

A Century of Resistance: The Ukrainian Youth Association

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Abstract: This essay traces the evolution of the Ukrainian Youth Association (SUM) from its revolutionary roots in 1917 Kyiv, through Soviet repression, diaspora preservation, and post-independence revival, illustrating the enduring power of youth-led cultural resistance. It argues that SUM, far from being a marginal or nostalgic institution, has played a pivotal role in sustaining Ukrainian national identity and civic agency across regimes, geographies, and generations.

Origins in Revolutionary Kyiv (1917–1925)

The Ukrainian Youth Association (SUM) has its earliest roots in the turbulent year of 1917, a time when Kyiv was swept up in the chaos of revolution and a renewed sense of national identity. With the Russian Empire collapsing and the Ukrainian People's Republic coming into being, teachers, intellectuals, and community leaders recognized the need to raise a new generation that would grow up fluent in Ukrainian language and culture. In March of that year, they opened the First Ukrainian Gymnasium named after Taras Shevchenko—the first secondary school in Kyiv to teach entirely in Ukrainian. More than just an educational milestone, it was a bold statement of cultural pride and political intent.

Led initially by Petro Kholodny, and later by the gifted educator and cultural organizer Volodymyr Durdakivskyi, the gymnasium became a hub for future national activists. Its faculty included towering figures of Ukrainian thought: Vasyl Lypkivskyi, Sofiia Rusova, Levko Chykalenko, and others. These educators viewed their mission not merely as instruction, but as cultural statecraft—raising youth in the service of Ukraine.

Within the gymnasium's walls, students formed tight-knit bonds. They were mentored in history and civic life by intellectuals like Yosyf Hermaize, whose seminars taught critical thinking alongside nationalist consciousness. Out of these relationships grew early circles like "Tovarystvo Yednosti i Zghody" (TYZ), a society formed by the 1923 graduating class to maintain the spirit and fellowship of their Ukrainian schooling. Though originally apolitical, TYZ's members—especially Mykola Pavlushkov and Borys Matushevskyi—began to discuss broader political and national concerns.

Other informal groups emerged, including the artistically inclined "Kvarta" (later dubbed "Gazomotor") which engaged in satirical public performances, mixing political subtext with

youthful parody. These circles, though varied in purpose, were united by an ethos of intellectual resistance and a belief in the promise of national renewal. Their gatherings, often held at the homes of sympathetic intellectuals like Volodymyr Chekhovskyi or Serhii Yefremov, fostered a nascent underground culture.

By 1924, the Soviet policy of “Ukrainization” created a deceptive sense of liberalization, even as political repression deepened. Students like Pavlushkov, who wore a crucifix, faced expulsion for religious expression; others, like Matushevskyi, were purged due to their family background. Surveillance and denunciations increased, and groups like TYZ were forced to disband or go deeper underground.

These years laid the groundwork for SUM. The students of the First Ukrainian Gymnasium had become not only learners, but future leaders. From the seeds of education, community, and shared conviction, the idea of a youth association dedicated to Ukrainian national liberation quietly took root.

The Birth of SUM and Early Activism (1925–1926)

By the mid-1920s, despite increasing repression, a number of former students from the First Ukrainian Gymnasium sought to rekindle the idealism and community spirit fostered during their school years. Among them were Mykola Pavlushkov, Borys Matushevskyi, and Diodor Bobyr—students who had once formed the cultural and intellectual heart of TYZ. Disillusioned by the growing pressures of Soviet conformity, yet emboldened by their shared sense of duty to Ukraine, they began to consider the creation of a more structured and ideologically driven youth group.

In the spring of 1925, amid national anxiety about an impending war and continued political suppression, these young men began laying the groundwork for a clandestine organization. Drawing inspiration from earlier discussions with Serhii Yefremov—who lamented the lack of modern student activism akin to his own generation—they resolved to form the Spilka Ukrainskoi Molodi (Union of Ukrainian Youth, SUM). A central cell was created using a five-person model, where each core member was responsible for organizing his own “five.” Their aim was not merely cultural preservation but active resistance and national awakening.

They discussed acquiring tools for propaganda, such as a duplicating machine and even a pistol for potential self-defense, though neither materialized. However, Pavlushkov managed to procure a typewriter for leaflet production. The group began to expand its contacts, reaching out to rural youth through figures like Danylo Kokot and planning a program for national liberation. The ideas initially diverged—Pavlushkov favored a

temporary hetmanate dictatorship, while Matushevskyi leaned toward building democratic institutions—but their vision for a sovereign, unified Ukrainian state was resolute.

SUM declared itself publicly for the first time in May 1926, following the assassination of Symon Petliura in Paris. The timing was symbolic and intentional. On May 30, during a memorial service for Ivan Franko at Kyiv's St. Sophia Cathedral, Pavlushkov printed 100 small leaflets bearing the words:

"People, Ukrainians! Once again, the innocent blood of the best son of Ukraine has been shed. How much longer must we endure? Come to your senses, be human..."

As the panakhyda ended, Pavlushkov, Matushevskyi, and Bobyr threw the leaflets from the choir loft onto the congregation below, while other members created a diversion to ensure their escape. The action was not detected by the GPU, but it marked the group's transition from cultural fellowship to active underground resistance.

That summer, SUM members continued producing and distributing nationalist poems, essays, and historical materials. They read and copied articles from the *Literaturno-Naukovyi Visnyk*, and even composed their own poetry commemorating Petliura. A verse written by Pavlushkov and later found in Yefremov's diary concluded with an ominous call to arms:

"...I say that the sleeping people will awaken,
Will speak the word – and in thunder will resound –
The powerful prelude to a new day..."

As the Soviet crackdown accelerated, SUM's actions became more guarded, but the seeds had been sown. A defiant youth movement had been born—rooted in culture, sharpened by ideology, and prepared to resist.

Soviet Crackdown and the SVU Trial (1927–1930)

As the 1920s drew to a close, the atmosphere in Soviet Ukraine grew increasingly hostile. The brief thaw of Ukrainization gave way to suspicion, surveillance, and purges. Students and intellectuals were expelled or imprisoned for ideological nonconformity, family background, or mere signs of religiosity. Pavlushkov was expelled from the veterinary institute for wearing a cross; Matushevskyi faced dismissal due to his heritage. Their shared environment—rooted in the spirit of the First Ukrainian Gymnasium and maintained through SUM—now became a target of state repression.

The group grew increasingly cautious. A serious threat emerged when Natalka Sobko—a former friend and member of their circle—turned against them. Swayed by Soviet

propaganda and likely driven by fear, she sent a letter to the Komsomol Central Committee exposing SUM's activities and goals. Whether her denunciation triggered the crackdown or simply hastened it remains unclear, but the response was immediate. In April 1929, Pavlushkov's sister, also named Natalka, was arrested. Her sudden disappearance sent shockwaves through Kyiv's civic circles. For days, no one knew where she was—until a small notice in the local papers forced the GPU to admit they were holding her.

Pavlushkov himself was arrested on May 18, 1929. That same day, both Matushevskiy and others connected to SUM were taken into custody. The GPU quickly expanded its net, searching for any link to anti-Soviet youth movements. Volodymyr Durdakivskiy, the revered school director who had tried to shield his students and uphold educational autonomy, attempted suicide by leaping into the Dnipro River but was rescued and later arrested. On July 21, Serhii Yefremov, public intellectual and mentor to many in the movement, was also detained.

Conditions inside the prison were brutal. Detainees were kept awake for days, beaten, and subjected to psychological torture. Pavlushkov, according to testimony from his sister and others, was taken at night to the prison garage—where executions were carried out—and made to believe he was about to be shot. These fake executions were used as a method of breaking resistance. Matushevskiy would later confirm to fellow dissident Heliy Sniehiriov that the sounds of engines and gunfire haunted him for years.

SUM's underground activity—limited primarily to writing, distributing leaflets, and organizing meetings—was cast by the GPU as part of a wider nationalist conspiracy. The accusations were rolled into the massive Union for the Liberation of Ukraine, or Spilka Vyzvolennia Ukrainy (SVU), case, which would become one of the most notorious show trials of the Stalinist era. Although SUM members were among the youngest involved, the trial's architects sought to use their case to implicate older figures such as Yefremov and to justify the purging of the Ukrainian intelligentsia.

The 1930 show trial held at the Kharkiv Opera House exemplified the Soviet regime's use of theatrical public spectacle as a tool of political repression. Designed to produce maximum propagandistic impact, the proceedings were meticulously staged, with defendants delivering rehearsed confessions under duress. Alleged key members of the Union for the Liberation of Ukraine (SVU), such as Pavlushkov and Matushevskiy, were presented not as individuals but as symbols of an alleged nationalist conspiracy. Their cultural activities—distributing small-scale leaflets, composing patriotic poetry, and organizing informal intellectual gatherings—were distorted and weaponized as evidence of sedition. The Soviet authorities used the trial as a calculated display—meant to discredit Ukrainian cultural and

political life, tighten their ideological grip, and send a clear message: dissent would be met with fear, shame, and punishment.

While many questioned why prominent figures like Yefremov confessed or gave statements that seemed to legitimize the charges, historians have since pointed to threats against family members, the use of blackmail, and the offer of commutation in exchange for cooperation. It's likely that the young SUM defendants were similarly coerced. Natalka Pavlushkova would later argue that the courtroom became a platform from which patriotic ideals were nevertheless declared, despite the repression surrounding them.

The SVU trial marked the destruction of Ukraine's independent civic life. Though the charges were largely fabricated, the sentences were real. SUM leaders received harsh prison terms. Pavlushkov and Durdakivskyi were later executed in 1937–38 during the Great Terror. The trial sent a chilling message to a generation that had dared to imagine Ukrainian autonomy.

Legacy and Revival of SUM (1930–1991)

Despite the brutal repression of SUM's founders and the dissolution of its underground activities by 1930, the idea of youth-led Ukrainian resistance did not die. Instead, it migrated—first underground, then abroad, carried in memory, letters, and community. SUM's legacy lived on in diaspora communities, particularly in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Canada, the United States, and later, Australia and Western Europe. These émigré groups saw themselves as the custodians of an idea that could not be extinguished by Soviet bullets or prison walls.

In the 1930s, a branch of SUM was founded in Harbin, Manchuria, a city that had become a hub for Ukrainian exiles fleeing Bolshevik persecution. During the Second World War, in 1946, SUM was revived again in Western Ukraine, particularly in the Ternopil region, where nationalist sentiments remained strong. Although this group was also targeted by the NKVD and sentenced to decades of imprisonment or exile, their very existence showed the remarkable resilience of SUM's ethos. Members received sentences as long as 25 years in labor camps, followed by additional years of Siberian exile.

The spirit of SUM was preserved most vibrantly in the post-war Ukrainian diaspora. The organization became the largest and most active Ukrainian youth group in the West. Its network of branches—operating in over twenty countries—focused on cultural preservation, language instruction, leadership development, and national consciousness. Summer camps, leadership seminars, and youth congresses kept the idea of a free Ukraine alive for generations born far from its soil.

Diaspora Resurrection and Global Expansion (1946–1991)

The aftermath of World War II saw millions displaced across Europe, among them hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians who had fled advancing Soviet forces or survived the devastations of Nazi and Soviet rule. For these stateless individuals—soldiers, intellectuals, civilians—return to Soviet-occupied Ukraine was often unthinkable. Instead, they entered displaced persons (DP) camps in Germany, Austria, and Italy, administered by Allied forces.

These camps, though temporary by design, quickly evolved into dynamic cultural hubs. Within them, Ukrainians began rebuilding their communal and intellectual life—organizing schools, churches, theater groups, publications, and civic associations. Out of this milieu emerged the revival of SUM. Though violently repressed during the Stalinist purges, the movement's ideals had survived in memory. Its resurrection in the DP camps represented a conscious act of cultural self-determination.

In 1946, the Central Organizing Bureau of SUM was established in Munich, in the American zone of occupation. Munich, a key center for Ukrainian émigré activity, became a launching point for the organization's transnational rebirth. Led by former underground activists, educators, and exiled nationalists, the revived SUM was rooted in the same principles that had defined it in the 1920s: service, memory, and leadership.

After being forced into exile, SUM had to rethink its purpose. With Ukrainian communities scattered around the world, the organization focused on bringing young people together through shared values like patriotism, responsibility, and pride in their culture. No longer underground, SUM could finally work in the open, building a more organized and transparent structure. For many in the diaspora, SUM became a lifeline—a way to stay rooted in their identity and pass it on, even while growing up far from home.

The organization focused on four foundational pillars: education, culture, faith, and civic duty. Ukrainian-language classes, history education, and citizenship training were central components of SUM programs. Artistic expression—whether through folk traditions, music, literature, or visual arts—was a key part of SUM's work. The organization also worked closely with Ukrainian Catholic and Orthodox churches, making sure that spiritual growth remained an important part of a young person's development. Leadership was nurtured through summer camps, community service, and hands-on mentorship, giving youth real opportunities to grow and take responsibility.

As Ukrainian DPs resettled in countries such as Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Argentina, they brought with them the frameworks and ideals of SUM. Local chapters quickly formed in new Ukrainian communities. Despite the varied political landscapes—ranging from multicultural Canada to more assimilationist

Argentina—each branch stayed true to SUM’s original mission. What tied these communities together wasn’t location, but a shared culture—rituals, symbols, uniforms, and long-standing traditions. Events like summer camps, national congresses, and cultural festivals helped build a strong sense of identity and belonging that crossed borders. In North America, SUM worked closely with groups like Plast, the Ukrainian National Association, and church networks to strengthen its presence. In the UK and Australia, it played just as vital a role in holding communities together and keeping Ukrainian culture alive.

Challenges persisted. Generational change tested SUM’s ability to maintain language proficiency and cultural fluency among youth raised outside Ukraine. Political tensions within the diaspora—between competing visions of Ukraine’s future—sometimes led to internal divisions. Cold War scrutiny also subjected Ukrainian organizations to surveillance, as anti-Soviet sentiment was viewed with suspicion.

SUM adapted by investing in leadership development and modernizing its curriculum. The growth of Ukrainian studies in Western universities provided an academic foundation for deeper cultural engagement. SUM also collaborated with other Eastern European youth groups advocating for human rights and national sovereignty.

By the 1980s, as the Soviet Union began to waver, SUM and its allied institutions found themselves at the threshold of transformation. No longer only preservers of culture, they were preparing for a political future. With Ukraine’s declaration of independence in 1991, the long-exiled vision of a sovereign homeland became reality. SUM’s decades of cultural labor in exile became the scaffolding upon which a new civic identity in Ukraine could be built.

The revival and global growth of SUM between 1946 and 1991 is a powerful example of cultural resilience. Without the backing of a state, SUM took on a nation-like role—shaping young people into future citizens and keeping Ukrainian values alive across borders and through generations.

Return to Independent Ukraine (1991–Present)

The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 was a turning point in Ukrainian history. After centuries under imperial Russia’s boot followed by brutal Soviet repressions, Ukraine finally had a real chance to shape its own future. For the diaspora, who had spent generations protecting their culture and identity from afar, it felt like both a long-awaited victory and a call to reconnect with the homeland. For SUM, this watershed represented more than a symbolic homecoming, it enabled the re-establishment of a movement rooted in Kyiv, where it had begun nearly seven decades earlier.

In 1992, SUM was officially registered as a civic organization in independent Ukraine. The repatriation of the movement signaled not only institutional revival but historical restoration. Chapters emerged rapidly in cities such as Kyiv, Lviv, Ternopil, Ivano-Frankivsk, and Kharkiv—often with direct support from diaspora branches that provided financial assistance, leadership training, and organizational continuity.

The 1990s were marked by a broader cultural renaissance as Ukrainians sought to rediscover suppressed traditions, reclaim historical memory, and chart a sovereign future. SUM provided structure and purpose to youth seeking active roles in civic life. Drawing on its diaspora experience, the organization promoted patriotism, democratic values, ethical leadership, and community engagement.

SUM's current programs blend tradition with fresh approaches. Its national summer and winter camps offer young people a deep dive into Ukrainian history, language, folklore, and values. These gatherings also serve as spaces for building leadership skills and strengthening connections across regions and generations.

Commemoration remains a key part of how SUM teaches and forms identity. The organization actively remembers the Holodomor, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), and the victims of Soviet repression. Annual observances of national holidays and revolutionary milestones help foster a shared moral awareness—connecting the struggles of the past with the responsibilities of the present.

Civic education remains at the heart of SUM's mission. Forums, workshops, and service initiatives cultivate critical thinking, civic literacy, and social responsibility. As Ukraine has faced new crises—from the COVID-19 pandemic to Russian aggression—SUM has expanded its mission to meet contemporary needs. Humanitarian campaigns, veteran support, and psychological services for war-affected families have become vital aspects of its work.

SUM's legacy found renewed force during the 2014 Revolution of Dignity. Its members stood alongside thousands of others in the streets, calling for democratic change, government accountability, and a future aligned with European values. When Russia annexed Crimea and began its assault on the Donbas, SUM didn't hesitate—it moved quickly to respond. It organized relief efforts, offered shelter and supplies to families forced from their homes, and led public education campaigns to build awareness both in Ukraine and internationally.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 pushed SUM into action once again. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 once again called SUM into action. Chapters across Ukraine and throughout the global diaspora mobilized quickly—delivering humanitarian

aid, setting up mental health support, and working to raise international awareness. Young members led the way, organizing campaigns to counter disinformation, foster unity, and defend Ukraine's right to self-determination.

What continues to set SUM apart is its ability to respond and evolve. Today, that includes offering psychological first aid, developing trauma recovery programs, and supporting the overall well-being of communities facing incredible stress. These efforts reflect the organization's core purpose: to serve the country through meaningful action—guided by strong values and a deep, living connection to its history.

A 2025 study published in *Nationalities Papers* explores this evolution through the lens of diaspora integration and civic transformation. It argues that organizations like SUM are more than cultural relics returning home—they are active drivers of social change. Shaped by their experience in exile, they carry with them a cross-border ethic—rooted in service, identity, and perseverance—that continues to strengthen Ukraine's civil society from the inside.

Viewed this way, SUM's evolution since 1991 is more than a story of organizational growth. It marks a wider cultural and civic reawakening. When identity is passed down across generations and borders, it doesn't simply endure—it becomes a force that shapes what comes next. SUM continues to teach, inspire, and mobilize young Ukrainians, keeping national consciousness alive as a mission, not just a memory.

Conscience, Continuity, and the Courage to Serve

SUM's influence today goes well beyond its programs. At its heart, the organization represents a steady moral and civic vision. In a country still grappling with the legacy of Soviet rule, the pain of ongoing war, and different ideas of what it means to be Ukrainian, SUM offers something reliable—a sense of direction grounded in values. It's not about holding onto tradition for tradition's sake, but about making those traditions matter now.

In SUM, camps, rituals, uniforms, and songs aren't just relics—they're part of everyday life. These traditions are passed down naturally, often without fanfare, and help young people find connection, meaning, and pride in who they are. They offer a sense of belonging that runs deep, while also encouraging a real sense of responsibility to their community. It's not about being weighed down by the past, it's about drawing strength from it, and using that strength to move forward with clarity and purpose.

Central to SUM's mission is a powerful balance: to remember, and to act. Its approach to education is grounded in lived experience, democratic values, and a commitment to public service. By confronting hard truths, especially around Soviet crimes and Russian imperial narratives, SUM has become a cultural institution of conscience. It gives young Ukrainians

a space to face complex histories, ask hard questions, and imagine a future rooted in justice.

In every major turning point—from the Stalinist purges to Ukraine’s fight for independence, from life in exile to the protests of Euromaidan, and now in the face of full-scale war—SUM has adapted while holding fast to its core beliefs. Its journey from underground movement to diaspora community-builder to a frontline civil society actor shows an extraordinary ability to endure and evolve.

Nearly a hundred years after it began in secret, SUM is still shaping new generations of Ukrainian leaders. Its members are everywhere—teaching in classrooms, volunteering in civil society, serving in the military, delivering aid, protesting injustice, and taking part in policymaking and advocacy. SUM’s story isn’t just preserved in history books; it lives on in daily action.

Again and again, SUM has shown that a nation draws its strength from the conscience of its youth. It teaches them to remember with purpose, to act with conviction, and to protect what they’ve inherited. In doing so, it continues to fulfill the promise on which it was founded: that through culture, character, and commitment, Ukraine’s future will be secured—not by chance, but by the will of those ready to serve.

At its heart, SUM’s story is one of faith—not just in Ukraine, but in the ability of young people to shape its future. It’s a story of resistance, resilience, and renewal, and it continues to unfold every time a young Ukrainian rises to meet the moment.

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