

Coming to Terms with Ukrainian/Russian Identity During the War: An American Social Worker's Perspective

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Abstract: Conflict in Ukraine has disrupted the lives of millions of people, including orphaned children. Yet, the consequences of the war in Ukraine extend beyond the Ukrainian border. The current crisis also impacts Ukrainian adoptees in the United States. Social workers are in a position to help children and families dealing with the effects of the crisis. My narrative adds another voice to the academic conversation from the perspective of a Ukrainian adoptee and a licensed clinical social worker working on coming to terms with multicultural identity as it pertains to the war in Ukraine. Additionally, it guides social workers who may be working with current or future adoptees in a therapeutic space by emphasizing the importance of culturally sensitive and trauma-informed services to address the intersection of institutionalization, adoption transition, and the impact of the current crisis in Ukraine.

Keywords: adoption, cultural competency, crisis intervention, cultural trauma, identity

Thursday, February 23rd of 2022 started as an ordinary day. I remember sitting on the couch with my husband, talking about our workdays and exchanging a few funny things we saw on Twitter (now X). I talked about how refreshing it is to spend afternoons not being glued to the evening news as we did during the election season. We discussed the cumulative trauma we experienced because of COVID-19 and reflected on being on the other side of things despite a few challenging days, months, and years. It was a lighthearted mood in our house, filled with reflection, laughter, and gratitude. Then, my husband proclaimed, "We better turn on the news." I jokingly replied, "Is the world coming to an end?" He did not respond but proceeded to turn on the evening news.

As of June 2024, the crisis in Ukraine has impacted over six million Ukrainians who have fled their homes (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, n.d.). As of May 2022 (the date of the most recent report on civilian casualties by the United Nations), 4,591 Ukrainian civilians were injured, and at least 3,942 Ukrainian civilians were killed because of the Russian aggression (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2022). In addition to the loss of life, many villages, towns, and cities across Ukraine have lost their cultural artifacts, infrastructure, and people lost their homes. Unfortunately, the full impact of the invasion is not yet realized. The consequences of the war do not remain within the borders of one country; they affect people worldwide, including Ukrainian migrants and adoptees living in the US. This reflection is a product of my journey dealing with war in Ukraine through the lens of intersectionality as it pertains to my identity. The purpose of this paper is to add another voice to the academic conversation from the perspective of a Ukrainian adoptee and a licensed clinical social worker and to provide guidance to social workers who may be working with current or future adoptees in a therapeutic space. The recommendations are based on the steps I took to deal with the initial shock of war and the identity crisis, which helped me process my thoughts and feelings surrounding those issues.

Orphan + Adoptee = A Social Worker

My story is like those of many other Eastern European children who were internationally adopted. In 1991, Ukraine gained its independence from the Soviet Union; however, the change in the government resulted in various negative social consequences because “the Soviet-type social care system” (Norman et al., 2008, p. 95) also collapsed with its government. As a result, people in Ukraine experienced increased poverty, alcoholism, and an inability for families to care for their children. In addition, the societal chaos that resulted after the fall of the Soviet Union increased the number of children who became orphans. Unfortunately, my biological family was not immune to societal problems. So, at the age of six, I became one of the handfuls of other orphans from the nearby villages that officially commemorated the opening of an orphanage in Ivankiv. I remember waiting in line for registration, but I did not understand the purpose of that trip or why I had to spend the night there. One night eventually turned into a week, and a week turned into months of hoping that I would return home. But that did not happen.

Most Ukrainian orphans are considered “social orphans” (Darewych, 2013, p. 85) because they have parents or other living relatives. Yet, the parents/relatives cannot care for the children due to poverty, substance abuse, and/or different health needs. I had family living in a village about 30 minutes away from my orphanage, but I rarely saw them unless I tried to get on the bus to see them on the weekends. Despite my parents struggling with alcoholism and poverty, I still enjoyed seeing them and visiting with my aunt, cousins, and grandmothers. I hoped that one day I would be able to live with them again. But then, the longer I spent in the orphanage, the more it became evident that living with my biological relatives was not an option. Not only because they were not equipped with resources to care for my siblings and me, but I was not sure if I wanted to live in the same conditions as they did. I was embarrassed. So, I hoped for adoption, yet I struggled to resolve the concept of termination of parental rights (TPR). I knew deep down that my mom was my mom, no matter what the law stated, but I also wanted a better life for myself and my siblings. So, when TPR occurred, I held on to the hope that I could have the best of both worlds—adoption and an adult relationship with my biological mom.

Through a series of events, I was finally adopted in 2005 by a family in America. I yearned for that day, but I underestimated the pain that it would carry. On the one hand, I was eager to eliminate the identity of being an orphan, which brought me great pain as a young child. Primarily, the children from Ukrainian families did not understand why orphanages existed. They often made fun of orphans for things outside their control, such as not having well-fitting clothes, not always wearing season-appropriate clothes, and lacking the material possessions everyone else seemed to have. Even some adults believed that orphans would not amount to much. On the other hand, adoption did not start as I imagined because shortly after moving to the US, I learned that my biological mom in Ukraine had passed away. As a result, I carried a hole in my heart that never healed. I felt guilty for agreeing to adoption and sometimes even blamed myself for my biological mom's death, thinking she died from a broken heart.

Living in the US, I tried to embrace my identity as a “normal child”; now, I had a family and a new name to prove that I was not an orphan anymore. But due to my accent, I could not escape

the identity of being an orphan and an adoptee. The older I grew, the more challenging it was for me to talk about my childhood in Ukraine. I was embarrassed and did not want to be judged by others. Even being an adoptee sometimes carried negative connotations, primarily when I interacted with people who knew an Eastern European adoptee who did not have a successful adoption. Despite being embarrassed by where I came from and the family that gave me life, I wanted my past to fuel my future. So, I decided to become a social worker and help others who experienced similar events as I did. I understood that the child welfare system in the US would be different from that we had in Ukraine, but I was eager to work with children who dealt with similar pain as I did. I understood that pain.

In retrospect, my social work and psychology education served as a five-year therapy session. During college, I learned more about myself and my experiences through the lens of mental health education. In those classes, I learned about trauma and its lasting impact on a human, no matter how much effort we put into hiding it or pretending it does not affect us. Yet, I did not take the time to process my own trauma or even sit with my own questions regarding my identity. Though I was 12 years old when I was adopted, there was a lot of my history that I did not know. For example, I did not know who my biological father was, yet I carried his middle name. I did not know the full circumstances of how my biological mom came from Russia to Ukraine, but I knew I had roots in both countries. In my social work classes, I learned the importance of considering a whole person when working with clients. But I did not take the time to reflect on my entire person because I did not have the skills to do that or know who could help me. Instead, I embraced my new identity as an American social work professional while leaving the others behind. I reminded myself that my past influenced my future self and professional identity. Still, I did not want to sit and process who I was and what it meant for me that I had unanswered questions about my heritage. Those questions silently raced through my mind, but I never allowed them to interfere with my personal or professional life. In a blink of an eye, specifically within 10 years, I went from being an orphan to an adoptee to a social worker. Though I eagerly accepted each new identity, I neglected to reconcile them as part of one person. Instead, I treated them like the instar stages of a caterpillar becoming a butterfly—I had to shed a few identities to become what I envisioned myself to be.

July 2018

Up to this point, I attempted to focus on my current identity as a social worker and American citizen. I also tried to reassure myself that sharing my story is not my job because it is like the story of so many adoptees. Yet, in July of 2018, I had an experience that added complex layers to my identity and uniqueness to my story—but I still tried to ignore it. Grotevant (1997) talked about a person's identity as a combination of similar experiences and unique experiences that make a person stand out. And in my identity formation up to this point, I tried to blend in. I did not want to acknowledge anything about myself that made me stand out because my whole life seemed like I stood out in a crowd of people.

July 2018 was a significant date in my life because I received a message on Facebook from someone with the same first and last name as my biological father. This person claimed to be my cousin on the paternal side, so I engaged in a conversation not only because, deep down, I was

hopeful to learn more about my paternal side of the family but also because this was bizarre. I wanted to tell this person that he should not be scamming people like that. However, after questioning this person about my biological family using my limited knowledge, I realized this individual was telling the truth because he correctly answered all the questions I had for him with details that only someone related to me would know. Through the interaction with my paternal cousin, I finally obtained some information about myself and my family that I had wondered about for years. I finally saw a picture of what my biological father looked like. I learned about his and my mom's separation, but I also learned that I have a paternal family in Russia—uncles, aunts, and several cousins.

Even though this new knowledge was emotionally overwhelming and, at times, too much to handle intellectually, I was excited to finally have someone in my life who could help me answer, "Who am I?" I video-chatted with my uncle and aunt in Russia. I learned that they had been unaware that my biological mother was struggling; otherwise, they would not have allowed my siblings and me to live in an orphanage. They were good people who thought about us for years while trying to find out where we ended up after my biological mom left Russia. The new information ended up adding more questions about myself and my life. I wondered:

"What would I be if I had lived with my paternal side of the family?"

"Who would I have become if I had been raised in Russia?"

"How would I be different or the same if I had grown up in another culture, with different experiences than what I grew up with in Ukraine and then in the US?"

I could never know the answer to those questions. So, I tucked them into my mind with all the other unanswered questions. The excitement of learning I had family in a different country faded as my perception of who I was, what I believed in, and how I viewed myself became more feeble. To protect myself, I told myself that my story was just like any other story of an adoptee. My voice does not bring anything new to the adoption and identity formation conversation. Yet silently, I wondered if there was anyone else out there who shared similar experiences as I.

War in Ukraine

When my husband proclaimed that we needed to turn on the TV, my attention automatically centered on the news anchor displaying a map of Ukraine and talking about Russia's advances to attack Ukraine. I saw anchors across multiple cities in Ukraine broadcasting and talking about what they saw and heard in those parts of the country. I was dumbfounded and a bit skeptical of the seriousness of the situation. I thought that the world was exaggerating Putin's potential threats, and I reminded myself, "This is the 21st Century. There's no way Russia will attack Ukraine so blatantly and on such a large scale." I remember watching an anchor in Kyiv explaining that the city has sirens that will go off if an air attack occurs to notify citizens that they need to shelter themselves. I went to bed that night, clinging to the fact that the sirens had yet to go off: "There is still hope that this is all a big misunderstanding." Little did I know that I would wake up on February 24th to a Twitter (now X) notification that Kyiv's sirens had gone off, indicating that an official attack on the city had begun. The sirens also meant that everything

I was putting on the back burner—all the unanswered questions and aspects of my life that I did not want to come to terms with—would be flooding the forefront of my mind.

The war was a shock for me, and I was unprepared to deal with it. I spent the first couple of weeks glued to the TV and only doing minimal else in my day-to-day life. I worried about my aunt and cousins in Ukraine. When I did not hear from them, I thought about the worst-case scenario. On days when I learned how to balance the war with my life in the US, I would wake up to a notification that my friend's biological family was killed in the shelling or that my orphanage teacher was missing after the town was hit. Something happened weekly that surged my emotions into a spin of chaos. Then, I learned that my cousin had to report for service in the Ukrainian army, and I prayed that I would not see his body in the news outlets. Of course, I also struggled with the political response to the war in Ukraine. On the one hand, I thought the US was not doing enough to help Ukraine. On the other hand, I knew that the US government had limited options for a response due to the NATO treaty. Even more, I struggled with the idea that whatever the US and other countries do to help Ukraine by sanctioning the Russian people will impact my paternal family there. My emotions seemed torn in multiple directions, and I felt stuck in a love triangle that seemed at odds with one another.

I did not know how to talk about all my thoughts and feelings because I did not understand what those thoughts and feelings were, let alone expect someone unfamiliar with the cultural similarities and differences to counsel me on coping with the war. At times, I felt like my identity was at war—do I align myself with Ukraine, or do I align myself with Russia? Is it allowed to be somewhere in the middle where I support Ukraine, hurt for the people of Russia, yet condemn the actions of the Russian government? Am I unpatriotic if I publicly declare that I stand with Ukraine and support the US government's efforts to help the people of Ukraine? When I talked to others, I cringed at comments that Russians should go to hell because I did not know if they were talking about the people in government who make the decisions, the military men who blindly execute the orders, or the general population of Russia. Yet, I did not have the energy to probe those comments because any effort I made to show some compassion and understanding to the Russian people, made me feel guilty for siding with the enemy. I wondered what my Ukrainian family thought about my family in Russia and vice versa. I made mental notes not to talk about specific topics with my Ukrainian family whenever we got the chance to connect again.

But being aware of what I said was just as important as how I said it. When I had the opportunity to connect with my biological family in Ukraine, I quickly learned that speaking a mixture of the Ukrainian and Russian languages, also known as *surzhyk* (Bernsand, 2001; Bilaniuk, 2004; Bureiko & Moga, 2019), was frowned upon. I was strongly encouraged to speak only Ukrainian, though I did not grow up speaking purely Ukrainian language. My biological family came from a rural village in Ukraine, so speaking *surzhyk* was a standard dialect among the poor people (Bernsand, 2001), of which I was a part. After migrating to the US, I often heard messages like, "If you're in America, you need to speak English." So, I did. Now, I listen to messages that do not allow me to speak my *surzhyk* dialect because speaking the Russian language is not congruent with my Ukrainian identity. Yet, my identity has many gray areas that do not fit neatly into a box. Language is a significant part of one's culture. And learning to speak

a purely Ukrainian language makes me feel like I am abandoning the very roots that I was embarrassed by when I was a little girl in an orphanage who dreamed of a better life.

Healing Through Self-Love

Stephen Levine, best known for his work on death and dying, once stated, “To heal ... is to replace with love that which has so often been touched with fear” (Levine, 1987, p. 175). Embarrassment has multiple definitions, but one that speaks to me is “the feeling of discomfort experienced when some aspect of ourselves is, or threatens to be, witnessed by or otherwise revealed to others” (Burton, 2014, para. 2). My identities of being an orphan and an adoptee were tied to my feelings of being embarrassed by my upbringing in an orphanage, my biological family’s economic status, and my mom’s choices. Ultimately, I was afraid to come to terms with my childhood in Ukraine, my familial roots in Russia, and gaps in my history that can never be filled. When I graduated from college with my degree in social work, I often heard how amazed people were that I went from being an orphan to a professional social worker helping others. Some even asked, “How did you do it?” The answer was always, “I don’t know.” Yet, I did it because I managed to ignore the parts of me that were hard to accept and focus on the identity I thought everyone would be comfortable interacting with. Russia’s war on Ukraine threatened my identity because my remaining biological family was, and still is, at risk. The aggression illustrated what was important: my birth culture, language, and memories of my biological mom. The thought of being embarrassed by those aspects of myself in the middle of the war made me feel like I was giving Russia reasons to invade my homeland.

Amid the threat, I focused not on the things that made me feel embarrassed but on the things that I should be proud of: people’s fierce fighting spirit, their humility when confronted with evil, their selflessness when they have all the right to be selfish, their generosity when they already have very little, and their constant sense of humor that brings hope to the nation. I often said that growing up in Ukraine shaped me into the person I am today. Yet, it was not until the war that I came to accept the positive and the negative life experiences. I am composed of the good and bad things that happened and the lessons those things taught me. The war awakened an unimaginable love for the people of Ukraine and indirectly sparked a kind of self-love that allowed me to view parts of my identity through love and not through fear and embarrassment. But coming to terms with who I am amidst the war was a process laced with tears, pain, and self-reflection. I realized that my identity is complex, but I am not alone. I can be angry with Russia for invading Ukraine and causing unimaginable pain while still hurting for my family in Russia, who are suffering because of sanctions. Additionally, I can be a proud American yet root for Ukraine’s independence and advocate that the US continue to help the people of Ukraine. I hope that Ukraine and Russia will one day learn to co-exist because their people are deeply interwoven. Coming to terms with my identity of being a Ukrainian/Russian/American does not mean that I have “figured it out” because I am still learning to balance myself as new developments with the war occur. Yet, I am using my identity as a social worker to cope with current events in a way that respects my whole person.

The war is not over, and I continue to fear for the safety of my Ukrainian family, friends, and culture. But I now understand who I am and what I need to do to make a difference in this

terrible time in our society. By embracing my past and my multiple roots in Ukraine, Russia, and the US, I can help others struggling with similar issues. Though I am not the only one who has ever struggled with her identity and accepting the past with all the good and bad experiences, I am a Ukrainian adoptee with Russian heritage who is a practicing licensed independent clinical social worker-supervisor (LICSW-S) in the US. My voice can be a starting place for current and future Ukrainian adoptees to have their unique stories understood from a multicultural perspective. In addition, my voice can be a small piece of education on the diverse identities that Ukrainian adoptees experience. And if my struggle coming to terms with my Ukrainian/Russian/American identity during the war allows another practitioner to help a current or a future Ukrainian adoptee in a similar situation, I have successfully integrated my past with my present. I have successfully embraced all parts of myself and allowed those parts to do good for others. Though my story may not be unique, being a Ukrainian adoptee and a LICSW gives me a unique perspective on the challenges other Ukrainian adoptees may face while learning to cope with the world's current events. Though I cannot control how quickly the war ends or how much carnage it leaves behind, I can control how I cope and respond to it.

Social Worker's Call to Action

Unless the relationship between Ukraine and the United States significantly changes because of the Russian invasion, it is safe to assume that American families will continue adopting Ukrainian children, especially amid a humanitarian crisis. The consequences of the current war are already too much for adults and children to cope with. In addition, current Ukrainian social problems, such as poverty, alcoholism, and HIV/AIDS, which contribute to the influx of orphans, will not be resolved because of the war; they may worsen due to the lack of resources to deal with them. Social workers can assist families and children currently living in the US who are impacted by the war and the potential adoptees that will make the US their future home. The recommendations below are based on my journey in coming to terms with the war. They are the steps I took as I reflected on what the war means to me as a person with a multicultural identity. The recommendations are a glimpse into the process I took as a social worker to help me come to terms with who I am and the many painful feelings that the war brought. So, what can social workers do?

If you are currently working with Ukrainian adoptees and/or their American families, consider that many current adoptees may still have families and friends in Ukraine that they worry about. Though they may be physically safe in the United States, they may still feel a lack of emotional safety because their loved ones are in a crisis. Some of their families and/or friends may be displaced, injured, or fighting to defend Ukraine. As a result, Ukrainian adoptees may experience a sense of hopelessness or survivor's guilt being in the US while their family and friends are distressed in Ukraine. Some adoptees may experience an increased sense of anxiety worrying about their loved ones without the ability to get in touch with them to confirm their safety. Additionally, some Ukrainian adoptees may grieve the loss of their country, family, or friends, causing further emotional turmoil. Regardless of the types of stresses that adoptees may experience, social workers need to consider the crisis' impact on their mental health and utilize culturally competent practices to assist the adoptees.

The first suggestion is for social workers to focus on the client's culture and cultural identity, which is often neglected during a crisis intervention (Cirincione-Ulezi & Jackson, 2012). Ukraine is diverse racially, ethnically, culturally, linguistically, and religiously (Bartosh et al., 2021; Norman et al., 2008); therefore, it is crucial to utilize culturally competent practices when attempting to assist Ukrainian adoptees. In addition, some adoptees may have familial roots in both Ukraine and Russia, causing difficulties with their cultural identity because of the war. Therefore, social workers need to be aware of the cultural differences and similarities to help adoptees process the multilayered cultural trauma. The second suggestion is for social workers to express curiosity about how their clients conceptualize their cultural identity and refrain from assuming that all Ukrainians and Russians have the same culture, identity, heritage, and values. In addition, social workers need to consider the role that adoptees' American identity plays amid the conflict and how they can utilize their diverse heritage to cope with the distress they experience. Finally, social workers need to take the time to understand what the conflict means to the Ukrainian adoptee and what specifically about the conflict causes the most significant distress. For example, providing mental health support to a Ukrainian adoptee who lost a family member because of the war will look different from providing services to an adoptee grieving the loss of their hometown, even though grief is at the center of both issues.

If you are working with American families and their adopted children, encourage the family unit to discuss how the crisis in Ukraine is impacting their mental health, their functioning within an American family and society, and their sense of safety. Adoptees or their parents may not know how to broach this topic with each other and may revert to ignoring the conversation altogether due to fears. Providing a safe space for the family to discuss many feelings and emotions they experience will be a beneficial conversation. Consider educating the family and the adoptee on the impact of the complex and compounding trauma of adoption, the transition to another culture/country, and the war in Ukraine on the family's functioning. Social workers need to help families understand how childhood anxiety from instability, poverty, and other social problems may reappear or exacerbate due to the current crisis in Ukraine. Social workers also need to assist the family with interventions and practices that they can implement to cope with the mental health consequences of the war as a family unit and as individual members of the unit. The interventions may look like setting boundaries around how much news exposure they have in a day, using mindfulness or adaptive thinking strategies when worst-case scenarios are constantly on one's mind, and reaching out to other people for support when distress becomes too challenging to deal with on their own. The most important thing social workers can do is help families with adoptive children feel supported during this time from the perspective of their culture.

Conclusion

Social workers need to be concerned about how the Ukraine crisis impacts adoptees who are already in the US but have families in Ukraine and future adoptees as they deal with addressing trauma from their institutionalization, war, and the transition to a new country. Social workers are on the front lines of serving children and families, and we have an ethical responsibility to ensure that culturally appropriate services are provided to the most vulnerable populations. Therefore, I urge fellow social work practitioners to consider the impact of past

institutionalization, the current social landscape, and the adoption journey on current and future Ukrainian adoptees. In addition, I urge social workers to seek additional training and consultation opportunities to prepare as best as possible to meet this population's multifaceted needs. Finally, I encourage social workers not to overlook the role of culture and identity among Ukrainian adoptees as they work on coping with the travesty in Ukraine.

If you are a social work researcher, there are also a few things that you can do. First, consider elevating the voices of current Ukrainian adoptees as they cope with the conflict in Ukraine by exploring how the war has impacted their daily functioning. Second, consider researching the experiences of Ukrainian adoptees as they transitioned from living in an orphanage to living within a family with diverse cultural beliefs, norms, and values. This will inform how practitioners can best support adoptees and their families post-adoption to ensure that adoption disruption does not happen. Third, consider exploring factors that help Ukrainian adoptees deal with complex and compounding trauma after adoption. Evaluate the effectiveness of interventions and evidence-based practices aimed at addressing complex and compounding trauma among Ukrainian adoptees who grew up in state-run orphanages. Finally, consider exploring how childhood anxiety is impacted by the events of the current crisis in Ukraine and whether current events worsen symptoms of unaddressed mental health needs.

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