to Russia.”²⁶ This demonstrates how captivity itself becomes a performative tool for disseminating state ideology.

Access to literature also reflects the intention of Russian cultural domination. Serhii Smyrnov recalled being



The Motherland Monument in Kyiv bears Ukraine’s coat of arms and stands as a symbol of Ukrainian identity and resilience. It is located within the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War. Source: Brook Ward via flickr, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/brookward/33428950508/>

allowed to read books and considered himself “lucky” when he found an American detective novel, since most available books were in Russian, which he described as “just garbage.” He wondered why people “still cling to Russian works and refuse to explore a much broader cultural landscape, when such a wide variety of high-quality music and literature exists worldwide.”²⁷

The ban on the Ukrainian language is perhaps the most apparent manifestation of symbolic violence. While physical violence is directed at the body and psychological violence is directly targeted at the mental integrity of the individual, symbolic violence is carried out through the imposition of meanings, norms, and hierarchies that make domination appear natural and inevitable. By banning Ukrainian and imposing Russian as the only valid language of communication the occupiers aim to delegitimize the Ukrainian identity itself, thereby creating a situation of symbolic subjugation where submission is inevitable and resistance impossible. Any attempt to speak Ukrainian resulted in punishment: “There was one man who answered some questions in Ukrainian, so he was taken away. He was gone for two or three hours, and when he returned, he could barely walk. We didn’t ask anything, because we understood what had happened.”²⁸ For soldiers who did not know Russian, captivity was particularly dangerous and painful. In an interview one POW recalled a group of captives from Ternopil, a predominantly Ukrainian-speaking city, who were forced to learn Russian in captivity. Despite their attempts to speak Russian, even minor mistakes were punished. “I remember one of them pronounced everything clearly, but at the end he said ‘89-go roku’ in Ukrainian [instead of ‘89-go goda’ in Russian], and the guard immediately struck him on his back with a hammer,” demonstrating zero tolerance for the Ukrainian language and the role of violence as coercion.²⁹

Linguistic Violence in the Occupied Territories of Ukraine

This linguistic persecution extends beyond the prison walls to the occupied territories. Russia’s “linguicide” strategy in the occupied territories affects five main areas: *official communication*, where administrative documents are exclusively in Russian; *the cultural sphere*, through the removal and destruction of books on post-1991 Ukrainian history, the Holodomor, and others; *the media*, via mobile television units broadcasting Kremlin propaganda; *the public space*, with the replacement of Ukrainian-language signs and the reversal of decommunization measures; and *education*, including the complete elimination of Ukrainian as a language of instruction, the replacement of school and university staff, destruction of library collections, and the retraining of teachers.³⁰

Moreover, in the occupied territories, speaking Ukrainian – and thus resisting the assertion of the “Russian World” agenda – has become life-threatening. In

Melitopol, a student was punished by pro-Russian security forces for speaking Ukrainian at school: they put a bag over his head, transported him several kilometers away, and abandoned him.³¹ Reports of these brutal acts are corroborated by Russian media and social platforms. Russian blogger Kirill Fedorov shared an interview with a Russian military officer, revealing that Ukrainians in occupied areas are being kidnapped simply for speaking Ukrainian.³²

Finally, the most extreme form of punishment for asserting one's Ukrainian identity is death. One Ukrainian soldier described Russian behavior in occupied Berdians'k, recalling that the occupiers once killed a man "just because he called himself a patriot. They asked him something, and he replied, 'Yes, I love Ukraine,' so they shot him dead right in the street."³³ Yet despite the danger and brutality, there are known examples of civilian resistance in the occupied territories. For example, Time magazine reports a case from the village of Yahidne in Chernihiv Oblast, which was under Russian occupation in March 2022. Civilians showed resilience by refusing to sing the Russian or Soviet anthem, even under threat of starvation.³⁴

Conclusion

This Policy Brief demonstrates how the Russian language, culture, and historical narratives become instruments of punishment, torture and oppression against Ukrainian prisoners and in occupied territories.³³ By forcing detainees to sing national anthems, songs glorifying Putin, and chants celebrating military aggression against

Ukraine, Russian captors seek to assert their superiority and to break the spirit of their victims. Speaking the Ukrainian language results in beatings, humiliation, and, in some cases, even death. In this context, the Russian penitentiary system not only physically destroys and dehumanizes prisoners of war but also aims to annihilate their moral resilience and erase their Ukrainian identity, thereby seeking to absorb and enslave them completely. Thus, the situation with Ukrainian prisoners of war, both military personnel and civilians, requires intervention and immediate actions by representatives of the UN and the Red Cross.

Author

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About TraCe

What effects do global developments such as technologization and climate change have on political violence? How can political violence be limited or legitimized by international institutions? How is it interpreted and conceptualized? Since April 2022, these questions are addressed by the BMFTR-funded regional research center "Transformations of Political Violence" (TraCe), in which five Hessian research institutions work together with a variety of disciplinary perspectives. More information: www.trace-center.de/en // www.linkedin.com/company/trace-violence // bsky.app/profile/trace-center.de

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