A Superhero Army, a Courageous People and an Enchanted Land: Wartime Political Myths and Ontological Security in the 2022 Russian Invasion of Ukraine

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ABSTRACT	The first three months of the 2022 full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine saw the rise of mythical stories of fantastical heroes, events, and places in Ukraine's public space. This article suggests looking at these stories through the frame of wartime political myths providing a greater sense of ontological security. By analyzing four proposed characteristics of the Ukrainian myths – transcendentalism, normativity, identity, and national context – we argue that political myths constitute strategies of resistance that contribute to ontological security. In this case, we observe that they do so in (at least) three ways: by creating myths of a superhero army; by creating myths of a courageous Ukrainian people; and by creating myths of a sacred enchanted land.

INTRODUCTION

The 2022 full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine revived conversations about Russian colonial and imperial violence, as well as exposing the shortcomings of Western scholarship in understanding and predicting patterns of resistance (KHROMEYCHUK 2023; BURLYUK – MUSLIU 2023; HENDL ET AL. 2023). Despite the expectations of Western and Russian officials and scholars of a quick surrender, Ukrainians have shown resilience to the invasion via the mobilization of all social strata. Beyond the loss of lives, millions of Ukrainians were forced to flee their homes and, whether displaced or not, they faced unemployment, poverty, malnutrition, homelessness, and a lack of access to education, medical help and supplies. A genocidal war in which ethnic identity and nationhood are denied, became a reality in Europe once more.

In these extreme times, Ukrainian people seemed to find comfort in surprising places: mythical stories and tales of heroes with extraordinary powers, wit and bravery which appeared in the first three weeks of the war; the Ghost of Kyiv, a legendary anonymous ace who shot down dozens of Russian planes above Kyiv; the thirteen Snake Island defenders who, while severely outnumbered, refused to surrender and told a Russian warship to "go fuck itself"; a woman who yelled at a Russian soldier in Henichesk to put seeds in his jackets so that sunflowers would grow when he died; and many, many others.

Several attempts to explain Ukraine's wartime narratives have been made by scholars from the perspectives of memetic warfare (HORBYK – ORLOVA 2022), as well as nation branding and strategic narratives (BOLIN – STÅHLBERG 2022; KANEVA ET AL. 2023). However, we argue that there is a need to approach these narratives with a holistic historical understanding of their grassroot origins, while explicitly addressing the foundational significance they have for national identity. Moreover, we argue that these narratives arose because of the need for ontological security – the need to find ways to relate to the world and understand its significance, feel safe and trust others (KIRKE 2016; RUMELILI 2015) – and serve the emotional purpose of responding to an extraordinary crisis of national identity and a complex existential struggle. Some authors point out that the concept of war itself can be explained by the striving for ontological security since it redefines national belonging and territory (CHRZANOWSKI 2021). In fact, several attempts have been made

to contextualize Russia's military strategy through the perceived threat to its ontological security (E.G. CHABAN ET AL. 2023; KAUNERT – DE DEUS PEREIRA 2023; SMITH – DAWSON 2023), as well as the responses of Western countries to the crisis (E.G. DELLA SALA 2023). But it is equally crucial to consider the cases where the opposite is the case: a war of aggression initiated by one state against another, a genocidal war at that, which becomes a source of ontological insecurity and therefore a catalyst for securitization of subjectivity (in this case, Ukraine's). In other words, exploring wartime narratives through the lens of ontological security can bridge the gap within IR in understanding the resistance of states, be it Ukraine or other states, nations and peoples affected by authoritarian and/or imperial violence.

Scholars have pointed to the importance of narratives in creating a sense of ontological security (SEE AKCHURINA – DELLA SALA 2018; GELLWITZKI – HOUDE 2023). In crisis situations, actors seek to preserve and re-invent positive narratives about national identity, and *"the most fundamental of these autobiographical state narratives become political myths"* (GELLWITZKI – HOUDE 2023: 438). We argue that the aforementioned stories can thus be understood as political myths, or narrative processes with discursively condensational properties that attain significance within a context shared among members of a common (national) identity and direct their actions. That is to say, they are embodiments of collective workings on stories, which *"coagulate and produce significance"* and are *"shared by a group"*, as well as *"address[ing] the specifically political conditions"* of the group (BOTTICI 2007: 14). What differentiates political myths from other types of narratives (e.g. strategic narratives or narratives of national identity) is that political myths are 'sacred' for the community – to question them is to *"raise doubts about the very identity and existence of the political community"* (DELLA SALA 2017: 546). This article highlights the sacred, identity-defining narratives present in the Ukrainian discursive spaces and social domains in the first months of the war, in line with the post-colonial understanding of Ukrainian discourses, which considers Ukraine's complex history of imperial subjugation and centers Ukraine as a multi-ethnic and multicultural nation with distinct localized experiences of conflict (MÄLKSOO 2022; MUSLIU – BURLYUK 2019; SCHULMAN 2004). It contributes to the study of political myths and highlights the importance of ontological security during wars in asymmetric, authoritarian and neo-colonial contexts, thereby shedding light on local (Ukrainian) experiences. For this, the article follows stories with mythical elements that appeared during the

first three months of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, from 24
February until 31 May 2022. We propose that the political myths emerged
in response to the demand for meaning and significance that emerged as
a reaction to the painful experiences of war.

The scientific and social relevance of this article is two-fold. Firstly,
the article links literature on political myths and ontological security to
the study of decolonial resistance. Our frame of analysis proposes four
categories of analysis for political myths: transcendental narratives, nor-
mative guidelines, national identity and contextual links. In short, we aim
to find an answer to the following question: How did the ontological secu-
ritizing in the 2022 Russian full scale invasion of Ukraine manifest in new
political mythologies? Secondly, the article contributes to the localized,
area-specific type of postcolonial scholarship on Ukraine by spotlighting
the often-missing narratives of Ukrainian citizens' experiences during
the first three months after the Russian invasion. Questions of historical
and cultural memory inherited from Soviet times, including the trauma
caused by earlier forms of genocide and oppression, such as those under
Stalinism, Nazism, and Hitler's plans to eradicate (certain) Slavic peoples,
are relevant for these local narratives.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we present the conceptual
framework based on the literature on ontological security and political
myths, relating this specifically to the wartime context and identifying
the four components of analysis (transcendental narratives, normative
guidelines, national identity and contextual links). We then explain our
research method and proceed with the analysis of stories as political myths
in wartime; this part is structured per our four framework components. We
then provide a discussion of the three myth-making processes that serve
to enhance ontological security: the infallible Armed Forces of Ukraine
(AFU), the courageous Ukrainian people, and the enchanted land. The
article ends with some concluding remarks on the generalizability and
long-term implications of the argument.

ONTOLOGICAL (IN)SECURITY AND MYTHMAKING IN WARTIME

We use the concept of ontological security to pinpoint the context of *"critical situations"* that (genocidal) war represents (EDJUS 2018). Ronald Laing (1960: 42) described an individual without a *"core of ontological security"* as *"precariously differentiated from the rest of the world, so that his identity and autonomy are always in question"* and without *"an over-riding sense of personal consistency or cohesiveness"*. Giddens (1979) has further developed the concept for sociology, and powerful cases have been made for the popularization of the approach in the field of International Relations (SEE EJDUS 2018) and by scholars of migration (SEE AGIUG 2017; INNES 2017; VAUGHAN-WILLIAMS – PISANI 2020). Jennifer Mitzen (2006) proposed the framework of ontological security to understand what she calls "irrational conflict", but we contend that the need for security can also be understood as an essential tool for interpreting "rational conflict" and resistance in asymmetrical warfare.

Alongside the profound physical insecurity that manifests in quantifiable health risks, exposure to war brings about an extraordinary existential crisis, or, in other words, ontological insecurity. In parallel with other securitization processes in war-affected societies – such as militarization – communities that experience ontological insecurity *"attempt to securitize subjectivity"*, which leads to *"an intensified search for one stable identity (regardless of its actual existence)"* (KINNVALL 2004: 749). To put it differently, the insecurity of being creates a need for new narratives of the national self and opens new avenues for collective identity finding and expression.

Political mythmaking in wartime directly responds to the need created by ontological insecurity, as mythical stories tell how one can get by in a world that is hostile or dangerous through identity-making and building relationships. Xander Kirke states that myths have recently become highly significant in modern politics, explaining that: *"[t]he work on myth ensures that even when one's physical security is threatened, one's security of being can be re-assured. This is because a myth does not (only) answer questions of existence in the sense of survival, but also wider questions about who we are and what we might become"* (KIRKE 2016: 44).

Unstable periods and conflicts can initially lead to a sense of ontological insecurity, but over time a new definition, and a "security of being" are achieved – seeing oneself as a complete, continuous person who is understood by oneself (MITZEN 2006) – because it helps *"settle certain existential questions about basic parameters of life, about being, [about one]self in relation to [the] external world and others, and identity"* (RUMELILI 2015: 1). Conflicts are not antithetical to ontological security-seeking, since situations of physical danger prompt individuals, communities and states to build relationships and rituals that strengthen the sense of belonging and stability of the self vis-à-vis other members of the community under conflict (MITZEN 2006). Imagining a community or identity establishes common traditions, boundaries, history, ideas for the future, and rules of exclusion and inclusion (ANDERSON 1983). In other words, the performance of routine practices provides the continuity necessary for achieving ontological security and *"certainty for the self"* (AGIUS 2017: 111). Narratives as a discursive practice can also give significance to a way of life, individual experiences, as well as political, social and cultural institutions. Political myths thrive in wartime because they involve ritualized storytelling of larger-than-life dramatic narratives that establish clear relationships and resolve existential questions about oneself and the community.

In the case of Ukraine, the search for ontological security also requires an answer to the question of what it means to belong to Ukraine as a nation. That is because the existential legitimacy of Ukraine as a nation is put into question by Russia as an attacking party and, at the same time, the purported extreme nationalism of Ukrainians is invoked as a justification for the invasion (ANDREJSONS 2022; CHOTINER 2022; DIXON ET AL. 2022). The precariousness that the citizens of Ukraine experienced is categorically due to their Ukrainian-ness, which makes the concept of national identity particularly relevant for this article. Ukrainian national identity is simultaneously in a process of transformation and under threat, and is a source of physical and existential danger. So practices ensuring ontological security also help to establish a(n) (re-)imagined community of Ukrainians with a secure national sense of self for the community. An ontologically secure community with a strong sense of belonging can provide a lot of comfort in a situation of extreme physical stress and explain patterns of resistance in circumstances of genocidal and imperial violence.

POLITICAL MYTHS AS SOCIAL PROCESSES

Several comprehensive efforts to integrate political myths into the framework of ontological security have been made by IR scholars (E.G. DELLA SALA 2017; EDJUS 2017; GELLWITZKI – HOUDE 2023; KIRKE – STEELE 2023). According to Vincent Della Sala (2017: 546), political myths are *"sacred"* narratives that are used as *"normative and cognitive maps that define and give meaning to a political community, helping to define who, more than what, it is"*. This sacredness reflects the tendency of identity myths to ascribe to themselves an authority that is *"transcendent and eternal"* (BERG 2005: 688). Della Salla (2017: 545) highlights that the origins of myths are existential and acknowledges that there are distinct social processes behind the creation of political myths; however, the emphasis of his work is mainly on the structure of the narratives, or their "narrative forms".

On the other hand, the processual model of political myth is explored in the works of the philosopher Chiara Bottici and the sociologist Benoît Challand (BOTTICI 2007; BOTTICI 2009, 2022; BOTTICI – CHALLAND 2010, 2013). Bottici and Challand (2010: 11) fittingly conceptualize a myth as a process rather than an object and argue that we should operationalize it as a series of production-reception-reproduction chains of narratives. Looking at myths as processes within the field of political science shifts the focus of a political mythologist from studying the narrative to studying the social acts behind their creation. Bottici and Challand (2010: 15) problematized the conflation of mythmaking with ideology – or the strategic use of myths explored in other literature – by pointing out that myths are not necessarily intended for instituting a false consciousness but are narratives *"that must respond to a need for significance that changes over time"*. The need for significance refers to the notion that unlike in any other narrative, something more is at stake in a political myth, be it prophetic promises of success or of doom. The need for significance is what gives prominence to some narratives and elevates them to the status of myths.

The national identity of the creators of political myths is a particularly fitting and under-explored concept for the exploration of political myths (and Ukrainian wartime myths in particular) as it offers a framework to explain the dynamic development of myths in the process of their transformation from stories to myths. Firstly, political myths answer to

the existential need for consistency and understanding of the national self (which arises in a genocidal war). Therefore, although Bottici and Challand do not explicitly acknowledge it, the need for significance stems from the need for ontological security (SEE KIRK – STEELE 2023). Gellwitzki and Houde (2023: 438) assert that political myths arise out of *"existing narratives as well as the generation of new stories about the self"* in order to respond to potentially national existential threats, or, in other words, *"manage the anxiety elicited through moments of rupture"*. Thus, myths as regular social processes include narratives aimed at the survival and preservation of members of a specific group by virtue of ensuring a stable self-identity (GELLWITZKI – HOUDE 2023).

Political mythmaking can therefore be understood as a dynamic process in the sense that an ontologically secure individual in a community accepts certain narratives as contingent on the status of that community. Political mythmaking is dynamic to the extent that it incites action in the present, and therefore never quite fully answers the question of being (BOTTICI 2007; KIRKE – STEELE 2023). We argue that political mythmaking during a war between nation-states is a dynamic, ordinary practice of narrative-making that responds to a very particular need for significance: understanding what it means to belong to a nation now and what this belonging entails. In such a way, political mythmaking in wartime satisfies the urge for ontological security based on a stable sense of national identity. By looking at political myths in wartime, one can come closer to understanding the mechanisms behind securitization of subjectivity and the process of imagining a new community.

We propose that wartime political myths should be understood as narrative processes with metalinguistic tendencies (or creative use of language) which direct political/normative action and attain meaning within a discursive context shared among members of a common (national) identity that presumes a baseline framework of cultural reference/history. In the context of war, when the physical security of a community is under existential and physical threat, political myths can ease ontological insecurity by affirming a sense of self, communal belonging and understanding of the world, and by giving significance to the political conditions and experiences of a (national) community. From this, we propose that the frame for analysis should include the following four components: (1) The *transcendental or sacred component*, which refers to the prototypical tendency

of myths to be dramatic, larger than life and sometimes supernatural or divine. It can be discerned by asking questions such as the following: What is dramatic, or larger than life about the story? How does the story incorporate extraordinary heroes, themes and/or events? (2) The *normative component* within a story, which refers to how the story reflects a behavioral norm or ideal. This requires answering the following questions: What actions are identified as good and bad in the story? Which behavior is desirable for members of this group, and which is not? (3) Mythmaking is a way for communities to define their view of self and their role in the world, and therefore we look at the common *national identity component*. A directing question in looking for identity-making in political myths is: How does the story contribute to the construction, definition and refining of national identity? (4) Finally, we need to add that myths always build on pre-existing historical and cultural rhetorical events, and these contexts are woven into the language, sometimes overtly and sometimes subtly. By looking at broader *contextual links*, one can understand what elements of the story are taken for granted and hint at the hidden meanings. To detect contextual links, it is useful to answer the following question: What links to the broader historical and cultural national discourse about the identity (Ukrainian in this case), which may be invisible to an outsider's eye, are there within the story?

A NOTE ON THE METHODS

Our analysis builds on three months of fieldwork and coding by Poberezhna (2022). The material was collected by following online news and media sources from individuals as well as governmental and non-governmental bodies between 24 February and 31 May 2022. In the first stage, 10 Telegram and 4 YouTube channels were followed, as listed in Table 1. Starting there, further data was collected using the snowball method by pulling from other sources that these channels reposted, and looking at the comments and reactions to the posts on these channels to get a sense of what engaged the audiences most and in what way.

Table 1: Data collection

channel	type of entity	number of followers (as of 27 May 2022)	themes
Telegram			
@ukrpravda_news	news channel	178,745	news
@zaborona_com	news channel	3,791	news; culture; media; art
@hromadske_ua	news channel	109,814	news
@torontotv	news channel	115,519	news
@genderindetail	non-profit publishing	2,549	gender
@nihilistLi	independent publishing	1,594	political commentary; opinion pieces
@ressentiment_channel	individual	64,861	military analytics; military news
@milinua	NGO	36,053	military analytics; military news
@hetmans_brushes	individual	15,083 (as of 1 Aug. 2022)	art posters
@V_Zelenskiy_official	individual	1,271,924	government official
YouTube			
@Ragulivna	individual	171,000	political commentary
@radiosvoboda	news channel	1,010,000	news
@STERNENKO	individual	908,000	political commentary
@uttoronto	news channel	632,000	news, opinion pieces

The second stage entailed monitoring these sources and noting instances that showed signs of mythmaking with transcendental storytelling elements, narratives that revolved around identity building, and establishing relations between groups and narratives that hinted at behavioral norms (what behaviors were shameful, anger-inducing or admirable, or simply good or bad). The third stage in the analysis was noting patterns, and, on the basis thereof, choosing stories that had overlapping themes and motifs. We chose discursive artefacts (texts, images, songs, videos) which could be used to exemplify the four elements of mythmaking: identity, transcendentalism, contextual links, and normativity. All of the material chosen was translated from Ukrainian or Russian to English. After that, the fourth stage consisted of seeking out more information on the stories by searching for keywords (signs) on five social media platforms: TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and Facebook.

To be clear, the collected stories are not full myths in themselves. They are selected discursive artefacts such as pictures, videos, posts and comments, and are merely sets of narratives that contained some of the four elements described above and together constituted myths behind or above the stories. Like Bottici and Challand $\overline{(2010: 22)}$, who mention the example of the myth of the Aryan race, and the Italian fascist myth that uses the ancient Roman Empire, we found a multitude of stories and narratives that can be compiled to form a larger political myth. After the analysis, we will trace the stories behind the political myths in the making, which are perpetually unfixed and only to be discarded *"together with the political regimes that have produced them"* $\overline{(\text{IBID.: } 22)}$. By collecting these stories and categorizing them according to the four elements, we will (in the conclusion) go a level further and describe three distinct political myths that, in Hans Blumenberg's $\overline{(1985)}$ terms, work on myth (*'Arbeit am Mythos'*) by figuring above or behind the collected stories $\overline{(\text{IBID.})}$. In the discussion/conclusion section of the article we will end with those bigger myths: the infallible Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU), the courageous Ukrainian people, and the enchanted land. Viewing political myths as processes allows us to consider a variety of otherwise obscure discursive artefacts – songs, memes, comments of individuals – and tie them into overarching narratives with a political function.

ANALYSIS OF THE STORIES AS POLITICAL MYTHS IN WARTIME

In this section, we analyze the pictures, videos, posts and comments that we have selected as discursive artefacts (or *"works on myth"*), using the four analytical categories from the above conceptual frame: transcendental narratives, normative guidelines, national identity and contextual links.

TRANSCENDENTALISM: HEROES, MAGIC AND OTHER THEMES

In this section, we provide examples of transcendence and sacredness in the stories which manifest through extraordinary heroes, dramatic plots and extraordinary settings. Firstly, heroes can behave extraordinarily, like in the story about the Ghost of Kyiv, a fictional ace fighter pilot who was rumored to have dealt crushing blows to the Russian Air Force during the initial stages of the war. The discourses surrounding the Ghost at times credited him with singlehandedly accounting for the majority of the

reported losses of Russian aircraft, and sometimes his speculated daily accomplishments exceeded the most generous country-wide estimations of any official government sources. A user on Facebook referred to the Ghost in a poem as *"a faceless avenger, like morning mist, who flies between the clouds, as if living in them; he is courageous, strong, fast, mysterious; he hides his face and name"*. The hero's anonymity is not trivial, as it absolves the Ghost of the burden of having any human flaws: the Ghost cannot be at the center of a corruption scandal, his political views are unknown, and his personal relationships cannot be speculated on. An anonymous hero allows anyone to project their ideals onto them and creates room for fantasizing about them, which is observed in art, videos and comment sections. For example, the comments under one TikTok video speculate in great detail about the Ghost's identity and fantasize about him: *"Imagine [if] this is a woman?"; "He is 35 years old"; "I want to marry him"*; and *"The Ghost has a girlfriend and a child and he is 37 years old"*. The anonymity of extraordinary heroes such as the Ghost enables the projection of idealized traits and produces a perfect national superhero who is above the bounds of human frailties, making them equally appealing across political, economic and social spectrums. Through the Ghost of Kyiv, we can see how the hero's anonymity fosters collective fantasizing and gives them a sense of imperturbability that shields them from criticism, turning them into a securitized symbol of the army.

The Ghost of Kyiv is portrayed in terms equating him to a superhero-like figure with extraordinary powers that is symbolically linked to the heroism of AFU. This symbolism draws from associations with powerful and masculine figures fighting for just causes, whether it is saving humanity, preserving cultural identity and sovereignty, or fighting evil. The Ghost, thus, is a symbol of perseverance of good and protection against evil, serving as symbolic representation of the Ukrainian army.

Transcendental heroes do not necessarily need to be remarkable; they can also be relatable. A narrative about a woman in Kyiv knocking down a Russian spy drone with a jar of pickles went viral at the beginning of March 2022. It typically portrayed her either as an older woman or a stereotypically grandmotherly figure, which has a clear iconography attached to it: mainly in the form of a shawl, but also in that of glasses, wrinkles, and specific types of clothing, such as sheepskin or woolen coats and foal boots. Even the choice of a weapon – a jar of pickles – is something that

a Ukrainian grandmother can always be expected to have at home (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: AN IMAGE FROM TWITTER SHARED BY LYBOV TSYBULSKA (2022)

It is peculiar that an act which required physical strength and precision of aim, which are not qualities typically associated with old age, are paired in this instance with an image of a grandmother. The hero is unlikely because under peaceful circumstances she would not be expected to be militant, but in the story, she is exemplary: when the need to resist arises, she is ready and willing to answer the call. Hers is the story of the unlikely heroine because she lacks all the features that make the Ghost superhuman and admirable, but at the same time she has more identity to herself. The story demonstrates the importance of regular people in the face of extraordinary situations and the effectiveness of group action when regular people are willing to answer the call.

Secondly, there are also more dramatic narratives such as the Snake Island defender's story, which began as a tale of tragic heroism and martyrdom and ended as a cautionary tale of justice and the power of intention. The story holds that a guard on an island in the Black Sea responded to a demand from a garrison of three Russian ships to surrender by saying: "Russian warship, go fuck yourself". When the thirteen Ukrainian guards present on the island were reported dead, they were instantly canonized by Ukrainians into martyrdom, as heroes who had stood up against impossible odds. The story of the thirteen border patrol guards was emblematic of the broader context of the war: significant technological asymmetry, Ukrainian military personnel being outnumbered by the Russian forces around 4 to 1, and the defense budget of Ukraine being around one-tenth

of Russia's (DEWAN 2022). However, there were two more significant twists in this story. First, on 26 February, the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine informed the public that the border guards stationed on the island might still be alive, and later some of the border guards returned home after a prisoner exchange. From this moment onwards, the story lost its tragic tint. Portraying the thirteen border guards as martyrs was no longer possible and this implied that the iconic utterance about the warship lost some of its meaning of commemoration of the fallen soldiers.

The phrase regained its significance after the second event: on 14 April 2022, the Moskva cruiser, one of the ships that docked on the island on 24 February, sank (COOPER 2022). The commentaries on the sinking rationalized the sequencing of events as justice: *"You need to pay for everything (that you have done) in your life… God can see and hear everything and they will get what they deserve, for lies, murders…"* The phrase *"Russian warship, go fuck yourself!"* was constructed as a prayer or as a hex, as can be seen in this comment on Facebook: *"I did not believe before that all these calls to the universe would work. But then the entire world sent this ship on a given course and it worked."* The notion that the sinking of the Moskva was in any way related to what happened to Snake Island and its defenders as well as the popularization of the phrase "Russian warship, go fuck yourself" and its constant repetition, conveys the message that there is justice awaiting those who fight back.

Finally, the setting in which events are happening can also be fantastical and larger than life. For example, the village of Chornobayivka — a village with an airport in the Kherson region, which has been an area of vigorous fighting since the beginning of the full-scale invasion — has become a character in its own right. What drives the stories about it is the depiction of the village as an enchanted and mystical land. Figure 2 gives an example of such a narrative. The screenshot from the looped video in Figure 2 shows Russian troops and equipment falling into a deep hole in the earth when the disk they are standing on turns over, reappearing replenished on the other side of the disk, and then being dropped again, as the cycle repeats itself. The caption repeats in Ukrainian and English (the English translation changed for the purposes of clarity): *"Chornobayivka is a legendary village. It's a place where Cossacks' ambition and infinite fire from*

hell reign. Hot tours to Chornobayivka. A warm welcome by the Armed Forces of Ukraine."

FIGURE 2: A SCREENSHOT FROM A TIKTOK VIDEO BY @YURA.FRESH (2022A)
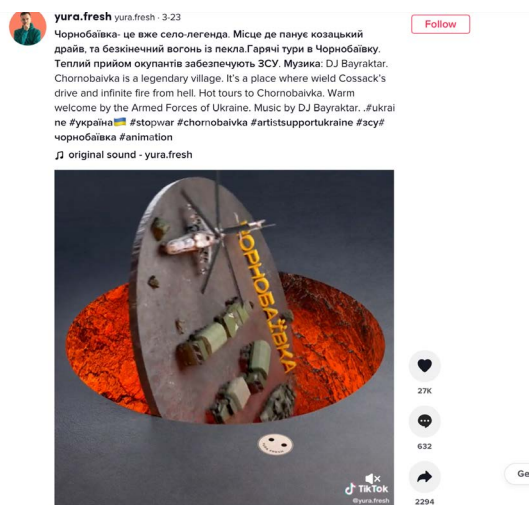
Here it is important to know that the Cossacks are associated with magic. Cossack sorcerers (*kharaktérnyk* in Ukrainian) were respected members of their communities, and they were known as shapeshifters, enchanters and soothsayers (SYSIN 1991). We notice the references to Cossack sorcerers and witches being frequently used in relation to Chornobayivka in both imagery and text (see the example in Figure 3). The image is from a series of illustrations by Marianna Pashchuk (2022), and it features some symbolic visual references to Cossack sorcerers – an earring and a Cossack hairstyle (in Ukrainian, *oseledets*) – and some more general references to magical symbolism in Slavonic culture: a black rooster, which is an animal with magical properties as well as a symbol of death, and a full moon, which is a magical symbol of renewal (PHILLIPS 2004).

FIGURE 3: ART BY MARIANNA PASHCHUK (2022) WITH THE TEXT "CHORNOBAYIVKA"

The allusions to the magical properties of the land level out the unequal playing field between the warring parties by assigning an allegiance of supernatural forces to the land of Ukraine. The essence of Chornobayivka is also connected to the Ukrainian national identity in profound ways by referencing the imagined national past. Ukrainians are depicted as having magic on their side and as carriers of ancient magical traditions connected to the land. The story of Chornobayivka is not limited by human morality and therefore not constrained to displays of contempt for and humiliation of the enemy. The magical aspects in the story function to equalize the forces and explain the dynamics of the war, which are otherwise hard to understand or impossible to access emotionally. The magical elements in the story also situate the Us and the Them in a broader context of the perceived historical dynamic between the 'corrupted' Russians and the 'pure' Ukrainians.

NATIONAL IDENTITY: A UKRAINIAN US IN OPPOSITION TO THE RUSSIAN THEM AND IN CONNECTION TO THE WEST

This section unpacks the ways in which national identity was reimagined and defined in relation to something else by delineating what it means to be Us (Ukrainians) in opposition to Them (Russians). On the one hand, the bravery of Ukrainians is an identifier that is put as a *pis aller* of the human world in the fight against the ultimate evil. Positive traits of Ukrainians are juxtaposed with the cowardice, stupidity and evil of the antagonized Other (Russians), for example by comparing Russian soldiers to orcs (BABENKO 2023; MATSYSHYNA 2022; SLYUSAREVSKIY 2022). Such discourses dehumanize Russian

troops and citizens by reducing them to creatures incapable of critical thinking and decision-making. Merging all Russians into one simple actor reduces the complexity, while in reality, many individuals make daily decisions to exacerbate or diminish the conflict. Portraying Russian troops and citizens as pawns of evil demotes them to a unitary thoughtless mass, which in turn absolves them of personal responsibility for their actions. Furthermore, there is a danger in such villainizing ideations of Russians persisting in the future and being applied towards anything perceived to be connected to Russia (e.g. opposition to Ukrainian nationalism) and those who do recognize their responsibility in the war (via complaisance or participation). In such a case, Ukrainian national identity may grow too rigid for any nuanced reflection, becoming *"a copy of that by which it felt itself to be oppressed"* (TÖRNQUIST-PLEWA – YURCHUK 2019: 702). That is to say, a dehumanizing anti-Russian sentiment can, in the long run, lead to a binary perception of the world which would shape the understanding of past and present, and can shape the actions in the future in ways that inhibit inclusive, non-monolithic politics and endanger critical voices. This approach reflects the anti-colonial route of essentialism, as opposed to the hybrid approach of post-colonialism, which recognizes the colonial past but remains more nuanced regarding the voices of minorities, whose views may diverge from those dominant within the accepted Ukrainian, anti-Russian nationalism.

On the other hand, the symbolism of the widespread construction of Russians as back-stabbing cowards presents fruitful ground for conflict transformation, as it represents a shift towards an anti-Russian stance even within the segments of the populations with an internalized Russophilia which may have upheld the narrative of brotherly nations before the full-scale invasion. For example, in his song "Russian Ship" (*"ruskyi korabl"*), written as an appeal to the ship that docked on Snake Island, BURLA raps:

> *Hey, Russian ship, do you remember those times?*
> *When we went sail by sail, side by side, supporting each other.*
> *Although we were terribly different, we always drank to the bottom.*

BURLA goes on to say that the feelings of unity are in the past (*"But are you my brother? Cutting into my back, you scratched me to blood"*) and that the enemy is weak and cannot make their own decisions (*"The engines*

break in the column, and you go against your will, straight to your death"). The Ukrainians, on the other hand, are described as fighting for a purpose (*"My sweet home, my little universe, I will not give you to anyone"*) and as people that can handle attacks (*"We will even handle blows in the back"*).

Discourses surrounding the perceived past closeness and subsequent unforgivable betrayal construct a symbolic breakaway from what is termed *Russkiy mir* (Russian world), a Russian quasi-ideology of an imagined collective identity of all post-Soviet countries.[1] Thus, this may be evidence that segments of the population that were previously hard to mobilize are coming to the point of embracing some form of post-colonial discourse of negotiating a separate culture detached from the narratives of the superiority of Russian culture.

NORMATIVITY: BE COURAGEOUS

Political myths also contain calls to action defined by behavioral norms related to good and bad behavior. In the 2022 Russian invasion, normativity was reinforced by encouraging bravery or courage in both the military and general society. Courage and defending the country are considered good behavior, both for soldiers and for civilians. For example, the sacrifices of the Snake Island border guards were glorified and presented as examples of acts of bravery that should be honored in Ukrainian society. By extension, this kind of bravery becomes the mode of behavior that is heavily encouraged as model behavior. For example, this sentiment is visible in a Ukrainian-language comment made on 24 February under the Telegram post from Hromadske about the Snake Island attack:

ETERNAL MEMORY AND ETERNAL GLORY TO THE HEROES! WE WILL DEFEND TO THE LAST [one of us], [we shall be] FOLLOWING YOUR EXAMPLE! SLEEP IN PEACE, BROTHERS, WE WILL CONTINUE YOUR CAUSE…

The normative element is visible in this act of remembrance, which sends a clear message: as a nation, we are strong morally because our heroes are not forgotten. This message and the wave of collective calls to remembrance at the time when the identities of the Snake Island defenders were unknown to the public is juxtaposed with the anonymized (blurred)

and/or very graphic mutilated bodies of Russian soldiers shared on social media, e.g. on the Telegram channel (GRUZ 200 [@GRUZ_200_RUS] 2022). This dichotomy is not coincidental but serves as both an encouragement and a warning: when dead, our heroes will be praised but our enemies will disappear into nothingness. Such normative expectations of bravery can be both broad-reaching and vague. We observed a broad call to action that asked all members of society to contribute to the common good as much as they could. An example of such a contribution is the aforementioned story about the woman who downed a drone with a jar of pickles. It shows how a very simple item that is available in every household is used to support the common goal. However, in some situations, the way that bravery is interpreted can lead to risky or ill-advised behavior, such as a man removing a landmine from the road with his bare hands while smoking a cigarette (BROWNING 2022). It can even lead to victim blaming, as has been observed by Ukrainian lawyers assisting women in cases of sexual assault by Russian soldiers (TIAHNYRIADNO 2022).

CONTEXTUAL LINKS TO CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL DISCOURSES

The last component of our analysis illustrates how contextual links are used in the stories to strengthen the myths and tie them into broader national narratives. We particularly observed cultural links, emphasizing connectedness to land, humor and resilience, and historical links, teaching lessons about perseverance and independence.

We noted narratives that have contextual links with the broader culture of romanticizing nature. A romantic view of nature is familiar to any graduate of a Ukrainian school through literary works such as Taras Shevchenko's "Beside the House, the Cherry's Flowering…" (1847/1963), Lesya Ukrainka's "Forest Song" (1911), Olexandr Dovzhenko's *The Enchanted Desna* (1956) and many others. The theme of unity with the earth, the relationship between the peasants and their land and the place of humans in the natural world, is very prominent in the Ukrainian national myth. We notice how familiar narratives of ecocentrism and earthly suffering surface during the war in discourses about the invasion. Specific imagery is directly repurposed from past eco-centric narratives – for instance, the story of a woman in Henichesk telling a Russian soldier to put seeds in his pocket

has become a source of a visual language depicting Russian soldiers as
sunflowers, or as fertilizer for sunflowers (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 4: A SCREENSHOT OF A TIKTOK VIDEO BY @YURA.FRESH (2022B)

Narratives centering land as a subject give an outlet for the pursuit
of vengeance and expressions of anger. In other contexts, it may be seen
as cruel or morally inadmissible to enact or express a desire for revenge.
However, in the context of eco-centric narratives, human feelings get at-
tributed to inanimate objects, which allows them to escape the constraints
of civil and religious morality. Cultural contextual links of romanticizing
the connection to land demonstrate a pervasive aspect of mythmaking,
given that the attribution of human emotions to land allows for robust
forms of operationalizing difficult events and creatively channeling grief
and anger. This form of projection of the war experience onto land can be
a way to practice healing. By attributing the experience of the war to the
land, which is more resilient to the pains of the war in the long run, the
horrors of war can be put in perspective, or at the very least shared with
an entity that is larger than any single human, thereby diminishing the
pressure on the individual and the community.

Links to historical discourses can be clearly illustrated by using nar-
ratives about the Ghost of Kyiv, whose iconography is coupled with two
historical references: Saint Michael the Archangel and the Cossacks. Angels
signify the support of the higher powers, and this contextual link is woven
into the religiosity of Ukrainian society: the Ghost is compared or equated

to Saint Michael the Archangel, who is a winged and warrior-like *"great captain"* of angels. For example, the Treasury of the National Museum of Ukraine posted the following on their Facebook page: *"We believe that Saint Michael the Archangel is with them [the AFU], and we encourage them in the fight against the minions of evil. We are sure that the Ghost of Kyiv is our Archangel!"* Saint Michael the Archangel is a recurring symbol of Ukrainian sovereignty and specifically a protector of Kyiv (BILOUS – ODNOROZHNEKO 2012). The comparison of the Ghost to the Archangel establishes him as a continuation of the long history of struggle for independence from Russia, and the sacred space that Kyiv as a capital holds in Ukrainian history (see Figure 5).

FIGURE 5: AN ILLUSTRATION OF THE GHOST OF KYIV BY DANYLENKO (2022)

Another contextual link is that to the myth of historical heroes, which, in this case, are Ukrainian Cossacks. Many works have been written about the importance of remembrance of the Cossacks to Ukraine's national myth (E.G. SYSIN 1991; PLOKHY 2014). But most specifically regarding the Ghost, we suggest looking at the lyrics of the song *"Pryzrak Kyieva"* ("The Ghost of Kyiv") by Serhei Alekseych (2022), which was uploaded to YouTube on 2 March 2022:

> *Glorious son of the Cossack land*
> *With a helmet on his head,*
> *Run away, you orcs, with all your legs,*
> *Because a Cossack has saddled his MiG*
> *Get ready, you Muscovites.*

By referring to the robust historical cultural heritage of the Cossacks, and even implying that the Ghost is their successor (and that all other

Ukrainians are on *"Cossack land"*), the story is embedded within broader narratives of a history of resistance to the Russian aggression, building on the existing ideas of historicized national pride, traditions and norms. By embedding the mythical hero into a storyline of Ukrainian national history, the mythmaking functions to present the events of the war as a continuation of a uniquely Ukrainian nationhood.

DISCUSSION: WARTIME MYTHS AND ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY

In the previous section, we have analyzed political mythmaking with four elements which may be considered a further validation of the position that the war has led to securitization of subjectivity. The patterns of mythmaking were traced, and we conclude that ontological security is supported in at least three actively developing mythmaking processes: (1) mythologizing the superiority of the Ukrainian military (or the myth of Superhero Army); (2) mythologizing the resistance of ordinary citizens (or the myth of the Courageous People); and (3) mythologizing the connection between Ukrainians and the land (or the myth of the Enchanted Land). These narratives contribute to ontological security in a community by establishing routines, providing schemes for social interactions, offering cognitive stability and explaining the world. Thus, our findings support the idea that situations of physical insecurity can induce narratives that provide ontological security.

CREATING MYTHS OF THE SUPERHERO ARMY

With regard to mythologizing the military, we found that the narratives surrounding the armed forces of Ukraine (a) depict the identity of Ukrainian soldiers as morally infallible; (b) construct the military as the epitome of a normative example of bravery; (c) produce an image of the military as filled with transcendental heroes and dramatic themes; and (d) incorporate the military into a national historical context.

The striving for ontological security, or the search for security of being as a national community, translates into a counterweight of the notion that the enemy possesses greater resources in terms of weapons, personnel, and financial assets on a global scale. The mythmaking achieves that by rhetorically placing value on the people, by making them the focus of

stories. This mythologizing practice tends to convey – in simplified terms – that one of 'ours' is worth ten of 'theirs'. The way in which the myth of a superhero army achieves this is by constructing characters in the army who are morally infallible because of their anonymity. By constructing heroes that are ethically invincible and portraying the entirety of the military as a protective, principled and ubiquitously masculine structure, this myth functions to reassure the audience of the capability of the Ukrainian military and asks it to lend unquestioning trust to it.

Such faith in the military allows a community to be surer of how to get by in the world, thus establishing a coherent social relationship of trust between civilians and the army, and constructing clear directions for action conditioned by this trust. A good example of this outcome of a political myth is messages that advise donating to the AFU when an individual feels anxious or ineffective. In addition, constructing the military as the epitome of a normative behavioral ideal also reassures the population regarding the trustworthiness of the army as an institution. It prescribes clear patterns of behavior in ways that can be potentially problematic, for instance through a gendered lens (a topic that merits further exploration in subsequent research). The myth of the strong military contributes to the sense of ontological security in a community by offering cognitive stability to its members, constructing a world that is less ambiguous and establishing a structure and routines, such as recurring donations.

By depicting the military as an institution with incredible heroes and constructing the narrative of justice, the myth brings drama to the stage and contributes to building a world that appears compassionate to the struggles of the community. The tales of heroes who can stand up to enemies successfully, such as the Ghost of Kyiv, create a sense of assurance that there are strongmen who can protect the weak. This is furthermore supported by stories such as the thirteen border guards at Snake Island and the sinking of the Moskva, which construct the world as ultimately just because of the perceived link between those events. These features of the myth bring continuity and purpose to the events and make the world appear *"less indifferent"*, in the words of Bottici and Challand (2010: 4).

By embedding the military into the national historical context, the narrative is constructing a continuous reality in which the unknown

can be explored through the familiar. To reiterate, the references to the Cossacks or Saint Michael the Archangel act as heuristics that help one to understand 'who is who' in the events of the war. Because of the previously constructed national myths, these references pack information succinctly. For instance, a comparison of a soldier to a Cossack conveys to a Ukrainian audience that the institution of the army can be taken pride in and relied upon because the Cossacks are trusted and esteemed as a historical entity. In this way, these mythmaking practices imagine a world which appears certain, with straightforward connections between the past and the present.

CREATES MYTHS OF THE COURAGEOUS PEOPLE OF UKRAINE

The responses to the war and the conduct of the regular citizens of Ukraine were found to have been mythologized in the following ways: (a) Ukrainian identity is reimagined in opposition to the Russian Other and in connection with the West; (b) normative expectations of ordinary citizens are created, ranging from vague to concrete programs of action; and (c) the images of regular citizen heroes are constructed, with clear marginalized identities which convey the notion that everyone can contribute to the national cause.

The re-imagination of the Ukrainian identity by dehumanizing the enemy functions to establish the boundaries of identity very rigidly: identifying with anything Russian is necessarily impermissible under a common national identity. The mythmaking practice of dehumanization also allows one to make sense of a world that has become physically unsafe. This practice makes the world simpler by removing ambiguity from some aspects of life and demarcating exactly who is to be mistrusted – namely, anybody who does not explicitly reject *Russkiy mir*. Mythmaking establishes clear relationships with those who are perceived to be the enemy by way of rejecting their culture, which was formerly a difficult process for Ukraine as an ex-Soviet imperial colony where the imposed superiority of Russian culture was internalized. Both mythmaking practices of identity-making (the radically dehumanizing one, on the one hand, and that of reflecting on the past, on the other) signal a cultural dissolution which marks an entrance into a period of anti-colonial national politics.

The discourse of dehumanization of Russian soldiers and the Russian population at large functions to explain why horrible events happen in the first place – because of the enemy. The atrocities are perceived to be inhuman and therefore moral humans cannot be responsible for them, meaning all connections to the enemy must be purged. And the construction of the image of the marginalized regular citizen heroes with clear identities, which conveys the notion that everyone can contribute to the national cause, functions as a guide to action. The normative expectation of ordinary citizens is set up through the myth of the courageous people of Ukraine, which prescribes action via storytelling. These narratives about ordinary citizens explain how to be and how to act in a world that is hostile: be courageous and act in accordance with what courage means to your social group.

The myth of the courageous Ukrainian people is showing signs of anticolonial development, which can be rigid and relatively essentialist. While clear social identities and normative expectations fulfil the need for ontological security, this mythmaking practice can be inflexible and exclusive, for example, in the sense of establishing rigid normative expectations based on gender.

CREATING MYTHS OF THE ENCHANTED LAND

Concerning the mythmaking surrounding the land and the mythologized connection between Ukrainians and their land, we have found that the analyzed narratives (a) incorporate magic into themselves to explain the relative success of Ukraine in what is perceived to be an unequal dynamic, and construct hope; and (b) contextualize the land and the connections of Ukrainians to it within a romantic cultural view of nature, which allows grief and anger to be channeled in socially acceptable ways.

The results of the analysis indicate that constructing a self-narrative of a Ukrainian nation as a community connected to their land is accomplished through cultural contextual links. These are the links to the tradition in Ukrainian art and literature of romanticizing the land and the connection that people have with it. Cultural links create a coherent imagined connection between the past and present, and this is done through established routines, habits and answers that are continuously recreated

in artistic, political and historical discourses. This narrative not only impacts identity by painting the Us as in touch with the land and the Other as disconnected from it, but also composes a reality which makes sense. In a situation of extreme physical danger, imagining the land as being on the side of the community allows for that community to function with less anxiety and anguish. Furthermore, the myth of the enchanted land constructs such a deep connection between humans and nature that it allows for a broader scope of experiences than otherwise possible, and specifically presents a way to re-channel emotions such as anxiety, anger and fear.

The mythmaking practices relating to land particularly show a potential for postcolonial politics of memory, that is, a potential to understand the past and present, and construct the future, in nuanced ways. While not necessarily post-national, as the myth of the enchanted land is expressed via a particular Ukrainian localized context, the postcolonial development offers more options in terms of transformations because it allows for nuance. For instance, perceiving the experience of war not merely as a Ukrainian national experience but also as an experience shared by the land itself, opens up opportunities for healing, exploration and creativity.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Based on our findings and analysis, we have demonstrated that political myths contributed to Ukrainian subjectivity becoming securitized in at least three ways: by mythologizing the superiority of the Ukrainian military, which gives people hope for victory and comfort for victims and losses; by mythologizing acts of bravery of ordinary citizens, thereby encouraging unity and keeping the common aim in mind; and by mythologizing the connection between Ukrainians and the land as an unbreakable link between the people and their territory.

Our framework with the four mythmaking elements (transcendentalism, normativity, identity, and contextual links) has worked in a satisfactory way, and we conclude that the narratives that we found in multiple channels do indeed contribute to the sense of ontological security for Ukrainians. They provide norms for social interactions and appreciated behavior, offer a sense of cognitive stability, and explain the world, so their psychological function seems clear. These frames may function to build

up a stronger common identity and unity, which may not have happened without the context of war (PENKALA ET AL. 2020).

How generalizable is this conclusion? First of all, Ukraine in 2022 may provide a particular context compared to other war situations, since the country was forced to unify in the face of a clear external threat. The article provides a framework for understanding armed resistance (or absence thereof) in asymmetrical warfare and it can be applied to other instances of critical situations in inter-imperial contexts in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, such as those in Moldova, Georgia, and Chechnya, but also in cases of complex-colonial contexts in the Global South such as those in Taiwan and Kashmir.

Second, the data gathering took place in the first three months of the war, when the common feeling of shock was strongly felt, and there was a focus on the war in online news and media. At the time of writing, more than a year later, our continuous observations of the case indicate that the stories and myths analyzed in this article are not merely still present, but have been consolidated, captured in various material artefacts and spread beyond Ukraine. Examples of this are numerous: a modern clinic in Lviv for treating wounded Ukrainian soldiers is called "Superhumans"; the song performed by the Ukrainian participants at the Eurovision Song Contest 2023 was titled "Heart of Steel" and unambiguously glorified the extraordinary strength of Ukrainians; T-shirts saying *"I am Ukrainian. What is your superpower?"* and similar slogans are widely sold, and are proudly worn on formal occasions by Ukrainians of standing; the slogan "Russian warship, go f*ck yourself!" was picked up by various national and international merchandise companies, including a company that manufactures a coin that is sold in the official gift shop of the White House, while the postage stamp issued by the Ukrainian Postal Service to commemorate the related event has become a sought-after collector's item. These and thousands of other examples suggest that a further study – going beyond the timeline and the database of this one – would be extremely insightful and indeed necessary.

Third, in the field of IR and Conflict Studies, ontological security is typically conceptualized as a psychological mechanism that could enhance conflict, and prevent conflict transformation and peacebuilding (RUMELILI

2015). When narratives come from two sides, divisions may occur. And when narratives come from a powerful party that controls the media in the conflict, they can be used as war propaganda to promote one side, which may have a disastrous effect, as was visible in the war in Ethiopia's Tigray (PLAUT – VAUGHAN 2023). But in the case of Ukraine, we see the opposite: the national identity is strengthened, and communities *"know who they are"* (MITZEN 2006: 361) as a consequence of and through the conflict. It remains to be seen whether the feeling of unity will continue after the war ends.

Finally, for future scholarship, we suggest investigating the gender component in the stories and myths in more detail, specifically the different notions of *"courage"* for men and women, respectively. It would also be fruitful to comparatively analyze the wartime mythmaking in the Ukraine of today and the Ukraine of the past (e.g. since the 2014 invasion, after the 1991 independence, and going further back in time), as well as that in Ukraine and that in other countries with a history of resisting Russian aggression – and the mythmaking in Russia itself. We also suggest investigating whether and how political myths could be used as a tool for conflict resolution. On an international level, conflict transformation initiatives and negotiations should be consistent with national self-narratives of the conflicting parties. But also on the individual level, narratives have the potential to reduce individuals' emotional toll and allow for the projection of trauma-induced emotions onto an entity that is larger than oneself. That would mean that both international negotiators and individual trauma counsellors could use them in their methods.

ENDNOTES

1   *"Russkiy mir"* is a Russian quasi-ideology aimed at the expansion of Russia's influence abroad, both politically and religiously. Putin used the term to justify the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Ukraine. From the postcolonial perspective, the notion that there was a common past of unity to break away from is a view internalized by Ukrainians, who were subjected to the imposition of the alleged universality and superiority of the Russian culture, language and way of living (Mayerchyk – Plakhotnik 2015; Mayerchyk – Plakhotnik 2019; Törnquist-Plewa – Yurchuk 2017, Smolii – Yas 2022). A process of disillusionment with the imagined brotherhood dynamic might offer tools to cope with the past instead of merely reclaiming or forgetting it (Törnquist-Plewa – Yurchuk, 2019). See Wawrzonek (2018) for the perspectives on *Russkiy mir* from other post-Soviet countries.

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