

Unit 3: Gestures and Taboos--Ukraine

Objectives

At the end of this unit you will

Be aware of the following

- The long history of hardships endured by Ukraine's peoples
- Patience, nationalism and agricultural ties to the land as significant traits
- Strong nationalism fostering identity seen in the Ukrainian Catholic (Greek) Church or Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church
- Politicized nature of Bible translation and distribution practices within Orthodox circles
- Human rights practices concerning prison, free speech and press, education and discrimination

Identify

- Potemkin villages
- Kyiv
- Igor Sikorsky

Realize

- Unique attitudes toward work possessed by many in Ukraine
- Religious perspective which sees God as merciful and kind
- Importance of the Ukrainian language in scriptures of Ukraine's Orthodox Churches
- Manners and customs regarding Ukrainian greetings, gestures, eating and visiting practices

Unit 3: Gestures and Taboos

"Above all, Ukrainians want the world to know that they are not Russians...[Ukrainians] will tell you that Ukraine is the second largest state in Europe, its population is Europe's fourth largest, and it has the second largest standing army in Europe."

-- From Da to Yes, Yale Richmond, p. 270

I. World and Life View

1. Ukraine In common folk history, the term "Ukraine" meant borderland. Under Communist domination, the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic was often referred to as "the Ukraine."

Since independence, the simple "Ukraine" or "Republic of Ukraine," omitting the article, is fitting.

Ukrainians, especially those in the western region of the country, see themselves as overwhelmingly European.

2. Optimism Due in part to their warm, moderate climate, rich agricultural land, and sense of a long, stabilizing history, many Ukrainians are an optimistic people. They are often outgoing, looking on the brighter side of things. The Ukrainian proverb "things will sort themselves out somehow" identifies an undemanding, reassuring view of the future.



3. Historical Past Hardships endured since World War I continue to leave a deep imprint on Ukrainian psyches. Much Eastern Front combat during World War I took place on Ukrainian soil. A short lived independence existed from 1917-1920. Many artists, writers and church faithful were killed, exiled or banned by the Soviets in the 1920s and 30s.

Collectivized farms and the Stalin induced famine of 1933 led to millions of deaths.



World War II saw Ukraine as a Soviet/German battleground. Nazi's occupied the region for three years during the conflict. Some four million Ukrainians lost their lives, including 1 million Jewish people in the Holocaust. Ukrainian insurgents continued to resist Soviet occupation until the 1950s.

The trauma of these events continues to shape the Ukrainian world and life view in the following ways.

a. Patience Difficulties experienced in today's economy, though significant, are minor compared with much of 20th century Ukrainian history. Distress is relative. Life goes on.

b. Nationalism Rather than a "God-given mission" to oversee Slavic peoples, a perspective that many Russians have, the Ukrainian outlook is more of a "live and let live" frame of mind. Many see their country as a mid-level European power, to be included in all things European.

c. Agriculture A close attachment to the soil is commonplace. The privately owned farm, or loose and voluntary association of peasants, is the tradition. An individualistic, independent spirit, dating from Cossack and freemen settlement, is much more common in Ukraine than in Russia.

d. Cossack heritage Cossacks remain folk heroes, symbols of national independence and zeal. Developed in myth and actual history, the Cossack mystique continues. Frontiersmen, pioneers, Orthodox soldiers, defenders of the oppressed, trusted "republican guards" of Russian tzars, adventurers and freedom fighters, such is the heritage of the Cossacks which still permeates the region.

e. Russia Within the Commonwealth of Independent States, of which the Russian Federation sees herself as "first among equals," Russia takes a somewhat paternalistic outlook toward Ukraine. Many Russians still regard Ukraine as a vital national interest. For them, an independent Ukraine is hard to comprehend.

f. Work Passivity in factory work, stemming from seven decades of Soviet oversight, can be common. Under Communism, initiative was suppressed, unquestioning obedience being the norm. Excessive industriousness was equated with greed. Though changing, with "street smart" entrepreneurs becoming the "movers and shakers" in the country, a passive work demeanor nonetheless continues.

4. Religion

a. God Compared with the Russian "fear" and "awe" characterizations of God, Ukrainians see the holy as "merciful" and "kind." In folk religion, gods often were bestowers of good.

b. Nationalist identity Both the Ukrainian Catholic (Greek) Church (or Uniate) and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church made few concessions to the Communists during the Soviet era. Consequently, these bodies are now sources of nationalist pride.

Some say that the shared persecution endured by Ukrainian Orthodox--whatever the denominational stripe--and the Ukrainian Catholic (Greek) Church (Uniate) under the Soviet regime now fosters a new appreciation of religion. Thus, most historic Ukrainian Churches, because of their history of enduring Soviet persecution while maintaining their integrity, now attract membership with patriotic loving Ukrainian citizens (see The Ukrainian Orthodox Question in the USSR by Frank Sysyn).



c. Jesuits Due to long term impact of Jesuit education and printing on Orthodoxy in the 1600s, some Ukrainian peoples may exhibit less than tolerant approaches to this Roman Catholic mission organization. Jesuit conspiracy theories exist. Political far-right demagogues may continue to propagandize against this group.



d. Bible translations and distribution

Within Orthodoxy, Bible translation and distribution projects can be volatile, politicized issues.

Many Protestant Americans welcome new translations and paraphrases of the Scriptures--the more the better. On military-to-military or support and stability operations with Ukraine counterparts, United States Armed Forces personnel may wish to willingly distribute Russian language Bibles to promote harmony and demonstrate witness.

As pointed out, however, by Stephen Batalden in a chapter entitled "The Contemporary Politics of the Russian Bible--Religious Publication in a Period of Glasnost," (Seeking God, pp. 232-243), military personnel would do well to be aware of the following reasons for the politicization of these Bibles.



(1) Approach to spirituality Historically, adherents of Orthodoxy fulfilled their religious requirements without reading the Bible. Observing the church calendar with its fasts, saints' lives, icons and joining in the liturgical celebration of the Eucharist were the important matters. Bible reading and study took a distant second place in Orthodox thought and practice.

(2) Ukrainian language Since independence, the Ukrainian language is the national tongue. Russian language Scriptures may symbolize domination and oversight rather than independent, Ukrainian identity. Also, to have many different Bible translations in existence undermines historic Orthodox church supervision and control.



(3) Personal translations In response to public demand, private, semiofficial translation projects exist. Many of these translations use conflicting Greek and Hebrew texts as their original sources. A confusing picture results. Church practice, authority, and oversight are damaged. Independent and competing Bible Societies and commissions add to the disarray.

(4) Uneasiness with change Orthodox hierarchy practices an innate conservatism and desire to preserve tradition. In a manner not unlike that of King James Bible controversies in American Christianity, Orthodox leadership feels new translations cloud the beauty of phrase and expression of older texts.

(5) Lack of linguistic norm In addition, though imprimaturs exist, there is no one linguistic norm for common Orthodox religious texts. A nostalgia for the past--with secure religious and language patterns--becomes increasingly valued.

e. Ukrainian Catholic (Greek) Churches (Uniate) Due to historical and theological practice differences, special sensitivity is required of all who would deal with Orthodox Churches in Ukraine.

II. Language

1. Ukrainian The official language of Ukraine is Ukrainian. It is as similar to Russian as Dutch is to German or Spanish to Portuguese. In 1989, 78 percent of the population spoke Ukrainian fluently. Influenced by Polish, the Ukrainian language has more cognates of West European languages than Russian. It also possesses fewer Old Church Slavonic roots.



2. Dialects Northern, southwestern and southeastern dialects are conventional Ukrainian language divisions. The Poltava-Kiev (pahl-TAH-vah, central Ukraine) dialects of the late 1700s and 1800s form the basis of modern Ukrainian.

3. Law on Languages An early 1990s Law on Language established Ukrainian as the national language of Ukraine. In addition, it promoted conditions so ethnic minorities could preserve their languages through schools, universities and radio.

III. Greetings

1. Reticence Initially Ukrainian peoples may be quiet and reserved. A protective barrier--avoiding eye contact, possessing a dour demeanor of suspicion and caution--may be the first impression. Smiles from enthusiastic Americans may puzzle more tradition bound Ukrainians.

2. Hugs Close friends and relatives receive cheek kisses and hugs upon greeting and farewell. A hand wave and verbal word takes place in more informal settings. Sensitivity and grace, a "warmth of heart," is a national trait. Body distance when talking may be

closer than that with which many Americans feel comfortable.

3. Names Usually first names are not used between strangers. A professional title (doctor, sergeant, major) or Mr., Miss., Mrs., or Ms., followed by the surname, is appropriate. Many Ukrainians value titles. Show deference to age as older people are well respected.

IV. Gestures

1. Impolite gestures include:

- **“OK” sign** (thumb and forefinger touching in a circle) This gesture may be interpreted as vulgar.
- **Shakenfist**
- **Pointing index finger** Though people may point this way, some consider it uncultured. 
- **Hands in pockets/folded across chest** Speaking to a superior or the elderly in this posture comes across as rude.
- **Gum** Chewing gum in the presence of superiors or elderly is impolite.
- **Spread or crossed legs** In public, when sitting, avoid resting one ankle on the other or spreading your legs in a wide fashion.
- **Theater** Squeezing in front of theater attendees with your back to them is impolite. Face seated people on such occasions.

2. Other, more positive gestures include:

- **“Thumbs up”** Often means approval
- **Eye contact** Use frequently in conversations yet avoid a constant, “boring down” on the person you talk with
- **“Fig”** (clenched fist with thumb between index and middle finger knuckles) Often this sign means “nothing” or “you will get nothing.”
- **Chivalry** Many Ukrainian women expect men to open doors and help carry heavy items.



V. Eating



1. Home Like many Slavic peoples, a warm kitchen is the center of social life. Wheat breads, dumplings, vegetable (borscht), potato and bean dishes, and dairy products are all well-known Ukrainian foods. A main mid-afternoon dinner, served in two courses, is the largest of the day's meals. Guests often remove shoes when entering the home.

2. Table Manners Hands (though not elbows) are usually kept on the table. All food taken is expected to be eaten. It is an honor for a guest to ask for, and eat, second helpings.

VI. Visiting

1. Friends The necessity of strong friendships is based, in part, upon the peasant and Soviet past, where friendship connections often meant the difference between success or failure. Titles are important. Yet, good personal relations are the most valued asset in getting something done. "Ukrainians will be fiercely loyal and trusting and will work hard for people they are bonded to" (From Da to Yes, p. 285). Many Ukrainians expect friendships to extend to business and military functions as well.

2. "No" A quick "no" is often the first response to a proposal. Though used frequently, it does not cancel a discussion or the suggestion at hand. Pursue the matter in a different way.

3. Potemkin Villages The desire of Catherine II of Russia to please a statesman Grigory Potemkin (pah-TYAHM-kyin, 1739-1791), led to her placing false village facades on the routes the two would travel. This practice--that of impressing gullible visitors--may continue today. Though Ukrainians may routinely criticize aspects of their country, visitors should avoid the same.



4. Kiev Some sensitivity may be required in spelling of the capital city of Ukraine. In March 1996, the government asked that Kiev be spelled, in the future, as "Kyiv."

5. Driving If military members must drive, employ defensive, cautious driving habits. Local laws and rules, known by Ukrainian citizens but unfamiliar to others, may cause difficulty.

6. Americans of Ukrainian Descent Good topics for discussion include references to prominent

Americans who are of Ukrainian heritage. These individuals include:

- **Igor Sikorsky** (sah-KAHR-skee, 1889-1972) Born in Kiev, he founded Sikorsky Aero Engineering, a division of United Aircraft Corporation. Sikorsky built, in 1931, the American Clipper, pioneering transoceanic commercial flight. He developed the first practical helicopter in 1939.
- **Andy Warhol** (1927?-1987) Artist who founded pop art. Known for his prediction that in the future, people would be famous for 15 minutes.
- **Mike Ditka** Former Chicago Bear football coach, TV commentator and now coach of the New Orleans Saints.

VII. Human Rights

1. Prisons *"The Constitution prohibits torture; however, police and prison officials regularly beat detainees and prisoners. Amnesty International in Ukraine reports that riot police beat and torture prisoners during their regular training exercises at jails.*



Prison conditions are poor. Despite government efforts to maintain minimum international standards in the prisons for convicted prisoners, the worsening economic situation led to a further deterioration of these facilities. Overcrowding, poor sanitation, and inadequate medical care are all common problems in the prisons.

Conditions in pretrial detention facilities routinely fail to meet minimum international standards. Inmates are sometimes held in investigative isolation for extended periods and subjected to intimidation and

mistreatment by jail guards and other inmates. Overcrowding is common in the pretrial and investigative detention centers. Prison overcrowding led the Government to release over 20,000 convicts under a mass amnesty, including some convicted of serious, violent crime" (Ukraine Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1997. Unless otherwise stated, quotes which follow come from this source).

2. Military Abuse *"Beating of recruits by senior conscripts, sometimes resulting in death or suicide of the young soldiers, remains common in the army, especially in the notoriously violent penal units."*

3. Freedom of Speech and Press

"The Constitution and a 1991 law provide for freedom of speech and of the press; however, the Government persistently attempts to control the press. The Government tolerates criticism on a selective basis. Many journalists practice self-censorship. The Government largely controls the broadcast media.

The print media, both independent and government-supported, demonstrates a tendency towards self-censorship on matters sensitive to the Government although this has been decreasing over time.

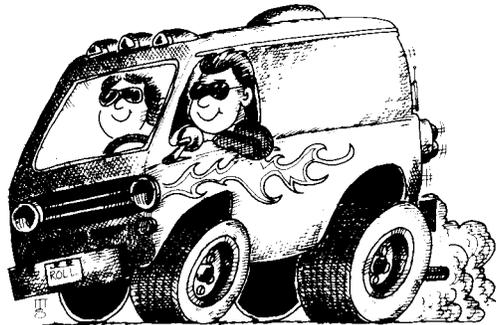


Reporting on organized crime and corruption in the Government, including misconduct by selected high-ranking cabinet and administration officials, is becoming increasingly bold. Journalists contend that they have been subjected to threats, including the threat of arrest, and violent assaults for aggressively reporting on crime and official corruption."

4. Education *"While major universities are state owned, they ostensibly operate under full autonomy.*

Academic freedom within universities, however, is an underdeveloped and poorly understood concept. Nepotism and bribery are reportedly common during entrance exams. Administrators of universities and many academic and research institutions possess the power to silence professors and scientists with whom they disagree by denying them the possibility to publish, or more directly by withholding pay, housing benefits, or by terminating their appointments. This atmosphere tends to limit the spirit of free inquiry."

5. Discrimination *"The new Constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, sex, and other grounds; however, due in part to the absence of an effective judicial system, the Government has not been able to enforce effectively many of these provisions. Societal anti-Semitism exists. The Government has not prosecuted anti-Semitic acts under the Law Forbidding the Sowing of Interethnic Hatred. The Government also has not prosecuted those responsible for sexual discrimination. Human rights experts also note that the police frequently harass dark-skinned young men."*



"Start anew."

Review Quiz: Gestures and Taboos

Part 1--True or False Place a T or an F in the blank provided.



1. _____ Currently, Ukrainian peoples identify their country as "Republic of Ukraine" or "the Ukraine."
2. _____ Most Ukraine peoples possess a "God-given mission" to oversee Slavic peoples.
3. _____ Many Russians still regard Ukraine as a vital national interest.
4. _____ Orthodox Bible translations in Ukraine are unifying, harmonious ventures the churches now agree upon.
5. _____ Most Ukrainian peoples are effervescent, outgoing and enthusiastic due to living in a moderate climate.
6. _____ "Bear hugs" are common in Ukraine between newly acquainted strangers.
7. _____ Using the "OK" sign in Ukraine is a positive, polite gesture meaning everything is fine.
8. _____ When in Ukraine, gum chewing in the presence of high ranking officials is a readily accepted way of reducing tension.
9. _____ An American of Ukrainian descent, Mike Ditka, is known as an exceptional Hollywood stuntman.
10. _____ A good practice when in Ukraine is to avoid criticism of Ukrainian culture even if hosts engage in saying unflattering remarks about their country.



Part 2--Multiple Choice Place the letter of the most correct answer in the blank provided.

1. _____ Compared with Russian peoples, Ukrainians are more
 - a. pessimistic.
 - b. optimistic.
 - c. socialistic.

2. _____ For many Ukraine peoples, the Cossack heritage is
 - a. a long forgotten excursion into the past, of little value in today's world.
 - b. a rich source of nationalistic identity and independence.
 - c. closely tied with Communist demagogues and shunned in current nationalist discussion.

3. _____ Many Ukraine peoples view God
 - a. as "fear" and "awe" inducing.
 - b. as "merciful" and "kind".
 - c. with feelings of dread or denial.

4. _____ The Ukrainian language is as similar to Russian as _____ is to German.
 - a. English
 - b. Dutch
 - c. Swahili

5. _____ For many Ukrainian people, the _____ is the center of social life.
 - a. kitchen
 - b. street borscht vendor
 - c. stamntisch

Unit 3: Gestures and Taboos--Ukraine

6. _____ "Potemkin Villages" are
- Ukraine's historically accurate early living arrangements, sort of like America's frontier settlements.
 - false fronted buildings designed to impress though deceive visitors.
 - industrial centers in Ukraine, famous for making Potemkin automotive tools.
7. _____ Andy Warhol, an American artist of Ukrainian descent, was known for his "pop art" and
- prediction that everyone would have 15 minutes of fame.
 - fierce animosity with Jackson Pollock.
 - paintings of pastoral scenes of Ukraine's farmland.
8. _____ Reporting on organized crime and government corruption in Ukraine today is becoming _____.
- grounds for imprisonment of reporters
 - increasingly bold
 - suppressed even more than in Communist times
9. _____ Within Ukraine's major universities, academic freedom is
- a highly developed, well-understood and rigorously employed concept.
 - despised and unheard of due to survivals of the Communist past.
 - an underdeveloped and poorly understood concept.
10. _____ A most valued asset in getting something done within Ukraine society is
- possession of a high ranking, official sounding title.
 - good personal relations and friendships.
 - plenty of American dollars and business sense.

Sources Used in Gestures and Taboos

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"The true test of character comes when the stakes are high, when the chips are down, when your gut starts to turn, when the sweat starts to form on your brow, when you know the decision you are about to make may not be popular...but it must be made. That's when your true character is exposed."

General Charles C. Krulak

