

Retrospective Reassessing: Ukrainians' Memories of Life Before the War

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Abstract This article examines how Ukrainians retrospectively reassessed their pre-war lives during 2022–2023, based on interviews collected in the *Prisma Ukraina: War, Migration, Memory* project. The study argues that war trauma reshapes both individual and collective memory, producing shifts in how the past is valued and narrated. At the individual level, many respondents tended to idealize or positively reframe their former everyday lives, often recognizing overlooked freedoms, relationships, and routines. At the collective level, memories were more ambivalent: former criticism of social problems such as corruption or disunity was sometimes downplayed, sometimes sharpened, depending on the speaker's current perspective. These contrasting reassessments reveal how memory functions as a dynamic process of reconstruction under conditions of crisis. The analysis highlights how personal testimonies not only register loss but also expose broader cultural patterns of adaptation, self-censorship, and resilience in the face of war.

INTRODUCTION

A person discovers the true value of health and a peaceful life only after losing them. In its poignancy, this trivial discovery is experienced almost as an epiphany. The cultural echo of this 'mood' is preserved in the ancient myth of "paradise lost".¹ It would probably be difficult to find a culture that does not have its own version of this myth. This fairly universal motif resonates on both a collective and an individual level of memory. For example, one of the Ukrainian women said in her interview: "I realized that those who have not gone through the war do not value or appreciate their *lives*" (NZ-8; F 20th). By contrasting *war* with *life*, she tries to articulate the abyss of misunderstanding between a peaceful society and people-at-war.² Moreover, she said this not only about those people whose peaceful lives have not been threatened yet, but also about her former self. Having had a peaceful life before the war, she did not value it properly, as she does now, having been deprived of it because of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

Her opinion seems paradoxical because war does not add any value to life itself, but rather to the perception of it. Instead, a war adds fatal risks,

threats to life, and affects the very experience of life. Expanding her quotation, we see not only the fourfold repetition of negations (*haven't felt, haven't encountered, don't know, haven't woke up*), overgeneralizations (*for all, completely different*), but also some contrast oppositions (Ukrainians – foreigners as *I/you – they*; war – peace(*ful life*)) that create emotional tension:

"... for all those who are not from Ukraine, that is, foreigners, they have not felt it, they have not encountered it, they don't know it, they have not woken up to the fact that your house is being bombed or shot. They have a completely different life. It just didn't fit together in my head. And first of all, [for me] priorities have changed, that these days, what is more important, what is unnecessary (...). I realized that those who didn't go through the war, they don't value their lives..." (NZ-8; F 20th).

The young girl perceives her war trauma experience as a deepening of her emotional and cognitive abilities to truly appreciate a life. At the same time, the painful opposition 'I – they' in the context of 'they don't value' exposes certain epistemological gaps that are supposedly impossible to overcome either logically or empathetically. The tension caused by such gaps reveals in her discourse a lack of words that would correspond to her traumatic experience. Despite being silenced due to its unspeakability, the deep layers of her war trauma affect her narrative and evoke that kind of polyphony in which she could hear only deep dissonances. War trauma divides life into *before* and *after*, imprinted in memory as a kind of scar-hyphen between them. And this invisible scar is tangible as a tension that can be traced in every interview with Ukrainians through their

emphasis on changes in their lives *before* and *after* traumatic events. The beginning of the full-scale phase of the Russian war against Ukraine is etched in the memory of many Ukrainians as a catastrophic event, the destructive potential of which has radically rerouted their autobiographical narratives.

By researching the variety of changes in attitudes of Ukrainians to their pre-war memories,³ I try to answer how diverse Ukrainians' retrospective reassessing of their former peaceful life was manifested in their memories.

MEMORY AS A REPOSITORY OF CULTURALLY EMBEDDED EMOTIONS

Drawing on the concept of memory as re/deconstructing "repositories" of culturally embedded emotions⁴ and as an inner "shelter"⁵ of person, I assume that in wartime some memories are revised and re/deconstructed more intensely, especially if the hybrid aggression intensifies the ongoing "memory wars"⁶ as a part of a full-scale struggle. Moreover, stressful conditions of wartime provoke the increase of anxious tonality, which, mobilizing memories, contributes to their re/deconstruction. To trace some deconstructions in the memory of Ukrainians in the article, I pay special attention to emphases, contrasts, dissonances, emotional, and evaluative vocabulary in the testimonies to reveal shifts in their attitude towards the content of their own memory. Since a speaker conveys his/her attitude towards what he/she said through tonality (generally classified as positive-neutral-negative) I draw on the respondents' self-traced changes in their attitude towards their own life as they remembered it and spoke about in their interviews. So, I focus only on what the respondents themselves perceive as changes in their attitude towards their own memories.

The emotions the respondents invested in their discourses about their own memories were also articulated in the interview transcripts. Text tonality as "an emotional quotient of the text"⁷ transmits a speaker's intention/attitude to the objects of his/her discourse, etc. However, often the discourse of

memory is neither homogeneous nor linear, especially when it comes to traumatic experiences. "Polyphony of memory",⁸ can reveal internal dialogues, debatable issues, contradictions or misunderstandings as the voices of others, including "one's own otherness" in memory discourses.⁹ So "polyphony of interpretations"¹⁰ is also traced in Ukrainian memories about the war. How varied are the post-reassessments in their memories?

I have analyzed the archive of the semi-structured interviews collected by 6 researchers¹¹ of the "Prisma Ukraïna: War, Migration, Memory" group at the Forum Transregional Studies (in Berlin) during 2022-2023. By closely reading all of these transcripts, I formed several thematic folders of selected fragments, some of which are discussed below. More than 100 anonymous female and male respondents were found among the Ukrainian adults inside and outside Ukraine. Most of them were internally or externally displaced because of the Russian war against Ukraine. They were mostly highly educated people with different work experiences. Some of them represented ethnic minorities (Roma, Turks, etc.). On the preference of the respondents, the interviews were conducted in Ukrainian, Russian, or in a combination of both. Despite the differences between the six collections of the archive,¹² all the interviews are linked by the general umbrella theme 'Prisma Ukraïna: War, Migration, Memory'.

In analyzing the memory discourse of Ukrainians, I do not have direct access to their actual past experiences, but only to how they themselves described changes in their memories during the interviews. When speaking about their former lives, respondents shifted between two main frames of recollection: the individual and the collective. In the individual frame, they recalled episodes from their own or their families' everyday lives, often speaking from an "I," "you," or "we" position (e.g., "I think," "you start," "we were content"). In the collective frame, they tended to recall what they perceived as shared experiences of Ukrainians more broadly, using "we" or impersonal forms (e.g., "we didn't have

any problem,” “many people,” “everybody”). By choosing between these frames and narrative positions, respondents also set the level of personal distance at which they felt comfortable discussing a topic. In both cases, what I analyze are not the events themselves, but the subjective traces of those events as expressed in their narratives of memory.

The archive is polyphonic in terms of the diversity of Ukrainian voices (by age, gender, region of origin, professional qualifications, place of displacement, etc.). However, it is also polyphonic because of the variety of expressions of different, often contrasting, emotions. The plasticity, the variability of emotions, is important to consider, continuing the conversation about retrospective shifts of emphasis in memories of a former life. Accordingly, the vocabulary and grammar position chosen by interviewees can help distinguish individual and collective levels of memory discourse in their interviews. Without direct access to either the past memories or the memories of the past of these respondents to objectively compare these data, I analyzed only their subjective perception of these changes as a cultural practice of adaptation to life in an ongoing crisis. Therefore, my research is limited to a set of fragmentary discourses of memories from the interview archive.

VARIETY OF POSITIVE POST-REASSESSMENT

Talking about how Ukrainians at the end of 2022 and in 2023 reassessed their life before the war, it is worth emphasizing that retrospective shifts in their assessments occurred in relation to both their former individual and social life in Ukraine. Respondents quite acutely express their experience of loss¹³ (of relationships with relatives, friends, acquaintances, home, usual lifestyle, social status, decent work, family photos, comfortable climate, native landscapes, hobbies, favorite leisure activities, etc.). All that in retrospect can seem to them to be the attributes of a ‘paradise lost’.¹⁴ Their retrospective reappraisal undergoes a significant shift in the positive direction, namely towards an increase in the assessment compared to the

previous “subjective” assessment of the same events (in their peaceful past).

Table 1: *Retrospective, more positive reassessment of their former life*

Post-perception	Examples
Ideal	“Ukraine, it is an ideal country for life” (VS-2 F 20th)
Better	“You start to appreciate it (<i>life in Ukraine</i>) just more and understand how great it was ” (VS-11 F 40th)
Positive	“We have already embarked on such flights of freedom , so to speak. Everyone had some plans . There was some hope ” (VS-20 F 50th)
Normal	“You begin to appreciate life from a completely different perspective (...) after , when the war started , (...) not a property, not clothes, nothing has any value at all except life ” (NZ-3 F 60th)”
Neutral	“It was an ordinary life for an ordinary Ukrainian family – my family – with its own little problems , with its own difficulties , but all of it was resolving... ” (OH-3 F 60th)

In general (See Table 1), Ukrainians revised and sometimes increased their satisfaction with their former peaceful lives in their retrospective reassessments.

- **Idealization** takes place in a situation of overestimated post-reassessment, as in the case of almost ‘paradise lost’. So, such an unrealistically high revaluation, by analogy with the swings of a pendulum, may indicate both the depth of the current despair and the desire to ‘thicken the colors’ in order to emphasize contrasts.
- **Reevaluation** as better than what previously seemed ordinary, despite the overtones of nostalgia, sounds like a survival lesson already learned. Life seems ‘great’ not so much because it was great then, but because it is experiencing as significantly worse now. When the current change of

optics is being applied (*'start to appreciate'*).

- **Positive** revision of one's own former **dissatisfaction** allows the respondents to recognize previously unobvious advantages of their former life (*freedom, plans, and hope* are spoken of in the past tense).
- Self-critical reframing (*'from a completely different perspective'*) is realized in **re-normalization** towards asceticism (minimization of needs) up to a radical revision of values (*'nothing has any value at all except life'*). These almost confessional reflections echo a painful conversion to the path of truth.
- **Neutralizing** former problems as self-censorship: the very problems are being downplayed retrospectively (as *'little'* or just *'difficulties'*). The former difficulties of ordinary life do not seem like problems because they were solvable (*'were resolving'*). In the pause, an unspoken 'unlike the large-scale catastrophism of the war' could be heard, as if the respondent lacked the words to articulate it.

This increase in positive reevaluation of retrospection extends only to the respondent's own life (including self-criticism, etc.) and to their individual memories.

VARIETY OF NEGATIVE POST-REASSESSMENT

At the collective level of their memory, Ukrainians, despite a certain self-censorship, were not so positive.¹⁵

Table 2: Retrospective, less negative reassessment of their former life

Post-critic	Examples
No problem	"Until February 24, we probably didn't have any problems (<i>laughs</i>). Even if it seemed like there were, in reality there weren't any " (VS-2 F 20th)
Problem	"It's no secret that many people in Ukraine had (and still have) pro-Russian views , other people simply don't understand that this is an element of Russian propaganda... " (DSh-16 M 60th)
Not so bad	"I used to have the feeling that everyone was robbing it (Ukraine) and pulling it apart , you know, like <i>fish, crayfish, and pike</i> , in different directions" (NZ-1 F 40th)
Bad	"And damn corruption , not on a hellish scale , it is what it is. And it surprises me very much , or rather, it doesn't surprise me, but it infuriates me... " (DSh- 5 M 40th)
Not so well as could be	"I think that then it seemed to us that we were happy... I think that we were content with little, and this was enough for us, and we didn't think that it could be better " (OH-11 F 40th)

In general (See Table 2), Ukrainians revised and sometimes weakened their former criticism in their post-critical reassessments.

- **Complete denial** of problems (as **'no problem'**) possibly rooted in both self-censorship and a change of their own optic to see past events through the prism of current conditions. That is why now former problems *seem illusory ('as if')* and even ridiculous, no matter how bitter the laughter.
- Instead, **problems** that previously did not seem serious are now being rethought deeper in a broader context of the hybrid full-scale war. 'Awakening'¹⁶ to the fact that Russian propaganda¹⁷ acts in advance (*'pro-Russian views'* as *'an element of Russian propaganda'*). As a powerful weapon¹⁸ of mass seduction¹⁹ it can blind many people,

even those who seem capable of critical thinking, around the world. Despite the obviousness of this problem (*'it's no secret'*), it was not noticed before the war. So, this sounds like a *warning* to both critics and sympathizers of the 'Russkiy mir'.

- **Reframing** the perception could lead to a reduction of some problems (as '**not so bad**') from zooming to scaling. It depends on the general social atmosphere, as well as the individual experience of involvement in the general uplift of unity,²⁰ which also contributed to the disappearance of the haze from the eyes. The respondent's feeling that Ukraine is being pulled in different directions by different forces (*'like fish, crayfish, and pike'*) is spoken of in the past tense, accenting that it has become a thing of the past.
- Respondents often express their **condemnation** of corruption²¹ (as '**bad**'), especially in the context of the war, more sharply, emotionally (*'damn corruption', 'hellish scale', 'infuriates me'*) and uncompromisingly.
- In rare cases, **restrained disappointment** (as '**not so well as could be**') is voiced. And this sounds rather like a rejection of ascetic optics (*'were content with little'*) in favor of a hedonistic view (*'could be better'*). It is about some kind of current disillusionment about the former life, which only once seemed like paradise, but no longer is. It is like a somewhat belated 'awakening' from illusion to reality.

Besides the variety of retrospective reevaluations regarding the former peaceful life described above, a clear resonance in memory landscapes of Ukrainians is observed in relation to the phantom reverberation of soviet propaganda; voices of displaced relatives of previous generations; voices of people repressed by the Soviet; echoes of World War II; a voiced awakening,²² etc. Because individual and collective memories preserve both the silenced

traumas and the voices of others. My further explorations will be devoted to studying the nuances of these resonances represented in the Prisma Ukraïna Archive.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

To sum up, in the presented variety of Ukrainians' retrospective self-reassessment of their former peaceful life in Ukraine, the scar Before-After, as a kind of alarming "center of pain," functions from the core of their memory, determining *centripetal* and *centrifugal* gravitation for the rest of the memories. Memories full of contrasting (from positive to negative) emotions, although being in constant motion, in crisis situations (like the war), their mobility and tendency to *re/deconstruction* noticeably increase.

In 2022-2023, Ukrainians were inclined to reevaluate their own former lives more positively. In general, the increase in positive self-reevaluated retrospections extends mostly to Ukrainians' personal memories about their individual life. The variety of the positive post-reassessments includes retrospective: 1) *idealization* as a symptom of unspoken despair; 2) *overestimation* as a symptom of cutting back on needs; 3) *recognizing the positive in the negative* as a symptom of a shifting 'blind spots'; 4) *renormalisation* as a symptom of self-critical asceticism; 5) *neutralizing* as a symptom of self-censorship.

In contrast, at the collective level of their memory, Ukrainians tend to retrospectively revise and sometimes weaken their former criticism. The variety of post-critical reassessments includes retrospective: 1) *denial of problems* as a symptom of self-censorship and change of lens; 2) *scaling of certain problem* as a symptom of awakening and warning; 3) *reframing* for reduction of some problems as a symptom of changing priorities; 4) *condemnation* as a symptom of indignation; 5) *restrained disappointment* as a symptom of disillusionment. Overall, the war-induced alarming tone of memories helped Ukrainians, through their own experiences, to more deeply rethink the dramatic experiences of previous generations of

their family and the larger Ukrainian community. Collective memory served as one of the foundations of resistance to the existential threat. To survive, one must become stronger, learning the lessons of getting rid of former illusions.

¹ It is noteworthy that the Greifswald Summer School Ukrainicum 2025 was held under the title in the form of the rhetorical question *Ukraine and the world: Paradise(s) lost?* <https://www.wiko-greifswald.de/programm/tagungen/aktuelle-sommerschulen/n/ukraine-and-the-world-paradises-lost-234691/>

² For example, Kateryna Botanova tried to explain why the tone of patronizing towards Ukrainians in the desire of foreign partners to reconcile Ukrainians and Russians, according to Ukrainians, is perceived as "simply unbearable", see Botanova, K. (2023). The art of misunderstanding. In O. Palko, M. Férez Gil (Eds.) *Ukraine's many faces. Land, people, and culture revisited*. (p. 358). Transcript Verlag, Bielefeld.

³ See also Haidamachuk, O. (2025). 'Emergency grab bag' in Ukrainians' memories about the Russian-Ukrainian war. *Almanac of Ukrainian Studies*, 36, 26–39.

⁴ Ahmed, S. (2014). *The cultural politics of emotion*. (2nd ed). Edinburgh University Press Ltd.

⁵ Szerszeń, T. (2025). To survive: Towards an anthropology of shelter. *Teksty Drugie*, 1, 62–76.

⁶ Noordenbos, B. (2022). Memory wars beyond the metaphor: Reflections on Russia's mnemonic propaganda. *Memory Studies*, 15(6), 1299–1302.

⁷ Ivanenko, S. (2021). Universality of humorous tonality (as exemplified in texts by Ukrainian and German authors). *Stylistyka X*, 10, p. 295.

⁸ Achilli, A. (2020). Individual, yet collective voices: polyphonic poetic memories in contemporary Ukrainian literature. *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 62(1), 4–26; Schwarzenegger, C. & Lohmeier, C. (2020). Reimagining memory. Digital media and a new polyphony of memory. In M. Filimowicz & V. Tzankova (eds.). *Reimagining communication: Experience*, (pp. 132–146). New York. Routledge.

⁹ Zaharchenko, T. (2013). Polyphonic dichotomies: Memory and identity in today's Ukraine. *Demokratyzatsiya*. 21. 241–269.

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¹⁰ Vitov, A. & Tymofieieva, H. (2025). Collective memory in Ukraine as a factor in identity formation in the context of postmodernity. *Skhid*, 7(2), 43–48.

¹¹ Some results of each individual research project are presented in the book, the electronic version of which is open access, Sereda, V. (Ed.) (2025). *War, migration, memory. Perspectives on Russia's War Against Ukraine*. Forum Transregionale Studien – Dossiers. 4/2025. Transcript Verlag, Bielefeld.

¹² Collection by V.Sereda (21 interviews) coded in examples as VS, by M.Homanuk (21) coded as MH, by A.Mozolevska (8) coded as AM, by D.Shatalov (16) coded as DSh, by N.Zaitseva-Chipak (25) coded as NZCh and by me (13) coded as OH.

¹³ Tytarenko, T., Vasiutynskyi, V., Hubeladze, I., Chunikhina, S., & Hromova, H. (2023). War-related life-making landscapes: Ukrainian context. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 29(2), 154–178.

¹⁴ Katarzyna Jakubowska-Krawczyk & Marta Zambrzycka also find expressed feelings of 'paradise lost' in Ukrainian war prose. Jakubowska-Krawczyk K., Zambrzycka M. (2022). Home, family, and war: Images of home in the Ukrainian novel about the war in Donbass. *Primerjalna književnost (Ljubljana)* 45.2. 63, 65.

¹⁵ Denysevych, O., Dubrow, J.K. (2025). Emotions, religious faith, and coping strategies of Ukrainians at the beginning of the 2022 Russo-Ukraine war: A qualitative study. *Journal of Religion and Health* 64, 1934–1953.

¹⁶ Nizhnikau, R., & Moshes, A. (2024). The war in Ukraine, the EU's geopolitical awakening and implications for the "contested neighbourhood." *Policy Studies*, 45(3–4), 489–506.

¹⁷ Pidkuimukha, L. (2023). Are we brothers? Pseudo-peaceful discourse in Russian media manipulation. In Salamurović, A. (Eds.) *Konzepte der NATION im europäischen Kontext im 21. Jahrhundert. Linguistik in empirie und theorie/empirical and theoretical linguistics*. J.B. Metzler, Berlin, Heidelberg.

¹⁸ Yang, Y., McCabe, S., & Hindman, M. (2024). Does Russian propaganda lead or follow? Topic coverage,

user engagement, and RT and Sputnik's agenda influence on US media. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 0(0).

¹⁹ O'Shaughnessy, N. (2024). *Politics and propaganda: Weapons of mass seduction*. Manchester University Press.

²⁰ Golovakha, E., Ivashchenko-Stadnik, K., Mikheieva, O. & Sereda, V. (2023). From patronalism to civic belonging: The changing dynamics of the national-civic identity in Ukraine. In B. Madlovics and Bálint Magyar (Eds.) *Ukraine's patronal democracy and the Russian invasion: The Russia-Ukraine war*, volume one. (pp. 297–329). Central European University Press.

²¹ Sadovnikov, O. (2024). The phenomenon of corruption in Ukrainian society: A philosophical analysis of ethical challenges and ways to overcome them. *Philosophy and Governance*, (1), 45–54.

²² Haidamachuk O. (2024). War/awakening *Almanac of Ukrainian Studies*. Issue 34. Kyiv: Milenium. 40–50. [In Ukrainian].