

Ukrainian-American Heritage

A framework for history, belonging
and academic connection



Fayette County
Public Schools

History

Ukrainian immigration to the United States occurred in major historical waves, driven by the search for economic opportunity and escape from oppression. The first large-scale wave began in the late 1870s and 1880s, primarily consisting of agricultural workers. The community's deep history of political advocacy culminated in Captive Nations Week, a national observance signed into law by President Eisenhower in July 1959 (Public Law 86-90). Drafted by Ukrainian-American scholar Lev Dobriansky, this federal law mandates that every U.S. President proclaim the third week of July to demonstrate American solidarity with nations.

Key Terms & Symbols

- **The Ukrainian Flag:** Composed of two equal horizontal bands of blue and yellow. The blue represents the wide, clear sky, while the yellow symbolizes Ukraine's expansive wheat fields, reflecting the nation's identity as Europe's breadbasket.
- **The Tryzub (Coat of Arms):** The golden trident is Ukraine's official coat of arms, dating back to the 10th-century rule of Volodymyr the Great. It serves as a universal symbol of Ukrainian sovereignty, resilience, and cultural identity.
- **Vyshyvanka:** Traditional embroidered clothing featuring geometric or floral patterns. Each region of Ukraine has distinctive embroidery stitches and colors, acting as a historical visual map of family, protection, and regional pride.
- **Pysanky:** Intricately decorated eggs created using a wax-resist (batik) method. The designs feature layered symbolic patterns wishing health, fertility, and protection.



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Barriers To Belonging

Invisible Barriers

- The "Linguistic Monolith" Misconception: Educators may assume all families arriving from Ukraine prefer communication exclusively in Ukrainian or exclusively in Russian. In reality, linguistic backgrounds vary widely based on regional origin, and assuming a preference without asking can alienate families.
- Trauma-Insensitive Programming: Abruptly organizing patriotic displays, loud rallies, or simulations of conflict without warning or psychological support can inadvertently trigger severe trauma responses in recently arrived refugee students fleeing war areas.
- Erasure via Outdated Regional Frameworks: Grouping Ukrainian students broadly under "Eastern European" or "Post-Soviet" classifications can minimize their distinct language, sovereign history, and unique cultural identity.

Common Misconceptions

- **"Ukrainian identity is just a sub-sect of Russian culture":** This ignores centuries of distinct Ukrainian language development, unique literary traditions (such as the works of Taras Shevchenko), and an independent geopolitical history that predates modern imperial borders.
- **"All Slavic languages are mutually intelligible":** Ukrainian is a distinct Slavic language with its own grammar, vocabulary, and alphabet modifications. Treating a Ukrainian student as if they automatically understand alternative Slavic languages can hinder proper English Language Learner (ELL) support.
- **"Ukrainians are only a modern refugee population":** While over 300,000 Ukrainians sought asylum in the U.S. following recent conflicts, the Ukrainian-American community boasts a robust, well-established 150-year history of civic, academic, and economic contributions to American society.

Common Microaggressions

- Mispronouncing names or mocking the Cyrillic alphabet: Passing off Ukrainian names or phonetic structures as "unpronounceable" distances students from their heritage and discourages classroom participation.
- Compounding the stress of displacement: asking intrusive political or regional questions forces children to act as spokespersons.
- Using "The Ukraine": Referring to the sovereign nation as "the Ukraine" relies on an outdated, Soviet-era geographic naming convention that implies the nation is merely a territory or borderland rather than an independent country.

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How to Connect with Families and Communities

Building Authentic Partnerships with Families

Start with Cultural Awareness & Sensitivity

- Recognize that Ukrainian-American families represent multiple immigration waves spanning more than 150 years.
- Understand that some families may have experienced war, displacement, political oppression, or refugee resettlement.
- Avoid grouping Ukrainian families broadly under “Russian,” “Soviet,” or generalized “Eastern European” identities.
- Ask families which language they prefer for communication rather than making assumptions.

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Education Connections

Alignment with FCPS Portrait of a Graduate

- **Critical Thinker:** Analyzing primary sources from the 1932–33 Holodomor (the man-made famine) or the 1959 Captive Nations resolution challenges students to evaluate how totalitarian regimes manipulate resource distribution and information, while teaching them to identify propaganda.
- **Effective Communicator:** Exploring the preservation of Ukrainian literature and oral folk traditions during periods of foreign bans helps students understand how language serves as a crucial tool for cultural survival and self-determination.
- **Empowered Learner:** Encouraging recently arrived or diaspora students to share or research family traditions—such as the regional mathematics and geometry found in *vyshyvanka* patterns—validates their home culture as an asset to academic learning.
- **Creative Problem Solver:** Investigating historic and modern community relief frameworks—such as the United Ukrainian American Relief Committee founded in 1944—teaches students how civic organizations design mutual-aid solutions during global crises.
- **Collaborative Team Member:** Engaging in cross-cultural community projects or peer-mentorship models for newly arrived bilingual students builds deep empathy, language awareness, and global collaboration skills.

KY Standards Alignment

Universal Social Studies Inquiry Standards

- **Using Evidence:** Gathering relevant evidence from credible sources; in Grades 6-12, determining accuracy, context, bias, and intended use.
- **Communicating Conclusions:** Constructing explanations and/or arguments using reasoning and information; in Grades 6-12, using claims and evidence from multiple sources while acknowledging counterclaims, strengths, and limitations of the arguments.
- **2.H.CH.1:** Identify and compare the diverse North American cultural groups of the past and today.
- **3.G.HI.1:** Explain how the cultural aspects of a region spread beyond its borders.
- **5.C.CV.1; 8.C.CV.1:** Describe the democratic principles of equality before the law, inalienable rights, and consent of the governed...
- **HS.C.CP.3:** Evaluate the civil responsibilities of individuals within a society
- **HS.C.CV.3:** Analyze the impact of the efforts of individuals and reform movements on the expansion of civil rights and liberties locally, nationally and internationally.
- **HS.C.PR.2:** Explain how active citizens can affect the lawmaking process locally, nationally and internationally.

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Resources

Primary (K-5)

Family Connection Strategies

- Invite families to share cultural traditions such as pysanky egg decorating, music, dance, embroidery, or storytelling.
- Create “Family Heritage Projects” where students can explore family traditions, immigration stories, or regional customs.
- Host multicultural literacy nights featuring Ukrainian folk tales, visual arts, and storytelling traditions.
- Encourage caregivers to share traditional foods, holiday customs, or seasonal celebrations connected to Ukrainian heritage.

Recommended Resources

- *The Mitten* adapted by Jan Brett or Alvin Tresselt
- Ukrainian folk tales and oral storytelling collections
- Educational kits and visual resources from the Ukrainian Museum of America
- The Ukrainian Museum (NYC): ukrainianmuseum.org
- Ukrainian Congress Committee of America (UCCA): ucca.org

Classroom & School Inclusion Tips

- Display visuals that reflect both historical and modern Ukrainian culture, including contemporary cities, universities, artists, and families.
- Learn and correctly pronounce Ukrainian student and family names.
- Respect cultural and religious holidays observed by families.
- Avoid lessons or activities that unintentionally center only war, conflict, or tragedy when discussing Ukraine.

Family Event Ideas

- Ukrainian Heritage Family Night
- Folk Art & Pysanky Workshop
- International Storytelling Celebration
- Family Traditions Showcase

Secondary (6-12)

- Family Connection Strategies
- Invite families, community leaders, or local Ukrainian organizations to participate in panels, oral histories, or cultural presentations.
- Create opportunities for students to explore migration, resilience, identity, and advocacy through research projects or digital storytelling.
- Include families in civic engagement, college readiness, and multilingual learner support opportunities.
- Encourage intergenerational storytelling projects that preserve family history and cultural memory.

Recommended Resources

- Holodomor Research and Education Consortium (HREC) primary sources
- Facing History and Ourselves lesson plans
- Captive Nations Week presidential proclamations
- Ukrainian-American historical and cultural organizations

Classroom & School Inclusion Tips

- Use trauma-informed practices when discussing war, displacement, or political conflict.
- Avoid asking students to speak on behalf of geopolitical conflicts or current events.
- Utilize structured, respectful discussion formats when exploring global issues.
- Recognize bilingualism and heritage language maintenance as strengths.

Family Event Ideas

- Human Rights & Heritage Panel Discussion
- Ukrainian-American Oral History Project Showcase
- Cultural Arts & Embroidery Exhibition
- Community Dialogue & Storytelling Night

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Best Practices for Schools

Communication

- Ask families about preferred language and communication methods before sending information home.
- Provide translation and interpretation support whenever possible.
- Use trusted community partnerships and cultural liaisons to strengthen relationships with newly arrived families.

Representation Matters

- Include Ukrainian voices, literature, art, and historical perspectives throughout the school year—not only during times of crisis.
- Highlight Ukrainian contributions to science, literature, music, mathematics, and civic advocacy.

Relationship Building

- Build trust through consistent, welcoming, and relationship-centered communication.
- Understand that some families may carry trauma related to war, displacement, or authoritarian governments, which can affect school engagement.

Equity & Belonging

- Create classroom spaces where students feel safe expressing cultural identity and heritage.
- Address stereotypes, political assumptions, and language-based bias immediately.
- Ensure students and families feel seen as individuals with unique histories and experiences.

Important Reminders for Educators

- Use “Ukraine” instead of “the Ukraine.”
- Do not assume all Ukrainian families speak the same language or share the same political experiences.
- Honor Ukrainian heritage as a distinct cultural identity with deep historical roots and longstanding contributions to American society.