

# The Ukraine Conflict: The Spectre of Fixed Cultural Identities

Qasir Shah\*

As I watch in horror the barbarity of the Ukrainian conflict unfold, I am reminded of the ineluctable charm of the notion of 'fixed' cultural identity. In particular, what is being played out now is the idea of a fixed ethnic and national identity, and the priority these elements are given to one's individual identity. Putin views the Ukrainians as ethnic brethren and denies Ukraine's sovereignty by claiming that [present-day Ukraine, as a sovereign state, has never existed](#): both 'nations' can trace their roots to the medieval federation, Kievan Rus. The Ukrainians on the other hand are adamant of their separate sovereign status.

However, the idea of a fixed cultural identity is too simplistic: identity is never singular and unified, but rather composite. As Appiah (2010) says, 'identities are multiple and overlapping and context-sensitive, and some are relatively trivial or transient'. The range of identities is almost infinite; they draw upon narratives of nationality, race, religion, gender, profession, class, political ideology etc. These are constantly in flux, and which of these we select and prioritise makes us the unique persons that we are.

Notwithstanding the composite nature of our individual identities, the far right peddles the belief that people are *essentially* defined by their nationality, race, language, or religion, which 'presupposes that 'deep

down inside' everyone there is just one affiliation that really matters, a kind of 'fundamental truth' about each person, an 'essence' determined once and for all at birth, never to change thereafter (Maalouf 2000, 2). Such a narrative tends to go hand in hand with the idea that cultural (or national) identity embodies historical continuity (e.g. David Miller 1993).

Yet the idea of immutability of national identity masks the fact that the nation-state is a recent invention: as Derek Heater (1999) informs us, it is only in the last two hundred years that the concept of citizenship and nationality have become twinned concepts. Moreover, the coming into being of the modern nation-state was forged in violence. For instance, in nineteenth-century France, in the process of nation-building, the nascent state destroyed the pre-existing sense of a distinct nationhood for the Bretons and Basques. Go back five centuries, and one will discover Hesse, Naples, and the Grand Duchy of Muscovy, but no Ukraine, Russian Federation, Germany, or Italy. But as Ernest Renan (1882) argued, this 'forgetting ... is an essential factor in the creation of a nation'. This convenient 'forgetting' prevented Putin from recognising that Chechnya was a nation conquered by Russia in 1858. And such amnesia makes him believe Ukrainians and Russians are the same people. One could ask Putin, if Ukrainians and Russians are really brethren, then why visit such wanton misery, destruction and death on your brothers and sisters?

Governments, and the ordinary citizens of bordering nations, moved by the human suffering, have welcomed nearly 4 million Ukrainian refugees - mostly women and children - with open arms, displaying solidarity with their fellow humans, with [Poland alone taking in over](#)

[2.2 million](#). This exemplary response highlights the depth and abundance of human compassion and kindness: we are not atomistic selfish individuals or nations. Yet the Western response to Ukraine contrasts starkly with its lack toward Yemen. Further, I am reminded that not long ago, these very countries put up barbed wire fences preventing Syrian and Afghan refugees from even passing through their lands: protecting a besieged 'fortress Europe' from dilution by a 'foreign horde.' For example Poland, which has been so generous, vociferously refused to accept Syrian and Afghan refugees in 2015.

This antipathy has resurfaced in the present conflict. African, Asian and Arab students describe harrowing journeys and discrimination as they fled Ukraine: some reported the humiliation of being served in supermarkets only after Ukrainians had been served; others of their transportation being commandeered for Ukrainians and told: 'There's Poland, now walk'. Even when they arrive at borders, they are pushed behind Ukrainians, and when they cross borders, countries who have been so generous to Ukrainians, [discriminate and ignore people of colour](#).

My intention is not to compare this discrimination to the terrible devastation visited upon these heroic Ukrainians, but rather highlight the continuing hex of the fixed cultural identity narrative. A response based on cultural/ethnic solidarity - because Ukraine is ['one of us'](#), civilised people who 'look like us': ['blue eyes and blond hair'](#) - is immoral; it perpetuates the divisive cycle of alterity – 'of "we-ness" of friends [...] to the "they-ness" of the enemies' (Bauman 1992, 678). Cultures have intermingled since time immemorial; purity and homogeneity are myths, even *Homo sapiens*, Neanderthals,

Denisovans, and Homo *heidelbergensis* interbred (Ko 2016). Geographical or cultural demarcations are artificial and arbitrary human constructs. ‘The notion that identity has to do with people who look the same, feel the same, call themselves the same, is nonsense’ (Hall 2019, 70).

## References

- Appiah, A. (2005) *The Ethics of Identity*. Princeton University Press.
- Bauman, Z. (1992) 'Soil, Blood and Identity.' *The Sociological Review* 40 (4). 675–701. DOI:10.1111/j.1467-954X.1992.tb00407.x.
- Heater, D. B. (1999) *What is citizenship?* Polity Press.
- Ko, K. H. (2016) 'Hominin interbreeding and the evolution of human variation.' *Journal of Biological Research-Thessaloniki* 23(1). 1-9.
- Maalouf, A. 2000 *On Identity*. Translated by Barbara Bray. London: The Harvill Press.
- Miller, D. (1993) 'In Defence of Nationality.' *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 10(1). 3–16. <https://doi.org/10.2307/24353704>
- Morley, D. G. (2019) *Stuart Hall: Essential Essays Volume 2-Identity and Diaspora*. Duke University Press.
- Renan, E. (1882) *What is a Nation?* Presses-Pocket.  
[http://ucparis.fr/files/9313/6549/9943/What\\_is\\_a\\_Nation.pdf](http://ucparis.fr/files/9313/6549/9943/What_is_a_Nation.pdf)

\***Qasir Shah** is a Lecturer in Citizenship and Education at University College London. He has published on various subjects: Confucian

The logo for the Professional Educational Society of Great Britain (pesgb) is a dark teal square with the lowercase letters 'pesgb' in a white, sans-serif font centered within it.

pesgb

ethics and pedagogy, English education policy, Citizenship Education, democracy, and lifelong learning. His latest publication being: Independent grammar school: Durham. The arrival of low-cost private schooling to a developed nation. *FORUM* 63(1) 115-127.