



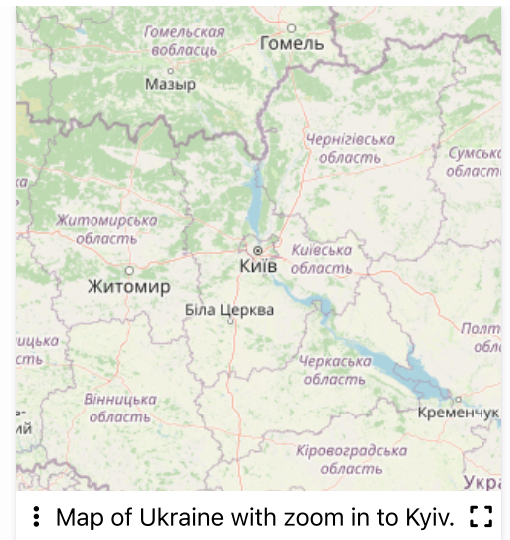
An Old Symbol Still Stands

In the center of Kyiv is the Independence Monument comprising a triumphal column, at the top of which is the statue of the Slavic goddess Berehynia, the orante, or blessed mother, of Ukraine. She holds a branch of the *guelder rose* bush in her outstretched arms. Standing proudly, with the gold-plated plant displayed for all the city to see, the monument shows how symbolic the flowering bush has become for a nation experiencing invasion and war.¹



⋮ The female figure that crowns this... 📷

Why was the guelder rose (*Viburnum opulus*) featured on the national monument? Called *kalyna* (калина) in Ukrainian and *kalina* (калина) in Russian,² it is an important symbol and a historically beloved cultural plant in both nations. For Ukraine, it represents independence, making the monument a perfect fit for its location: Maidan Square. Also called Maidan Nezalezhnosti, the square has a long history of civic and political action. Student revolutions occurred there in 1905 and 1917; the Revolution on Granite in 1990; protests in 2000; Orange Revolution in 2004; and Euromaidan in 2013.³ The guelder rose not only stands for continued nationhood in Berehynia's hands, but is sung about and referenced across Ukraine today. The modest flowering plant has come to represent Ukrainian loyalty, homeland, struggle, and protest as it joins the fight for Ukrainian resilience and independence from Russia.



Map of Ukraine with zoom in to Kyiv.

Prehistoric Roots

The guelder rose has long played a prominent role in human culture and can be traced back to the prehistoric period. Charred remains of its seeds were found in Tybrind Vig, a late Mesolithic coastal settlement of the Ertebølle culture dated to 5600–4000 BCE.⁴ Since the berries have to be cooked prior to eating, this record shows that they were cooked and consumed at the site. Clusters of guelder rose seeds were also found at Clonava-1, an island site at Lake Derravaragh in present-day County Westmeath, Ireland, which is a remnant of the Mesolithic Larnian culture.⁵ Since these seeds were uncharred, the evidence probably shows their collection prior to being prepared for consumption.⁶ Doel Sector M, a Swifterbant site in present-day northwest Belgium, dated to the late Mesolithic–early Neolithic transition period (ca. 4600–4000 BCE), has remains of guelder rose berries and seeds.⁷ Another site dating to the later Bronze Age, is Greengreenagh in Ireland.



Prehistoric Sites with evidence of...

Greengreenagh, a cooking pit, shows that other uses for the guelder rose were found in later periods. It includes a silty-clay trough—used for heating water by fire-reddened stones, which in turn were heated by burning wood—that contained wooden charcoal from the guelder rose shrub, the wood dating between 791 BCE and 419 BCE.⁸



A Fulacht Fiadh at Dromberg Stone...

As these data show, the guelder rose is native to the paleoarctic regions and has been used in Europe for millennia. Today, it enjoys a much wider geographical range. As it moves across boundaries of culture, time, and geography, the plant takes on new significations and meanings. While some of them may seem contradictory, each is tied to the plant's character and morphology.



Resisting Classification: Taxonomy and Nomenclature

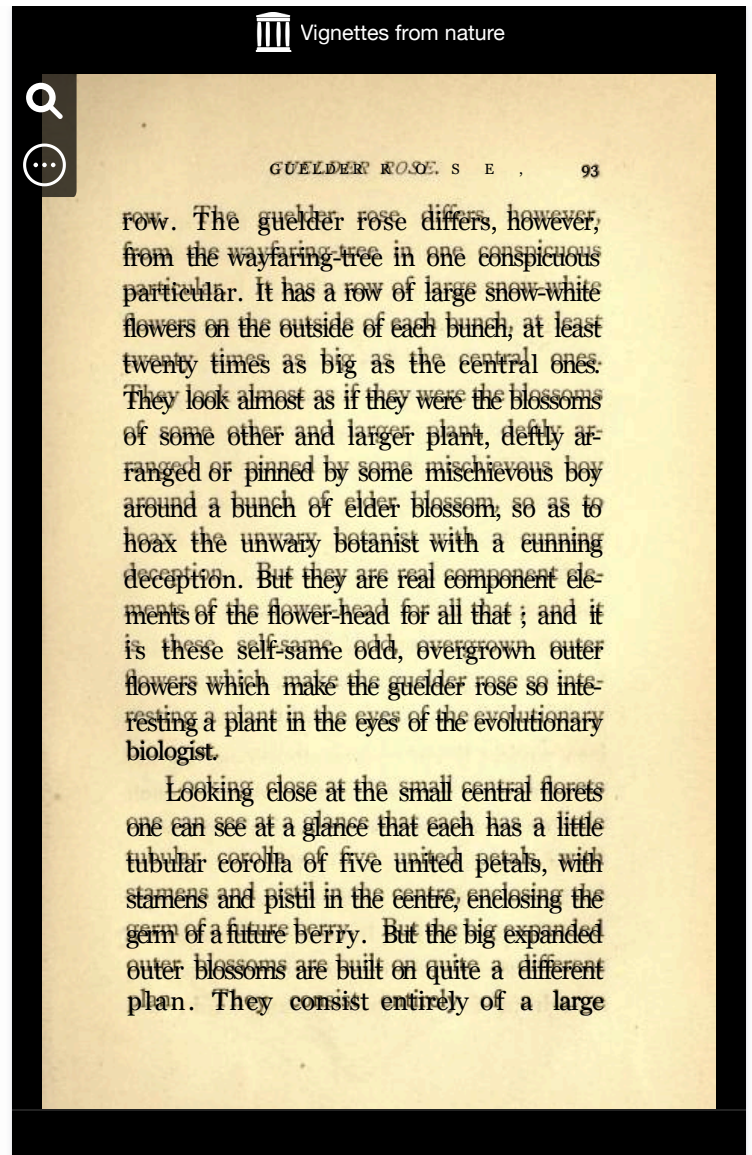
The guelder rose seems to elude precise classification. Taxonomically, it belongs to the *Viburnum* genus within the *Adoxaceae* family, which is often termed the *Viburnaceae* family.⁹ Until 1998, this entire family of plants was placed within *Caprifoliaceae*, commonly known as the honeysuckle family, some species of which have been regarded as invasive in their introduced habitats.¹⁰

<image src="10.5555_al.ap.specimen.bm000558413" caption="Viburnum opulus"

This seeming confusion spills into the plant's nomenclature as well. The name guelder rose is itself a misnomer, since the plant is not a rose as commonly understood, nor is it part of the botanical rose family, *Rosaceae*. And while "guelder" seems to relate to the Gelderland region in the Netherlands, the plant has no significant relationship of origin or cultural importance to that region. It has also been called the European guelder, water elder, rose elder, Rose Ebru, cherry-wood, crampbark, and gilaburu in Turkey. Other names include Cranberry Bush and Snowball Tree, but both confound more than they explain, since the plant is not a cranberry, and the snowball is only a single cultivar of it. In Ukrainian the plant is called kalyna and in Russian kalina, having a phonetic difference between the two names. The plant occurs in other Slavic languages such as Polish and Belarusian (kalina in Polish and каліна in Belarusian). Its scientific name, *Viburnum opulus*, results in similar confusion: viburnum is Latin for the wayfaring tree,¹¹ and opulus is Latin for the maple tree.¹² While these other plants are used to define the guelder rose, its own individuality seems almost slippery.

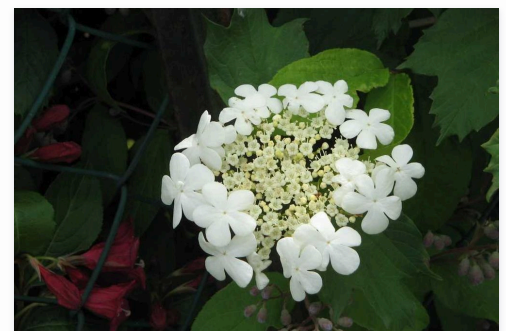


In fact, the first recorded use of the term evolutionary biology was by the naturalist Grant Allen in relation to the guelder rose.¹³ In his 1881 text *Vignettes from Nature*, Allen writes about the “self-same odd, outgrown outer flowers” of the guelder rose that make it extremely fascinating from the point of view of evolutionary biology. These outer flowers, Allen writes, look like the petals of another plant “deftly arranged or pinned by some mischievous boy” onto the plant in order “to hoax the unwary botanist with a cunning deception.”¹⁴



Morphology: Flower & Fruit

The plant’s “hoax” lies in its morphology. Its emblematic outer white flowers are sterile and serve to attract pollinators to the smaller flowers that are at the center of the inflorescence. The difference in size between these flowers—the larger ones are about 1.5–2.5 cm. in diameter, while the fertile ones are only 4–5 mm.—explains why the sterile flowers capture the imagination. Botanists have noted that the guelder rose flower has an “unpleasant, rather sickly smell,” to ensure that insects are driven to the fertile inner flowers to produce red berries.¹⁵



Guelder Rose Flowers



Discussion of guelder rose is often centered on its widely grown cultivar, the roseum, which gave the plant its name "snowball." The roseum consists of only sterile flowers, which results in the inflorescence becoming a striking ball of white petals.¹⁶ It can only reproduce with human intervention.



⋮ Roseum—the sterile cultivar of the... 📷

The guelder rose fruit has a bitter taste due to the presence of saponin glycosides and slightly toxic viburnine.¹⁷ It is usually cooked or frozen before human consumption. The plant's berries ripen in the fall but remain on the shoots till winter. This is because seed dispersers, which are integral to plant reproduction, are averse to their taste, preferring to eat more palatable fruits first and turning to the guelder rose berries only when food is scarce.¹⁸ The bright red berries thus persist through most of winter, forming a powerful image. They signal how the interplay between the plant's reproductive clock and the landscape's seasonal transformation could become culturally significant: the red fruit stands out, set against the white snow of winter, particularly in regions with harsher winters like Ukraine and Russia.



⋮ Guelder Rose berries in the snow. 📷

Morphology and Meaning: Cultural Depictions of the Guelder Rose

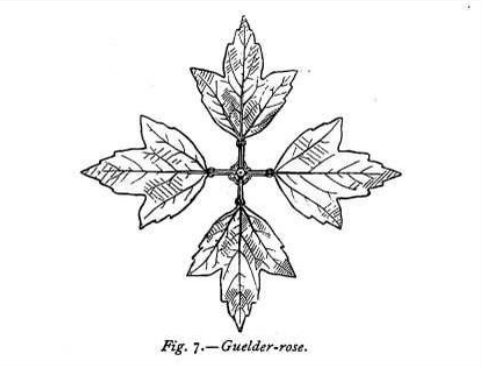
The plant's unique morphology—with white flowers that turn into bright red fruit—has taken on different associations and meanings across cultures. In Britain, books on the Language of Flowers referred to the *viburnum* as "snowball" for its white flower. The guelder rose was represented in many of these works as a symbol of old age, purity, and even of the white bosom of Venus.¹⁹ The French painting *Guelder Roses and the Venus of Milo*, by Édouard Vuillard (1905), juxtaposes the white flower with the backward bust of the classical Venus de Milo, both of which are painted in the same white and gold hues.



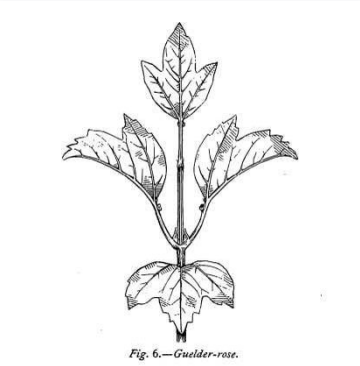
⋮ Guelder Rose... 📷



⋮ Guelder Roses and... 📷

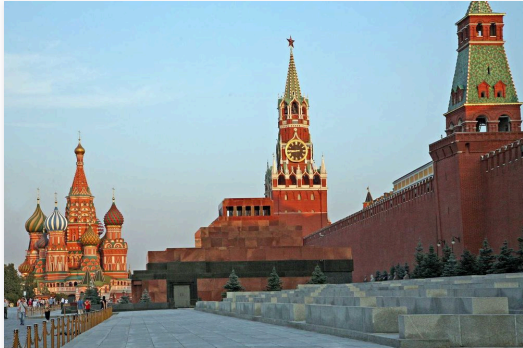


⋮ Art from Rutherford Alcock's articl... 📷



⋮ Japanese Art of the... 📷

In Ukraine, the red berries are embedded in the plant's vernacular name. "Chervona kalyna," a folksong that became the unofficial Ukrainian national anthem, translates to "red viburnum," emphasizing the red berries over the white flower. In fact, one would rarely hear the word "kalyna" alone; it is usually "chervona kalyna." In Ukrainian culture, it is the leaves with the berries, rather than the blossoms, which serve as an important symbol.²⁰ In Old Russian, the word for red is "krasni," while in modern Russian, the word for beautiful is "krasivi." Generally, things that are red are elevated in status, and many revered landscapes in Russia contain red in their name: the Red Square, one of the most important sites of Moscow; the red corner full of Orthodox icons; and red easter eggs.²¹ Etymologically, the red berries of the viburnum are associated with beauty and elevated status.



⋮ The Red Square in Moscow.



⋮ A shelf for Orthodox icons, called...



⋮ Red easter eggs, the color...

For Ukraine, Folk Art and Song

According to the writer and researcher of Ukrainian folk art Orysia Paszczak Tracz, it would be difficult to find a village house in Ukraine where there is not at least one *kalyna* growing in the garden or appearing right at the gate to welcome guests. Preference is given to images with red, from towels and shirts to skirts and shoes, and *kalyna* berries as well.²² Petrykivka, a type of traditional Ukrainian ornamental painting, often features the berry. Named after a village in Ukraine, an artist would decorate their living quarters with this style of painting that depicted roosters and other birds, along with local flowers, including *viburnum* berries. Families would pass down this tradition, and local schools would teach the fundamentals.²³ This painting style was added to the List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity of UNESCO in 2013, and the Vice Prime Minister of Ukraine at the time, Olexandr Vilkul, stated, "Petrykivka is a national brand of Ukraine."²⁴



⋮ Petrykivka painting; a rooster...



⋮ Petrykivka painting

In 2022, in Independence Square, standing under the maidan statue holding the golden guelder rose branch, Varvara Logvyn was painting red berries in the Petrykivka style beside steel antitank obstacles lining the square. She was inspired to paint the *kalyna* plant because of a famous Ukraine patriotic song, "Oh, the Red Viburnum in the Meadow." She described her work as "my way to talk with the world about Ukraine, about our war, about our values. We have to defend our culture. Culture is the basis of a nation, and [Petrykivka painting] shows that Ukraine is very bright."²⁵



Towels (Рушники) are an important object in late-nineteenth-century Ukrainian folk art and were presented as gifts at births and weddings, to guests, and more. They are also a common decorative feature of Ukrainian homes, both rural and urban. One towel at the Dnipro National Historical Museum was made by Nadiya Kovalenko, from the Petrykivka village in 1908. It is a girl's towel, featuring a viburnum branch with a nightingale on it, symbolizing the continuation of family. The towel is further decorated with ornamental flowers, like cornflower and an ear of corn.²⁶



Naïve art is a type of fine art created by someone who lacks the formal education and training that a professional artist might go through, though they may have received local training or are self-trained. The *kalyna* also appears in twentieth-century Ukrainian naïve art. Kateryna Bilokur's "Flowers and Viburnum" (1958) illustrates the leaves of a viburnum tree and the clusters of white flowers. One of Ukraine's most beloved artists, Maria Prymachenko, in her painting "Red Snowball Tree Blooms Over a Well" (1982), shows red and white flowers bursting from a tree that is growing between a male and female figure at the center. In her youth, Prymachenko's mother taught her how to embroider and decorate easter eggs, and she used inspiration from her dreams and tradition in her paintings. In her painting "Our Army Our Protectors," she depicted Ukrainian soldiers in traditional attire, standing below tall flowers.²⁷ Prymachenko's works were later used by American artist Maria Carmen Knecht for her peace advocacy efforts.



Ukrainian folksongs and folktales speak of the *kalyna* bush in ways that promote nostalgia for the homeland. Different kinds of songs—ballads and lyricals; songs sung in the spring, during harvest, and at weddings; and soldiers' and shooting songs—speak of the *viburnum*. They also can be humorous and satirical, and numerous folksongs compare a chervona kalyna to a beautiful maiden.²⁸ One Ukrainian harvest song begins, "Oh! nightingale, come down,/ Come down from the guelder-rose/ Come back, Oh ! my beloved, From Ukraine Home." "I am a woman. I am a blade of grass. I am dew./ Without love I am like a guelder rose in the frost," wrote a Ukrainian poet about the *viburnum*.²⁹ Another wrote, "My songs are a guelder rose bridge over the river of time,/ I am a pagan in love with life."³⁰ *Viburnum* has taken many symbolic forms, even in more contemporary poetry. It symbolizes fire and sunlight, a girl's virginity, as well as love, family, blood, and sadness.³¹ To many, it is a reminder of the homeland and of familiar places left behind.³²



⋮ Harvest in Ukraine (oil on canvas, 1896), by Mykola...



The guelder rose appears in Ukrainian literature, such as Taras Shevchenko's book of poetry, *Kobzar*, where *kalyna* appears 360 times. Shevchenko was a strong advocate for Ukrainian liberation, and the poems' characters are often depicted fighting against oppression and searching for a national consciousness.³³ Other works, such as Ivan Franko's "Chervona kalyna chogo v luzi hneshysy," and Lesya Ukrainka's "Kalyna" also feature the guelder rose plant.



⋮ Taras Shevchenko.



The guelder rose flute is a motif that appears in Ukrainian literature as an object that can bridge as well as build oppositions. In the Ukrainian version of the European Twa sisters tale—the traditional murder ballad in which one sister kills the other out of jealousy, and then an instrument fashioned from the skeleton of the dead sister tells the truth of her death³⁴—there is no “singing bone” motif as there is in other European variants. Instead, a flute made from the wood of the guelder rose takes on the role of the skeleton, endowing the plant’s wood with the mythological power to express grief, separation, and truth.



⋮ Mural depicting the Guelde... []



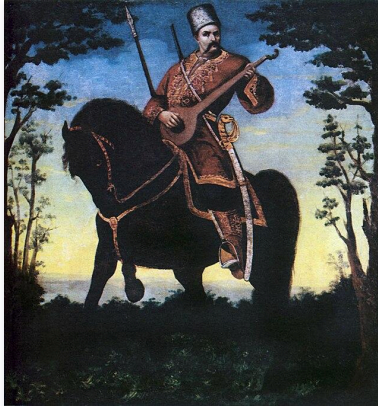
⋮ Mural depicting the guelder rose flute in a... []

In the contemporary Ukrainian author Oksana Zabuzhko’s short story collection *Your Ad Could Go Here*, the motif of the guelder rose flute is complicated by questions of guilt and culpability. The story “Oh Sister, My Sister,” is a second-person narrative of a girl who blames herself for the abortive death of her sister. It is set during the time of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, and the shadow of the KGB hangs over the girl’s family, especially since her father, Anton, is an escapee from a Gulag camp. The trauma of the KGB interrogating the household is tied up with the pregnant mother, Natalia’s, decision to abort—she is struck by the realization that she “would not be able to shield” two children and that she “dare not” suckle another child on her fear.³⁵ As the KGB officer rummages through their house, he pulls a book from the narrator’s hand which contains the story of the guelder rose flute. Here, the text reimagines the guelder rose tale through the perspective of the unborn sister: “Gently, gently, my sister, play, do not stab my heart today; it was you, sister, who drove us apart, plunged a knife into my heart.” Another piece in the collection is Zabuzhko’s adaptation of the folktale of the guelder rose flute in which the older sister is driven to murder the younger sister who decides to marry the former’s abuser. When the younger sister sings the truth of her death through the guelder rose flute, her horrific betrayal of her older sister is already known. The catharsis of the revelation of murder is accompanied by a dubiousness of culpability. In Zabuzhko’s work, guilt, culpability, and revenge are treated as complicated phenomena that are tied to the weight of history.



⋮ Oksana Zabuzkho is a contemporary Ukrainian Author... []

The guelder rose flute seemingly takes on a rhetoric of fraternity in Oleksandr Ilchenko's *A Cossack Never Dies, or Mamai and the Other Woman*. Written during the Soviet Era, the novel appears to be a “run of the mill curtsy to the Russian ‘elder brother,’ a recurring sibling motif in Ukrainian and Russian relations through which the former is seen as the younger brother to the latter.”³⁶ In the novel, the protagonist Omelian, the eponymous Cossack, carries a guelder rose flute to Moscow in memory of his home, Ukraine. The flute is broken by the Russian character Arina to protect Omelian, since he refuses to not play the flute despite the tsar’s ban on secular music. At the end of the novel, however, Omelian offers one half of the broken guelder rose flute to the tsar, almost in subordination. This is highlighted by the epigraph of the Moscow chapter of the novel, “Russia and Ukraine are a Guelder Rose that grows from the same root”: presenting a neo-colonial perspective wherein Russia’s imperial power over Ukraine is rationalized through the concept of the “shared roots” of the Guelder Rose.³⁷ The more contemporary work of Zabuzhko, however, sheds light on the danger of this rhetoric, offering a hardened perspective of how betrayal and violence can damage a relationship between even siblings beyond recognition.



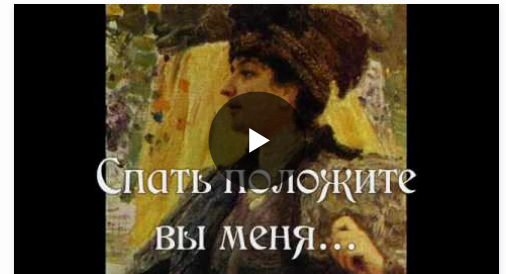
⋮ Cossacks are a key figure... ⌂



⋮ This coin issued in Ukraine i... ⌂

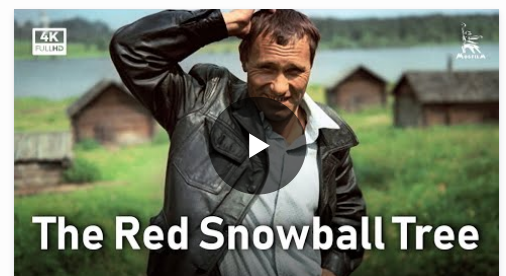
For Russia, A Symbol of Beauty and Doom

In Russian folk tradition, the red color of fire and guelder rose berries symbolizes beauty. Together with the sweetness of raspberries, they serve as a symbol of love. The guelder rose and the raspberries later came to represent a beautiful maiden, someone who epitomizes passionate love. The folk song “Kalinka,” a diminutive of *kalyna*, begins: “Kalinka, kalinka, kalinka, my sweet/ beauty berry in the garden malinka/ my sweet, eh.”³⁸ Russian folk culture even has the phrase, “*kalina krasnaya*”, which is common in folksongs and contemporary songs, connoting love, passion, beauty, and even sadness and grief.³⁹



⋮ "Калинка" текст "Kalinka" -Russian... ⌂

The iconic movie *The Red Snowball Tree* (1974), or *Калина красная* (Kalina Krasnaya), also uses the plant as a symbol. In this highest-grossing Soviet film of all time, the protagonist Yegor Prokudin is released from prison and forced to make a new life for himself in the countryside where guelder rose bushes grow. However, the redness of the berries foreshadows a bloody and painful future for Yegor, just as the bitterness of the berries symbolizes the tragedy of love and sudden death. Ultimately, Yegor is shot and both he and his lover die.⁴⁰



⋮ The Red Snowball Tree | DRAMA |... ⌂

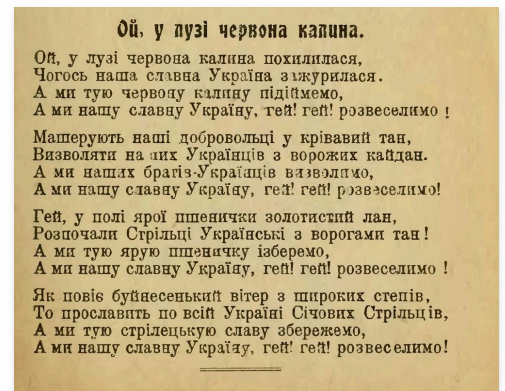
Even in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* there is a climactic scene in which brother Dmitri sneaks up to a window with the intent to kill his father. It is the sight of the guelder rose berries on a bush, just outside the window, that stops him: "'Snowball berries, how red they are!' he whispered, not knowing why."⁴¹ Later, in a trial scene, Dmitri claims that he did not kill his father because his mother was looking down, watching him at that moment, perhaps referring both to the berries and to Mother Russia.



⋮ The Snowball bush is another word... 📖

Context with Ukraine-Russia Conflicts

On February 27, 2022, only a few days after Russia invaded Ukraine, an Instagram video of the Ukrainian rock singer Andriy Khlyvniuk singing "Oi u luzi chervona kalyna" ("Oh, the Red Viburnum in the Meadow") went viral, and once again the guelder rose became fundamental to Ukrainian identity. The song, which has been covered by countless artists. It originates from a seventeenth century Cossack folk song that became associated with the Legion of Ukrainian Sich Riflemen, a unit within the Austro-Hungarian army during the First World War. It was a song of national pride for Ukrainians under the Soviet Union, which banned it because it was deemed too nationalistic and tied to struggles for Ukrainian independence. In the song, the guelder rose functions as a symbol for all of Ukraine.⁴² It begins: "Oh, in the meadow a red kalyna has bent down low,/ For some reason, our glorious Ukraine is in sorrow." In a later verse, the song continues: "Marching forward, our fellow volunteers, into a bloody fray, / For to free our brother Ukrainians from the Moscovite shackles."



⋮ Lyrics of Chervona Kalyna from 1922. 📖

Russia's invasion of Ukraine sparked worldwide condemnation of its aggression and support for Ukrainian independence. In the ensuing months, military aid to Ukraine from NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) member countries allowed Ukraine to defend its independence when initial reports were skeptical of its ability to stave off Russia. Artists from around the world performed Chervona Kalyna in a show of support. The band of the Air Force of the Armed Forces of Ukraine performed the song in a style that juxtaposes beautiful choral voices with the visual imagery of powerful military forces. The song has had international reach, too. The American rock band Pink Floyd covered the song and published a music video in support of the Ukrainian army. Through song, guelder rose has become a unifying force of Ukrainian nationalism and support.

In many respects, the 2022 invasion was more an escalation of prior Russian aggression rather than a completely new act of war. In 2014, Russia invaded and annexed Crimea, a region of Eastern Ukraine that many now see as a prelude to the current war.

Refugees by country of origin per 100,000 people

Our World in Data

People who fled their country of origin and are in need of international protection. This data is given per 100,000 people in their country of origin and shows how many people fled a country as a proportion of its current population.



 Edit

No matching data
Try adding countries and regions to display data.

Data source: UNHCR (2025); Population based on various sources (2024) – [Learn more about this data](#)
Note: This data includes all refugees, not just those who fled that year.
OurWorldinData.org/migration | CC BY



Explore the data →



The striped region shows the 2014... 

Russia and Ukraine have had a contentious past long before this latest conflict. Untangling this history is especially important both to understand the significance of the gulden rose in the region and its importance in the context of the Russian-Ukraine War because of Vladimir Putin's frequent invocation of history. Putin argues that since the beginning Russia and Ukraine were one nation, and therefore, a separate Ukrainian identity and independence poses a threat. Under the Russian Empire, Ukraine was called "Little Russia," signaling the proximity to the center of the Russian Empire and the empire's power over the Ukrainian territory. "Little Russia" later took on greater political and nationalist meanings that was a precursor to Ukrainian nation-building.⁴³ As the scholar William Artlett explains, "To Putin, anyone opposing the invasion of Ukraine either does not understand this fundamental historical truth or is a traitor."⁴⁴ But Putin's historical arguments have been denounced by governments and historians, such as Timothy Snyder's essay in the New Yorker, for being ahistorical and for spreading propaganda about Russia's invasion. As Snyder explains, Ukrainian national identity is rooted more in the Cossacks, a free people who lived in the Ukrainian steppes, than imperial Russia, which acted as a colonial power over Ukraine for centuries since at least the 1700s.⁴⁵



Map of Russia and Ukraine

Wikimedia Commons

IMPORTANT EVENTS IN THE HISTORY OF UKRAINE- RUSSIA RELATIONS

Ukraine and Russia have a complicated centuries long history of political and cultural relationships. This historical context has been distorted by Russia and motivated their invasion.

➤
RUSSIAN EMPIRE
ANNEXES MUCH OF
CURRENT-DAY
UKRAINIAN
TERRITORY



Music, Symbol of Patriotism, and Military Identity

The song “Chervona Kalyna” offers a counterexample to what we think of as nationalist music. As the music historian Phillip Vilas Bohlman explains, there are two types of nationalist music. Music “from above”—for example, national anthems, military marches, and other songs created or popularized by state institutions—and “from below,” meaning folk songs and dances, minority song cultures, and poems.⁴⁶ “Chervona Kalyna” is in the middle of this spectrum. What began as a folk song and was made popular by rank-and-file soldiers and social media users has become the unofficial national anthem of Ukraine. Guelder rose, historically a symbol of the people, has now become the symbol of the state as well. As a result, Russia has banned the song again: playing it in Russian territory has resulted in fines and arrests.⁴⁷



The guelder rose, once a frequent symbol in Ukrainian, Russian, and British traditions now firmly represents Ukrainian culture. Whether through the towering Independence Monument or a patriotic song to build military support, the bush with white flowers and red berries has become one of the most important plants in Ukraine. In 2024, Russia also targeted another important plant for Ukraine and the world: wheat. Wheat is so important to Ukrainian culture and economy, that it appears as a gold band on Ukraine's flag, symbolizing an endless field of wheat. Russia's initial blockade of seaports and halting a deal that would allow for grain shipments to resume was a war waged on the Ukrainian economy and global hunger.⁴⁸ If wheat encapsulates the economics of the war in Ukraine, then the guelder rose encapsulates the fraught cultural and ideological context in which the war is being fought.



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