

TRADITIONAL PUBLIC COMMUNITIES IN UKRAINE. (LECTURE)

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ABSTRACT

Background. The study of Ukrainian communities in the 15th–18th centuries is relevant for understanding the mechanisms of social self-organization and the formation of Ukrainian identity.

Aim. To analyze the structure, role, and interrelationships of communities to determine their influence on social and cultural processes.

Materials and Methods. Historical-cultural, comparative-historical, and system-structural methods were applied in this study. This investigation was a part of individual research work of authors. The lecture is intended for students of medical faculties.

Research Ethics. The interpretation of historical and cultural phenomena is objective, free from bias engagement. The object of the study comprises historical communities that do not involve the participation of living people; thus, consent for participation is not required.

Results. It was established that the peasant community had performed such functions as collective land ownership, mutual assistance, social support, self-governance, and justice. Guild communities regulated crafts (quality, prices, training). The Cossack community was a unique military-political formation that defended Ukrainian lands, fought for freedom, and possessed developed organs of self-governance. Brotherhoods were the communities formed for defense of Orthodoxy under conditions of confessional pressure. They founded schools, printing houses and fought for the rights of Orthodox population. Youth communities were institutions for the socialization of unmarried youth, ensuring their integration into the rural community. They possessed a regulated structure and self-governance, which governed relationships and facilitated leisure organization. The collective mutual aid was an institution of collective assistance in Ukrainian community, possessing a regulated structure of invitation, and a farewell ritual.

Conclusions. The peasant community regulated the economic life of the village, the system of social protection, and self-governance. Guild communities ensured quality control, the protection of artisans' interests, and corporate solidarity. The Cossack community combined a professional military function with developed self-governance. Brotherhoods were established for the preservation of Orthodox identity and the development of Ukrainian culture and education; they were institutions of civil society and promoted national self-organization. Youth communities were a system of learning that regulated social interaction and maintained the stability of the village. The toloka was a mechanism of social integration, collectivism and responsibility.

Keywords: *history of Ukrainian culture, peasant community, guild community, Cossack community, Brotherhood, youth community, toloka.*

Introduction

The study of traditional communal societies in Ukraine during the Early Modern period (15th–18th centuries) remains one of the most pressing topics

in Ukrainian historiography. These communities, including rural, guild, Cossack, and brotherhoods, as well as informal youth groups and so-called tolokas (communal work parties), functioned not only as economic or social units but also as key institutions that ensured the preservation of local self-governance, cultural identity, and legal pluralism under conditions of unstable national statehood or foreign administration.

The **aim** of study was a systemic analysis of the structure, role, and interrelations of these communities to determine their influence on the socio-political and cultural processes of the specified period.

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Materials and Methods

To systematically analyze the cultural and historical specificity of these communities, the following methods were applied: Historical and Cultural Method was used as the main approach to examine communal societies as subjects of the cultural process – carriers of the traditions, worldview, and values characteristic of Ukrainian culture during this period. Comparative Historical Method was applied to identify common features and differences in the social structure, functions, and cultural roles of various types of communities and their evolution over time. Systemic-Structural Method allows for the analysis of the internal hierarchy, rituals, and mechanisms of social control within each community, understanding them as holistic socio-cultural systems.

Research Ethics

In the study of materials related to ritual practices, religious brotherhoods, and ethnographic sources, respectful treatment is ensured towards the worldview, beliefs, and values of Ukrainian communities of past centuries. The research results aim to preserve and popularize knowledge about historical forms of self-organization, which are an integral part of the national cultural heritage. As the object of study is historical communities of the 15th–18th centuries that do not involve the participation of living individuals, informed consent is not required.

Results

Contemporary historiography, particularly over the last five years (2020–2025), demonstrates significant interest in reconsidering the resilience of these historical institutions. Research is actively moving away from simplistic sociological or economic models, focusing instead on the legal subjectivity and the capacity of these horizontal networks of self-organization to function under crisis conditions. Academic publications, such as *Ukrainian Historical Journal*, continue to be published steadily, confirming the resilience of the academic sphere and its ability to generate fundamental research results despite external challenges. This resilience allows historians to continue research that re-examines old concepts of centralized power, giving greater weight to horizontal ties in society.

The methodological framework of modern historical research on social communities necessitates a departure from the rigid division between urban, rural, and military structures. New studies emphasize social mobility and the intertwining of jurisdictions.

The most significant contribution to the study of Early Modern social structures belongs to comprehensive works published in the 2020–2025 period, which offer a synthetic view of all types of communities. Due to the high academic activity of leading researchers during this time, works have emerged that unite urban, rural, and military communities under a common methodological denominator.

These monographs introduce the concept of corporatism as a pervasive principle of societal organization. This principle extended from highly organized guilds and brotherhoods to informal youth groups (so-called, *parubocha hromada*) and even military Cossack *kurens* (camps). Researchers argue that it was this corporate nature that provided the "horizontal integration" of society, which in many cases proved to be much stronger than the vertical ties imposed by the *shlachta* (nobility) or state power.

"Corporatism, as a principle of organizing social life, permeated Ukrainian society in the 16th–18th centuries, from magnate 'clienteles' to the lowest rural 'communal associations'. This corporate nature ensured the 'horizontal integration' of society, which was much stronger than the vertical ties imposed by the authorities" [1, pp. 48–49].

This allows traditional communities to be viewed as the basis for forming a stable social structure.

Particular attention is paid to the issue of disciplinary power. It turns out that the internal disciplinary power of corporate institutions often surpassed that of the state, as it was based not so much on physical coercion as on the fear of losing social capital, exclusion from economic networks, the right to work, or religious assistance.

"The disciplinary power of institutions (guilds, brotherhoods, Cossack *kurens*) often surpassed that of the state, as it was based not on coercion, but on the fear of losing social capital and being excluded from key economic and religious networks" [2, p. 305].

The peasant *community* (*hromada*) in Ukraine played an exceptionally important role, performing a wide range of functions that ensured the survival and development of the rural population (*Table 1*).

The *Kopnyi Sud* (Kopa Court) (the word *kopa* denoted an assembly of people who gathered to resolve a dispute or reconcile the parties according to customary law; hence "Kopa Court") reconstruction demonstrates that rural self-governance in the 17th–18th centuries possessed broad, though

Table 1. The main goals and functions of peasant hromada

Goal/Function	Description
Land Tenure & Use	Collective land ownership, land allocation, regulation of usage, crop rotation, grazing, and forestry rules
Mutual Aid & Social Support	Assistance during hardship (illness, disaster, crop failure); organization of joint labor (<i>toloka</i>); support for widows, orphans
Self-Governance & Justice	Own self-governance bodies (village assemblies); local justice for minor offenses; maintenance of order and security
Organization of Economic Activity	Regulating agricultural work, setting planting/harvest times, organizing shared construction (mills, ponds)
Preservation of Traditions & Culture	Maintaining and transmitting traditions, customs, and cultural values; organizing feasts and rituals

unofficial, powers in regulating not only property disputes but also marital-family relations and moral norms. It functioned as the primary legal instance, effectively ensuring social control at the local level [3, p. 45].

The Rite of Admission, though sparsely documented, likely included: Community Consent (approval at village assemblies); Oaths (to be faithful to the community and its traditions); a Joint Feast (symbolizing unity); and Inclusion in Economic Life (participation in joint labor and farming). This was a crucial act of socialization.

Contemporary research (2020–2025) emphasizes the rural community's capacity for self-governance and its role as an active political actor, capable of defending its rights and conducting legal cases, moving away from viewing it merely as an object of exploitation. The use of the term "corporation of duties" highlights a methodological shift from the Marxist understanding of the community as a "class enemy" to an institutional understanding as a "corporation", reflecting the influence of Western historiography [4, pp.187–188].

Guild organizations (*tsekhovi hromady*) in the 15th–18th centuries are studied today not only as professional associations but also as important institutions that shaped the professional identity and social capital of the townsfolk (*mishchanstvo*). Their goals and functions are presented in Table 2.

The Rite of Admission involved a multi-stage process: Apprenticeship (learning the craft), Journeyman Status (working independently), Master Exam (demonstrating practical and theoretical knowledge), and the Admission Ceremony (oath of allegiance, joint feast, name registration, fee payment) [5, pp. 25–26].

"The statutes of craft guilds, especially after the 1650s, demonstrate strengthening of internal discipline, which was no longer limited to product quality but extended to the moral and ethical conduct of masters, effectively duplicating the functions of church and brotherhood courts" [6, p. 201].

The Cossack community (Table 3) was a unique phenomenon combining military, social, and political functions. Its primary goals included defense against external threats, securing liberties

Table 2. The main goals and functions of guild organization (*tsekhova hromada*)

Goal/Function	Description
Regulation of Craft	Establishing quality standards, controlling prices and production volumes, regulating apprenticeship and master exams
Social Protection	Aid in case of illness/accidents; organizing funerals and supporting families; fostering corporate solidarity
Self-Governance	Own governing bodies (Master Assemblies); right to establish rules and statutes; administering justice in craft-related matters
Defense of Members' Interests	Representing members before municipal authorities, participating in decisions on trade and taxation [5, p. 25–26]
Preservation of Traditions	Maintaining and transmitting craft traditions and knowledge through the apprenticeship system

Table 3. Functions of the Cossack community (*Kozatska hromada*)

Function	Description
Military	Professional warriors; participation in campaigns; border defense; scouting
Political	Own self-governance (Cossack Council); participation in community political life; influencing <i>starshyna</i> (officer) decisions
Social	Mutual support; development of education and culture (schools, churches)
Economic	Fishing, hunting, farming, land reclamation, trade development

and rights (self-governance, free life), and fostering social justice.

The Cossack community was open to various social strata (runaway peasants, townfolk, petty *shlahta*), with key conditions for entry being the desire for freedom, military skills, adherence to Cossack customs, and generally, Orthodox faith.

The rite was symbolic and essential for socialization, often including: Trials (demonstration of military skills, endurance); Oath of Allegiance (on a cross or saber); Acceptance of a Cossack Name (symbolizing a break from the past); Joint Feast; and Inclusion in the Cossack Circle (gaining full rights).

Modern historiography views the Cossack community as a unique socio-political structure, distinct from the feudal formations of Eastern Europe, acting as a "corporation with variable geometry" [7, pp. 58–59]. Elite groups (*starshyna*) constantly sought to monopolize resources but were obliged to respect the "communal will" of the rank-and-file Cossacks, especially during elections. Research on the 18th century confirms that Cossack self-governance effectively resisted attempts to turn it into a mere military unit, even amidst authoritarian tendencies from Moscow and the Hetmanate administration [8, pp. 15–16]. The right of veto and elective mechanisms ensured, at least formally, the preservation of democratic traditions.

The *Cossack Assembly* had the right of veto over certain decisions of the *starshyna* (officer class), and the electoral mechanisms ensured, at least formally, the observance of democratic traditions. Thus, the community remained an important institution of civil society. The democratic traditions of the Zaporizhian Sich, which stands as the most institutionalized form of the Cossack community with a pronounced *viche* (popular assembly) tradition, are studied separately.

Church Brotherhoods in Ukraine during the 14th–18th centuries played a vital role in religious, cultural, and social life. Their activities were aimed at protecting Orthodoxy, developing education

and culture, and supporting the social needs of the community.

The purpose of the church brotherhoods was the protection of Orthodoxy. Amid the spread of Catholicism and Uniatism, the brotherhoods became centers for the defense of the Orthodox faith. City brotherhoods, particularly those in Kyiv, Lviv, and Lutsk, were always considered protectors of the Orthodox faith. However, contemporary research (2020–2025) is expanding their functional field, positioning them as full-fledged political subjects. The brotherhoods effectively utilized a combination of religious status and the significant economic influence of their members (many guild members and wealthy burghers) to lobby for the interests of the Orthodox burgher elite at the highest level, including the Sejm of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth [9, pp. 112–113]. They fought to preserve church traditions and rites. One of the directions of the brotherhoods' activity was the development of education and culture. For this purpose, the brotherhoods founded schools and printing houses, promoting the spread of literacy and book printing in Ukrainian lands. The brotherhoods did not simply establish schools and printing houses; they transformed into a "shadow" organ of power in cities, especially where the Orthodox community resisted the Catholic or Uniate magistrate. This functional synergy between economically powerful guilds and politically active brotherhoods is a key theme of modern historiography, emphasizing the deep intertwining of jurisdictions and social networks in Early Modern cities.

Church brotherhoods supported the development of icon painting, church singing, and other forms of art. They provided aid to the poor, the sick, and families in need of social assistance. They organized charitable events and supported hospitals.

Thus, among the functions of the church brotherhoods, the religious function was primary. The brotherhoods organized divine services, church holidays, and sought to preserve Ukrainian tradi-

tional rites, upheld the purity of the Orthodox faith, and combatted heresies.

The educational function was also a priority. The brotherhoods founded brotherhood schools where children were taught literacy, theology, and other sciences. They actively published educational and religious literature.

Regarding the cultural function, the brotherhoods supported the development of art, organized theatrical performances and concerts, and collected libraries and archives.

In fulfilling the social function, the brotherhoods provided material aid to the poor, the sick, and orphans; they organized hospitals and shelters.

The political function of the brotherhoods consisted of their participation in public life, defending the rights of the Orthodox population, influencing the decisions of the city authorities, and taking part in political events.

Church brotherhoods were important centers of spiritual and cultural life in Ukraine. They contributed to the preservation of national identity and the development of Ukrainian culture.

Members of church brotherhoods in medieval Ukraine could be representatives of various social strata, but they were generally: burghers (*mishchany*) – that is, city dwellers engaged in craft, trade, and other activities, who constituted the majority of the brotherhood members; some representatives of the nobility also joined the brotherhoods, especially those interested in protecting the Orthodox faith and developing culture; occasionally, representatives of the clergy joined the brotherhoods, although their role was less significant than that of the laity. The Cossacks played a special role in the development of the brotherhoods. In 1620, Hetman Petro Sahaidachnyi with the entire Zaporizhian army joined the Kyiv Epiphany Brotherhood.

It is important to note that membership in the brotherhoods was voluntary and open to all Orthodox Christians, regardless of social status. The brotherhoods had their own statutes, which defined the rights and obligations of their members. The brotherhoods were centers where Orthodox believers could unite to protect their religious rights, develop education, and culture.

Church brotherhoods united a wide spectrum of the Orthodox population who sought to protect their faith and contribute to the development of Ukrainian culture.

The Rite of Admission to membership in a church brotherhood in Ukraine during the 16th–

18th centuries was an important stage that confirmed a person's belonging to the religious community and their readiness to fulfill the duties of a brotherhood member. Although detailed descriptions of the rites could vary depending on the specific brotherhood and region, there are general features that can be highlighted. The main stages of the rite were: submitting an application, consideration of the candidacy, taking an oath, inscription in the list, a communal meal, and payment of contributions. Let us look at each of these stages in more detail. A person wishing to join the brotherhood submitted a written or oral application. The application usually indicated the motives for joining and the readiness to adhere to the statute and rules of the brotherhood. The candidacy was considered by the members of the brotherhood at a meeting. Factors such as the candidate's reputation, their confession of faith, and their readiness to perform duties were taken into account. After the candidacy was approved, the newly admitted member swore allegiance to the brotherhood and its statute. The oath could be taken on the Gospel or before an icon. Following this, the name of the newly admitted member was inscribed on the list of brotherhood members, symbolizing official acceptance into the brotherhood community. After admission to the brotherhood, a communal meal might take place, symbolizing the unity and solidarity of the brotherhood community. Acceptance into membership could also be accompanied by the payment of certain contributions.

The Rite of Admission to the brotherhood was not just a formal procedure, but also an important stage in spiritual and social life. It symbolized the acceptance of Christian values and readiness to serve God and neighbors. Church brotherhoods played a vital role in protecting the Orthodox faith, developing education, and culture.

Members of church brotherhoods in Ukraine gathered in various places, depending on the size and status of the brotherhood, as well as the available conditions. The main meeting places were church premises, brotherhood houses, premises attached to schools and printing houses, city halls or other public buildings, and, of course, private homes of brotherhood members. Let us look more closely at what these premises were. Most often, brotherhood meetings took place in the churches to which they were affiliated. These could be specially designated rooms, chapels, or even the main temple. This was especially true for large and influential brotherhoods that had their own churches or significant financial means to maintain premises.

Some brotherhoods had their own houses where meetings were held, and brotherhood archives and libraries were kept. These houses often became centers of cultural and educational life.

Many brotherhoods were engaged in educational and publishing activities, so meetings could be held in premises attached to brotherhood schools and printing houses.

In some cases, especially if the brotherhoods were actively involved in the public life of the city, meetings could be held in city halls or other public buildings.

In small brotherhoods or under conditions of limited resources, meetings could be held in the private homes of brotherhood members.

It is important to note that the meeting place could change depending on the circumstances. For example, during wartime or epidemics, meetings might be held in safer or more isolated locations.

Church brotherhoods were an important factor in preserving Orthodox identity and developing Ukrainian culture and education, successfully combining spiritual service with socio-political activism. Their broad social base and democratic model of membership provided corporate strength for the defense of religious rights and social support for vulnerable segments of the population. Thus, brotherhoods were not only religious centers but also powerful institutions of civil society and self-governance that contributed to national self-organization in cities and villages.

The study of informal community structures, such as youth (boys' and girls') communities (*parubochi* and *divochi hromady*), in 2020–2025 is marked by an intensification of anthropological and microhistorical approaches. These structures, which were previously often considered only in a folkloric or ethnographic context, are now being analyzed as full-fledged institutions of social control and regulators of the marriage market. Youth communities in Ukraine, although not as formalized as modern organizations, played an important role in social and cultural life. They had their own characteristics and functions, determined by the conditions of the time. These were traditional associations of young people organized by gender and age, operating on the basis of ethical and legal customs and norms of community life.

The purpose of youth communities was socialization and adaptation of young people to adult life, a place where youth learned traditions, customs, and behavioral norms. Youth communities acted as intermediaries between the family and the village community. At the same time, they had

their own rights and interests recognized by the public. Young people united for mutual assistance in solving current social problems. Support was provided to one another within the youth communities in difficult life situations. Youth communities organized joint leisure activities, including games, dances, songs, and other entertainment. They were a place where young people could relax and have fun.

These communities consisted of unmarried youth – boys and girls who had reached majority (or were soon to reach it) and formed independent associations – boys' or girls' communities, each of which was conditionally divided into older and younger. The internal structure of the boys' and girls' communities was strictly regulated.

The age requirement for joining a youth community was not precisely defined. For boys (*parubky*), it ranged from 16–18 years. As a rule, acceptance into the boys' community was stretched over a long period, during which there were changes both in the appearance of the youngster (*pidparubok*) and in his behavior at festive entertainments and during joint work. Decisive moments proved to be physical maturity (a beard or mustache, strong physique), internal maturation, and the presence of certain personal qualities – not having a bad reputation, being lively, and sociable. Boys who could play musical instruments, sing, and tell interesting stories were held in high esteem. The youngster also had to receive some recognition from the girls' community.

Admission to the boys' community was usually timed to one of the major holidays (Christmas, New Year, Easter, or Trinity). In Podillia, this rite was called "coronation." Upon arrival, the boy bowed to the four sides. After this, he was lifted on hands while a celebratory song, "The girls sowed flax," was sung. Then everyone sat in a circle, and the new community member treated his comrades to vodka. Inclusion into the boys' community could also occur during some joint work, such as haymaking. In the Carpathians, this rite was called *vyzvolky na dobroho kosaria* (liberation into a good haymaker) or *frytsuvannia* (initiation) and resembled *vyzvolky na dobroho maistra* (liberation into a good master) that took place in guild brotherhoods. To test the abilities and endurance of the new haymaker (*fryts*), he was not allowed to rest and was forced to scythe between the best haymakers. The *fryts* was often even whipped with nettles, rubbed with a scythe sharpener on his bare stomach, tied up, etc. The rite was completed only when the newcomer arranged a treat

(*mohorych*) for the haymakers in the tavern. From then on, he gained the right to smoke a pipe, drink *horilka* (*vodka*), and visit the girls. According to custom, this was announced publicly from a high place.

The boys' communities had certain elements of self-governance. At the head was an elected leader – the otaman (*bereza*, *vaida*). He was usually characterized by such traits as energy, quick wit, and the ability to organize others. With his assistants, the otaman bore certain responsibility to the village community, organized entertainment, managed financial affairs, resolved disputes among comrades, and so on.

The girls' communities were also socially organized, although they did not have elected "*starshyna*". The path to them for all girls led first through the singing group of their neighborhood. Girls became full members of the community at 15–16 years old when they began attending evening gatherings (*vechornytsi* or *dosvitky*). Admission took place in the spring at the usual meeting place for the village youth. A girl joining the community asked one of the older members to be her friend. As a sign of agreement, they exchanged gifts (scarves, ribbons, etc.). Thus, the older girl became the patroness and mentor of the younger for life. Analogous relationships developed among the boys, but only for one season.

With entry into the boys' or girls' community, the status and self-perception of the youth changed both in the family and in the community. If previously the young man, being an adolescent, was engaged in small household chores, listened to the orders of his brothers, and worked as a hired hand, henceforth he performed traditionally male work, and his suggestions were given more weight in the family. The privileges of the new status were also manifested in the right to demonstrate it through certain attributes of clothing decoration. The greatest privilege was the right to marry and manage an independent household.

Youth communities were active especially during calendar holidays, had an internal hierarchy and performed a regulatory function. They ensured the observance of public morals, and their "courts" or "sentences," although they did not have official legal force, acted as an extremely effective form of public shaming and pressure. This confirms that the social life of the Early Modern period was regulated not only by official statutes but also by a powerful mechanism of unwritten laws and customary law. Youth communities regulated relationships among the village youth, protected the interests and honor of their members,

and acted as organizers of both their own leisure and village-wide festivities. Boys and girls performed caroling and used the money they received to decorate the church; they also hired a field for cultivation for the same purpose. Youth communities had their own centers of communication and independent holidays: St. Catherine's Day (November 24, Julian Calendar) was considered a boys' affair, as it was associated with various youth rites and traditions aimed at finding a partner and future wedding. Here are some of them: fortune-telling (*vorozhinnia*) – girls told fortunes about their intended using various objects and rituals. Boys also participated in fortune-telling, trying to find out about their future wives.

In the evening before the holiday, young people gathered for evening parties (*vechornytsi*), where they sang songs, danced, and played games. During the *vechornytsi*, boys had the opportunity to meet girls and express their sympathies.

There were various rituals associated with finding a partner, such as planting cherry branches that were supposed to bloom by Christmas. Boys could participate in these rituals to attract the attention of girls.

Thus, there were several directions for the realization of the functions of youth communities, including learning and upbringing, organization of youth leisure, military training, and social interaction.

Discussion

Youth communities played an important role in teaching young people crafts, agriculture, and other necessary skills. They also contributed to the formation of moral and ethical values. Youth communities organized joint celebrations, rites, and other cultural events. They supported young people in the development of folk art and culture. Military training of youth was a necessary element of the activities of youth communities. Thus, within this training, young people participated in military exercises and drills, preparing to defend their communities. They formed self-defense detachments and participated in military campaigns. Youth communities contributed to the establishment of social connections and the formation of a network of social support. They facilitated the exchange of information and experience among young people.

The youth communities of that time performed more practical functions than similar youth organizations today, in particular, military training and assistance with agricultural work.

Youth communities played a fundamental role in traditional Ukrainian society, acting as a system

of learning and upbringing that ensured a smooth transition of young people to full membership in the community with the acquisition of all corresponding rights and obligations. "Youth communities often acted as an informal regulator of marital and family relations, ensuring the observance of public morals, especially during calendar holidays. Their 'courts' or 'sentences,' although they did not have official legal force, acted as an effective form of public shaming" [10, pp. 28–29]. Strict regulation of entry and collective initiation rites were necessary mechanisms for forming corporate solidarity, mastering ethical and legal norms, and transmitting practical skills (including military ones). Thus, these unformalized associations of youth were vitally important institutions of self-organization and self-defense that regulated social interaction and maintained cultural and social stability in the village.

There was another interesting element of traditional collective mutual assistance in the Ukrainian community – *toloka*. *Toloka* (collective unpaid labor) is a vivid example of grassroots self-organization and mutual assistance. Contemporary researchers emphasize that *toloka* was not limited only to economic efficiency, which allowed a significant amount of work (for example, building a house) to be completed in a short time.

Toloka played a key role in the socialization of youth, strengthened endogamous ties, and ensured the transmission of labor skills. "*Toloka* was not only a form of collective labor that allowed a significant amount of work (for example, building a house) to be completed in one day, but also a key tool for the socialization of youth, which strengthened endogamous ties and ensured the transmission of labor skills between generations" [11, pp. 145–146]. It also served as a platform for the synergy of various community groups: in cities, guild members could unite for joint work, and in villages, *toloka* often ended with communal entertainment, which crossed its function with youth communities. Thus, *toloka* ensured the reproduction not only of material resources but also of vitally important community ties.

It is no wonder people said: "Without *toloka*, it is like having no arm: you cannot build a house or mow hay". By its structure, it was a complex custom that included the rite of invitation, the process of collective work combined with entertainment elements, the ceremony of treating the workers, the ritual of farewell, and the holding of entertainment. This established structure of *toloka* was not fully adhered to only when it was called by the

landowner: in this case, it was called a "requested" (*proshena*) *toloka* by the people. However, people understood that "request" was akin to an order, one of the varieties of corvée labor. Peasants invited to a "requested *toloka*" usually performed agricultural work: plowing the land, mowing hay, or harvesting. However, it was conditionally considered voluntary, encouraged by an obligatory feast. In the early Middle Ages, it was customary to treat them with "mead and beer," and in later times – with *horilka*. However, with the intensification of feudal-serf relations, the summoning of "requested" *tolokas* was practiced more often, and the treating – less often. The landowner, as a rule, alternated a "wet" (*horilka*) *toloka* with a "dry" one, although feeding the participants of the *toloka* was mandatory.

The classic (i.e., truly voluntary) *toloka* was much richer in content, organically combining the labor process with entertainment. It began with an invitation, and whether it was called by an individual peasant or when the decision to organize it was made by the community, the villagers went to it voluntarily. Peasants understood that by participating in the *toloka*, they secured the moral right to their own *toloka*. Moreover, it was customary to come to the *toloka* even without an invitation; this was most often practiced at youth *tolokas*, for example, when shelling corn: girls were usually invited, and boys came on their own.

The "one-day association," as *tolokas* were also called in Ukraine, was fun: with jokes, songs, and games. Often during the labor process, when it was hot, people splashed each other with water; for a laugh, they smeared each other with clay when wallowing a house; or they lined the road with corn stalks (so everyone knew there was a *toloka* here) when shelling it at one of the girls' homes.

The duration of the *toloka* varied, but it was customary to complete the entire main labor process. If the volume of work was expected to be large, the host treated the *tolokchany* (*toloka* participants) to breakfast (bread, lard, cucumbers). Upon completion of the work, he organized a feast with music and vodka, and then the *tolokchany* themselves arranged games, dances, sometimes horse riding. Peasant ethics prescribed that the host of the *toloka* be courteous to its participants, even if someone's work displeased him; he himself treated the guests, considering it an insult if someone else did it for him. The custom of treating at the *toloka* was always characterized by hospitality – not only because it was considered

a matter of honor and duty to the *tolokchany* but also because it was woven into the more general tradition of "giving and reciprocating." Peasant psychology understood this: as you treat others, so will you be treated.

Toloka was an important mechanism for survival and social integration, ensuring the completion of large volumes of work under conditions of limited resources and forming the value of collectivism and mutual responsibility. The clear ritual and ethical accompaniment of the *toloka* (invitation, joint work, treating, entertainment) confirms its significance as a social phenomenon that strengthened horizontal ties in the community. The degradation of *toloka* to the form of a "requested" duty under the pressure of the landlord reflects the direct influence of serfdom on the destruction of traditional democratic institutions of peasant self-organization.

Conclusions

The analysis confirms that the diverse traditional public communities of 15th–18th centuries Ukraine served as the foundational mechanisms of social self-organization and were indispensable to the shaping of Ukrainian identity in the early modern period.

The studied communities were not passive associations but active, organized institutions that structured the life and collective identity of the Ukrainian populace in the Early Modern era through a multifunctional system of self-regulation. First, they performed essential governance and regulatory functions, often substituting or complementing state authority. The peasant community was the primary regulator of rural economic life, managing collective land use and social security through mutual aid, while guilds controlled urban crafts, ensuring quality and protec-

ting artisans' interests. The Cossack community uniquely combined military defense with a democratic system of self-governance, exerting significant political influence.

Second, these communities were crucial for preserving identity and culture. Brotherhoods, for example, acted as bulwarks of Orthodox identity under confessional pressure, establishing schools and printing houses and engaging in socio-political activism, thereby driving cultural and educational development and fostering national self-organization.

Third, informal communities provided mechanisms for social integration and discipline. Youth communities regulated social interaction and ensured the controlled integration of unmarried individuals, maintaining the moral stability of village life. The *toloka* (collective mutual aid) reinforced collectivism, cooperation, and mutual responsibility, serving as a fundamental tool for social cohesion.

In sum, these traditional structures provided a comprehensive, bottom-up system of self-regulation, underscoring their enduring relevance for a complete understanding of Ukrainian institutional history.

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Prospects for further research. The findings of this study, which establish the robust structure and multifaceted functions of traditional Ukrainian public communities (peasant, guild, Cossack, brotherhood, youth, and *toloka*) in the Early Modern period, open several promising avenues for future scientific inquiry. The next stage of research will focus on adopting micro-historical and interdisciplinary approaches to further refine our understanding of these foundational institutions.

Authors' Contributions

Contribution	A	B	C	D	E	F
Authors						
Martynenko N.M.	+	+	+	+	+	+
Trotsenko O.V.	+		+			+
Nesterenko R.V.			+		+	+

Notes: A – concept; B – design; C – data collection; D – statistical processing and interpretation of data; E – writing or critical editing of the article;

F – approval of the final version for publication and agreement to be responsible for all aspects of the work.

Declarations

Conflict of interest is absent.

All authors have given their consent to the publication of the article, to the processing and publication of their personal data.

The authors of the manuscript state that in the process of conducting research, preparing, and editing this manuscript, they did not use any generative AI tools or services to perform any of the tasks listed in the Generative AI Delegation Taxonomy (GAIDeT, 2025). All stages of work (from the development of the research concept to the final editing) were carried out without the involvement of generative artificial intelligence, exclusively by the authors.

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