



Alexander Strashny

The Ukrainian Mentality

An Ethno-Psychological, Historical,
and Comparative Exploration

With a foreword by Antonina Lovochkin

Ukrainian Voices, vol. 47

ibidem

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A. Strashny

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Translated from the Ukrainian
by Michael M. Naydan and Olha Tytarenko

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Foreword

Antonina Lovochkina

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For centuries, the idea has been imposed on the entire world that Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Russians comprise a single people, and therefore the two smaller nations must forever be linked with Russia, which, as underscored in this distortion of history, insists on hegemony. During Soviet times, we were taught in school that the different peoples who come to dwell in the country must form a single nation—the Soviet people, with a single mentality—a Russian one. After the collapse of the USSR, Alexander Strashny was perhaps the first to write a book about the Ukrainian worldview, in which he arguably established that Ukrainians have their own unique mentality that essentially distinguishes them from their neighbors.

This book is exceptional for several reasons. First off, because the study of the Ukrainian mentality was undertaken not by a historian, not by an ethnographer, not by a linguist, but rather by a psychotherapist with many years of experience in the field and who, additionally, is a talented writer. Adhering to all the necessary requirements of scholarly research, Alexander Strashny presented the results of his studies not in the form of a scholarly monograph, but as an interesting, lively work that reflects not just the tip of the iceberg of the Ukrainian worldview, but also what an outside observer fails to notice. In this book there are many strata of little-known, historical facts that Western readers may not expect, but which are conclusively demonstrated.

Based on an analysis of everyday life, customs, culture, language, military matters, and the traditions of Ukrainians, of their ancestors, and of those peoples who joined in the formation of the Ukrainian mentality, the author managed to answer the question of how the Ukrainian worldview was fashioned and why modern

Ukrainians have been shaped precisely the way they are – with all their innate contradictions, shortcomings, as well as merits.

When you read about the ancient history of the lands on which Ukraine is now located, it's as though you're plunging into the actual world of your ancestors. Academic history is mainly the study of the actions of princes, kings, and their retinues. But Dr. Strashny has focused on ordinary people – tillermen, nomads, and warriors. All the author's historical pursuits are directed at explicitly revealing the human factor, the motives for an individual's behavior. As if on the silver screen, the ancient ancestors of Ukrainians appear – the mysterious Trypillians, the ancient Greeks of the northern Black Sea region, the Scythians, the Sarmatians, the Proto-Slavs, the inhabitants of Kyivan Rus, and the Zaporozhian Cossacks. Relying on numerous facts, the author has reconstructed the way of thinking of a person who absorbed Ukrainian history, Ukrainian culture, and Ukrainian traditions, all that ultimately constitutes the cumulative mentality of a modern Ukrainian. Everything is presented so graphically that you feel as if you are participating in events that took place in the ancient past.

This book also offers a captivating exploration of the profound connection between Ukrainians and their land, delving into the deep-rooted beliefs that bind them to Mother Earth. It examines the intricate dynamics between men and women that challenge prevailing patriarchal structures, offering a remarkable source of empowerment for Ukrainian women – an attribute often absent in many traditional societies. It provides a compelling exploration of Ukrainian eroticism, skillfully tracing its origins to the veneration of ancient female deities. The author's refreshing psychological perspective is firmly grounded in socio-cultural and historical analyses. Through these insightful frameworks, it unravels the various contradictions that permeate the Ukrainian mentality. For instance, it sheds light on the perplexing phenomenon of a hardworking and highly skilled man exhibiting extreme laziness. It explores the reconciliation of seemingly opposing traits like collectivism and individualism. It elucidates how sociability and introversion can coexist harmoniously, devoid of conflict. It delves into the reasons behind the curious phenomenon of highly intellectual men being labeled as backward. It explores the intricate nature of human behavior,

illustrating how both greed and selflessness can coexist within a single individual. This is merely a glimpse into the myriad examples that the book illuminates. Above all, the book provides a comprehensive understanding of what it means to navigate between the influences of the East and the West. It skillfully uncovers the ways in which Ukrainians assimilate traits from both mentalities, despite their seemingly conflicting nature.

Dr. Strashny's copiously researched material is not only collected into a complete system, but also passed through the author's heart, warmed by humor and emotions. It is no accident that after its release in Ukrainian, this book immediately became a bestseller.

Now, during the war, the Kremlin's propaganda is trying to impose the false narrative on the entire world and on Russians themselves that Ukrainians are unworthy of serious attention, that they are weak and helpless, that they have fallen into a trap that leads them, step by step, to their demise. However, neither the so-called Russian "experts" nor their Kremlin dictator have understood that Ukrainians in peacetime and during war are completely different entities. Few people know what strength and power has awakened in Ukrainians—known for being a kind and peaceful people—during times of danger.

In the 1990s, the leader of the Chechen liberation movement, Dzhokhar Dudayev, uttered what amounts to a prophecy: "The biggest mistake is to disregard the Ukrainians. To consider Ukrainians weak. To offend Ukrainians. Never insult the Ukrainians. They are not as weak as you might think".

This is precisely what writer and psychotherapist Alexander Strashny's book deals with. Yet the author has not only written about the positive aspects of the Ukrainian mentality, but also about the shortcomings that still remain in the Ukrainian worldview.

Recently, a number of fair-minded, interesting publications have appeared on the topic of the Ukrainian mentality. Now, in the 21st century, Ukrainian culture is increasingly etched with the notion of the nature of its national character. But the process is not yet complete. There are still blank spots that require further elucidation.

Alexander Strashny's book answers many questions regarding the Ukrainian worldview, which combines within it seemingly incompatible notions. But mainly the author has answered

the question of how a gentle, peace-loving people with a love for singing, who enjoy having numerous, lengthy discussions without making concrete decisions, has managed to constrain the brutal military might from the East in order to protect themselves and the world in the confrontation of Good vs. Evil.

There is a saying about Ukrainians: “My house is on the edge ...” Some believe that it speaks to their indifference. But in fact, this saying has a second part that ends like this: “My house is on the outskirts – therefore I am first to meet the enemy”.

Starting with the war of aggression in February 2022, Russia cruelly hoped to obliterate Ukraine, to force Ukrainians to abandon their language, their traditions, and their mentality. The wild horde has done considerable damage. Even now, as I’m penning the foreword to this book, an air raid siren is sounding. I’m not in my office, but in a corridor protected only by two walls. And outside the window, exploding enemy missiles can be heard, shot down by the Ukrainian air defense. Unexpectedly for the invaders, at the beginning of the full-scale Russian aggression, positive changes to the Ukrainian mentality began to develop more rapidly than ever before. Ukrainians began to believe in themselves, and the world began to believe in Ukrainians.

Recently, on the eve of the national holiday when Ukrainians wear their national dress – the traditional “vyshyvanky” (embroidered shirts and blouses) – the enemy launched dozens of missiles at Kyiv. The residents of the city did not sleep that night. And how did they feel after a loud and sleepless night? It didn’t matter – they put on their fine embroidery and went out to take pictures for the holiday. They were saying: Here we are, the Ukrainians – strong, courageous, and unbreakable!

To anyone who wants to learn more about the Ukrainian mentality and also what is common to and differentiates Ukrainians from Americans, Europeans, and Russians, I recommend that you read this book by Alexander Strashny.

It will give pleasure to everyone, from students to senior citizens.

Kyiv, June 17, 2023

Preface

One can choose a God to worship. One can choose a nationality. One can even choose a history. But no one can choose their mentality.

In 1990, I was invited to give a series of lectures in the U.S. When they asked me where I was from, I answered that I was from Ukraine. No one then knew what country it was or where it was located. When I said that I was from Kyiv, the audience cheered: “Oh, yes, we know, Chicken Kyiv, those cutlets are on the menu of our restaurant”. That was it. There was no other information about Ukraine in the civilized world then.

Thirty years have passed. Ukraine has dominated mass media across the world since February 24, 2022. People of the world have turned their attention to Ukraine, and as it turns out, they see Ukrainians as cool people! President Biden mentions Ukraine more often than any other country in his speeches. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson repeatedly addresses journalists in the Ukrainian language. After a twenty-eight-year hiatus, the legendary Pink Floyd band recorded a song in Ukrainian. Paul McCartney unfurled the Ukrainian flag at the first concert of his tour. Parisian high fashion houses adorned their collections in the blue and yellow colors of the Ukrainian flag. Dutch florists produced a new variety of tulips in yellow and blue. The crew of the American SpaceX campaign took the Ukrainian flag into space. Time Magazine has repeatedly featured the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, on its cover.

How did this come to be?

Within the past ten years, two logically impossible things have happened in Ukraine. During the Revolution of Dignity in 2014, Ukrainians singlehandedly overthrew their president-dictator Viktor Yanukovych, who gave the order to fire on them with machine guns. In 2022, Ukrainians repelled the second-largest army in the world, which threw all its sophisticated weapons and might against them. NATO experts shrug their shoulders in surprise: how could this have happened? Ukraine was supposed to surrender three days after the invasion . . . The Russians continually bomb Ukraine – it still stands; they try to level it with tanks – it still stands; they try to destroy it with rockets – it still stands; the

Russian soldiers crawl into Ukraine from every direction and cannot do anything. What steel are these Ukrainians made of?

NATO experts were wrong in their political prognoses. The mad Russian president was also mistaken. Estimating the number of weapons and military equipment, the world did not consider the primary weapon of Ukrainians—their spirit, backbone, and mentality. It is precisely this Ukrainian mentality that will be the topic of my exegesis.

This book was first published in 2008 in Ukrainian and Russian. Preparing the edition for the English-speaking reader, I extensively revised the text to make the content understandable for those who know little about Ukraine but want to learn more about it. Based on an analysis of history, the everyday life of Ukrainians, economy, culture, religion, politics, so forth I singled out fifty dominant Ukrainian mental traits. I compared them with the most common characteristics of Europeans and Russians. Based on my research, I derived conclusions about similarities and differences between Europeans, Ukrainians, and Russians.

The character of a person is revealed in extreme situations. In times of danger, they “take off their mask” and show their best and worst qualities. An entire nation’s character can also be exposed in an extreme situation. The events of the Russian war against Ukraine have made me rethink many things. Therefore, this edition includes much material unpublished in previous editions of this book and in English-language nonfiction literature in general.

Looking for an answer to the question “Who is a Ukrainian?” I have tried to be impartial and not to project my own hypotheses; instead, I have tried to describe everything as objectively as possible.

Plato is my friend, but my greatest friend is truth. Even more so when it is the naked truth. I still intend to offer it to my readers.

Acknowledgments

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Work on this book continued at a time when bombs were falling on Ukraine. I ended each of my messages to family, colleagues, and friends with the words: "Let's hang in there! We are stronger than the enemy!"

I address these same words to my readers.

What is Mentality?

The collective soul of a people is only a slightly more complex structure than the soul of an individual.

Carl Jung

Mentality as a concept is difficult to understand. It almost does not lend itself to rational interpretation. It is not the same as generally accepted rules and customs, traditions, a language, or a worldview. It is something that can be perceived but not rationalized. However, it embraces generally accepted rules, customs, traditions, language, and worldviews.

There is no precise scientific method to identify certain national traits. There is no concise and explicit definition of the concept of “mentality”.

This term is derived from the Latin word *mentalis*, which means *mental*. In the Great Encyclopedic Dictionary, mentality is defined as a set of thoughts, cognitive skills, and spiritual instructions inherent in an individual or a social group. In the Explanatory Dictionary, mentality is defined as a worldview and “mindset”. The Dictionary of Foreign Words defines this concept as thinking, a state of mind, a deep level of collective and individual consciousness, which includes the unconscious.

Mentality is a particular set of psychological algorithms that shape the view of an individual or a group of people concerning surrounding reality and, accordingly, determine their behavior.

The concept of mentality first appeared in Alexis de Tocqueville’s book *Democracy in America* (1835). Researching the collective consciousness of the U.S., the author discussed the superstitions, habits, and misconceptions characteristic of American society. In his opinion, the American national character embraced all these aspects.

European thinkers of the 20th century engaged in a lively discussion of the concept of mentality. For example, historians of the Annales School viewed mentality as the sum charge of spiritual experience that makes history.

Sigmund Freud made a prominent contribution to developing ideas about the human psyche. He convincingly argued that between the conscious and unconscious, which are intrinsic to mentality as well, the unconscious realm is more important.

In the modern world, the study of mentality is primarily used by special services in training agents for work abroad, in the activities of trade managers, as well as by politicians who seek to impose their values on a particular social group.

An individual is rarely able to objectively evaluate himself and his or her behavior. According to Freud, to comprehend something—an image, feeling or idea, one has to verbalize it and embody it in a verbal shell. Therefore, in this book, we will put into words something that is little understood—Ukrainian mentality; I hope it will become more understandable. I also hope that readers will compare the material of this book with their own life experience, draw from the text, and come to their own conclusions.

Hence, mentality is an asset of every individual. When it is common to some group, formed by an occupation, lifestyle, or ethnicity, we talk about the mentality of a trader, a Christian, a policeman, a fan, a German, a Briton, or a Ukrainian. A family, a generation, inhabitants of an entire continent, or the planet's whole population can be that group. Mentality can have male or female characteristics.

The concept of a group mentality (a collective unconscious) gained recognition thanks to the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung. According to him, the content of the personal unconscious is formed during the entire lifetime of an individual. Still, one lifetime is not enough for the collective unconscious to emerge. The collective unconscious is a kind of instinct that consists of archetypes (archaic types), that is, primary images, ideas, and experiences that arise from the depths of unconscious mental formations.

Jung posited that archetypes are the essence of the psyche, inaccessible through direct experience but formed from the mental imprints of our ancestors' countless experiences. These foundational elements are likened to riverbeds, lying dormant when devoid of life's flow, yet they become vibrant and full when the currents of existence return in force.

Jung emphasized the spontaneity of archetypes. They manifest themselves independently of will or consciousness and emerge unexpectedly. Jung insisted that the extent to which a person remains under their influence is incalculable. Especially a modern rational and pragmatic person is completely unaware of how much his or her life is under the control of irrational forces. Such a person is subject to them no less than a primitive man, who, unlike us, realized that he existed in a realm of otherworldly influences.

The Genetic Memory of Generations

Why do some ancient experiences of *the entire lineage of ancestors* emerge suddenly *from the depths of the unconscious* and affect human behavior? Is it true that if a child from a tribe of Australian aborigines grows up in a European family, then this person and their descendants will “genetically know” how to catch a crocodile? It seems impossible because “how to catch a crocodile” is not encoded in the genes.

Nevertheless, the mechanism of genetic transmission of ancestral memory exists.

We receive genes from our parents, which already record features of our appearance, health, personality, so forth. But hereditary traits depend not only on the received genes but also on their functionality. People with a similar set of genes will behave differently in similar situations thanks to epigenetic mechanisms.

This phenomenon has the following mechanism. Each person has a complete set of all psychological traits, including their opposites, encoded in their DNA. The way the ancestor behaved in a particular situation, whether they exhibited courage, cowardice, cruelty, or nobility, is not encoded in DNA. However, due to the chemical reactions that strengthen or weaken the activity of a gene cluster responsible for a certain psychological trait, a *predisposition* to a certain behavior is transmitted from an ancestor. Information from the past alters the activity of genes through chemical modification of DNA: some genes are “turned on”, some are “turned off”. These changes are transmitted only through the paternal lineage because epigenetic effects on DNA affect sperm and do not affect ova.

Chemical modifications of DNA do not disrupt the sequence of nucleotides that make DNA. The replacement of one nucleotide by another does not constitute a mutation. These external chemical reactions affect a certain gene by weakening or, on the contrary, strengthening the synthesis of the protein included in the chains of the DNA molecule.

Thus, it becomes clear why, if the grandfather had drowned, his grandchildren would be afraid of water; if he had abused

alcohol, his descendants would tend to have a similar disposition to the bottle; if he were starving, there would be a tendency to stock up on excess food.

The research of biologists Kerry Ressler and Brian Diaz from the Maury University Medical Center (Georgia, U.S.) have scientifically proved this hypothesis.

The experiment was as follows. Scientists filled a laboratory room containing male mice with the odor of acetophenone, which resembles the scent of bird cherries. The mice did not react to it. Later, using electrodes wired into the floor, the researchers began to use an electric shock every time the scent was released. The mice panicked and tried to run away.

After a series of studies, the mice were no longer electrocuted; only the scent was released. Having smelled bird cherry blossoms, the mice shuddered, jumped up and ran away without being given an electric shock.

The most exciting thing happened later. The mice involved in the experiment produced offspring that were never shocked and were unfamiliar with the scent of bird cherries. When the offspring grew up, the scientists let them sniff acetophenone. The mice reacted the same way as their parents: they froze, jumped up and tried to run away, although they were never given a shock.

The fear of the scent even remained in the third generation — the grandchildren of mice who once dreaded the smell of acetophenone also exhibited a panic reaction.

So, the memory of the danger was transmitted to mice even across generations. But maybe the animals somehow communicated the fear to their descendants?

To determine this, scientists set up an experiment using in vitro fertilization followed by embryo implantation into surrogate mothers. Babies born in this way never saw their “frightened” parents and had no opportunity to learn anything from them. However, they also exhibited stressful behavior in reacting to the scent of acetophenone.

At the beginning of the last century, Nobel laureate Ivan Pavlov observed a similar phenomenon. While developing a

conditioned reflex in dogs, he observed that this reflex appears faster and faster in subsequent generations of animals.

In this way, it was scientifically proven that a living being carries an imprint of events that happened to their ancestors: a person usually behaves the same way as their ancestors on the paternal line. Education is not a decisive factor here. Carl Jung plausibly called this “imprint of events” archetypes.

There is an infinite number of archetypes. Jung emphasized they are revealed to their full extent in periods of crisis, like *the channels of dry rivers*, they are filled with a *raging full-water stream* during wars, calamities, reconstruction, and revolutions.