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Editorial

Ukraine in Popular Culture: Editorial for a Special Issue

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ABSTRACT

This special issue explores how popular culture shapes local, regional, national, and global perceptions of Ukraine amid the ongoing war with Russia. Integrating literatures on popular geopolitics, vernacular and aesthetic IR, and Ukraine studies, we delve into the complexities of the knowledge-making about Ukraine that takes place at the interstices of the everyday, the aesthetic, and the international. Given the mutually implicated relationship between popular culture and world politics, the popular representations of the Ukrainian subject both mirror and shape prevailing narratives, practices, identities, and power relations. But we also inquire into how popular culture serves as a space for political resistance and activism by those existing at the margins of world politics. By centering the Ukrainian perspective in all its multiplicity, the special issue helps to challenge the Western- and Russian-centric prism through which Ukraine has been approached in IR and related disciplines.

INTRODUCTION

In 2021, season two of *Emily in Paris* came out on the Netflix streaming platform. We do not expect that you have watched it, but if you did, you would have noticed a minor character in the show: Emily, the protagonist, at some point meets a fellow French class student named Petra *"from Kyiv"* (thanks for spelling it correctly, Netflix). The only character from Eastern Europe in the show by our account turns out to be (spoiler alert) a petty thief. This characterization did not go unnoticed and even prompted a statement from the Ukrainian culture minister Oleksandr Tkachenko and lots of indignant comments from Ukrainian women. Arguably, this was a minor gripe compared to the avalanche of bad press Kazakhstan had to endure in the wake of Borat's release (SAUNDERS 2008; SCHMID 2010; ALIKHANOVA 2018), but, in hindsight, it added a significant touch to the often very ignorant collective Western portrayal of Ukraine. Whether we like it or not, these popular culture vignettes will serve as a source of knowledge for many international audiences. What would an average American person associate with Ukraine? The Ukrainian mafia (*Dexter*, 2012), the section of Brooklyn informally referred to as Little Odessa (*Little Odessa*, 1994), mail-order brides (*Love Me*, 2014), and the Russian language (Petra at least speaks Ukrainian instead of Russian, unlike in most Western portrayals of Ukrainians) – all in all, it is an Orientalized and imperial view of the country that is shaped by its representations in series and movies, which are often full of crude stereotypes. And now this average American citizen will go to the polls to decide, among other things, whether the new president will continue to support Ukraine in its fight against Russia's invasion. And that is if they even know that Ukraine exists, – for example, *Friends* (1994) fans might still think that Minsk is in Russia, and not in Belarus, as was stated in season 1 episode 10 of the show.

It is not only popular culture that shapes the understanding of Ukraine. The proliferation of social media provides a "near-real-time" experience of the war for the "digitally advanced" (DER DERIAN 2009). Most of the authors and editors of this special issue saw the full-scale invasion in 2022 unfold in real time, often learning about missile strikes and troop movements before they were reported by mainstream news media and using social media to reach out to their friends and family. The immediacy and urgency of social media have obviously impacted the way the war

is perceived and theorized. Thirty years ago, media scholars spoke about a CNN effect; in 2022 multiple articles tracked emotions, misinformation, and policy decisions on Twitter and Telegram. A much closer entanglement of the publics, pundits, citizen journalists, trolls, and politicians has created a unique and by now, to an extent, destroyed ecosystem, where a "diffused war" has been marked by the availability and connectivity of the digital (HOSKINS – O'LOUGHLIN 2010). Moreover, the digital sphere, popular culture, and aesthetics have also become new battlefields where cultural artefacts and even memes have gained massive importance.

In this special issue, we turn to the scholarship on popular geopolitics, vernacular, and aesthetic approaches to international relations (IR) and Ukraine studies to analyze how global publics make sense of Ukraine in and through popular culture, with the term "popular culture" denoting a form of mass-produced entertainment available to large numbers of people (STREET 1997). Popular geopolitics argues that forms of popular culture are deeply geopolitical, which enables the exploration of popular culture as a platform for knowledge production and identity construction in times of war (DITTMER – BOS 2019; DITTMER – DODDS 2008; GRAYSON 2018). In turn, vernacular and everyday approaches to IR provide leverage for understanding how discourses about security, violence, and geopolitics circulate in everyday life and are (re)produced by ordinary non-state actors (BJÖRKDAHL – HALL – SVENSSON 2019; BUBANDT 2005; VAUGHAN-WILLIAMS – STEVENS 2015). Approaching the vernacular of the war with an aesthetic sensibility further encourages attention to the role of sensation, subjectivity, and affect in wartime imaginaries (BAKER 2020; BLEIKER 2001; SHEPHERD – MOORE 2010). Finally, spotlighting the Ukrainian perspective and experience provides a much-needed counterbalance to the tendency of IR to theorize world politics through predominantly Western- and Russian-centric lenses (HENDL ET AL. 2023). One of the side effects of this tendency has been the establishment of false moral and political equivalences between Russian and Ukrainian perspectives on the war, which perpetuate a distorted narrative that blurs the lines between the perpetrator and the victim. Attending to an understudied context with the help of non-traditional IR approaches represents a unique theoretical and empirical contribution to both the study of popular culture in global politics and the study of Ukraine in a global context.

Exploring the realm of popular culture proves invaluable for gaining a deeper insight into the diverse local experiences, narratives, and practices amid the ongoing war. This investigation is particularly illuminating as it acknowledges the role played by non-elite actors in shaping social perceptions of Russia's war. Beyond the purview of traditional elites, the interpretations, contestations, and (re)enactments of the war unfold in both online and offline spaces, providing a multilayered view of war-making. The issue places a key focus on emphasizing the importance of understanding micro-practices that contribute to the formation of knowledge about the war in local settings. It becomes evident that the war extends beyond the battlefield, permeating everyday life. In so doing, the special issue helps us to rethink the question of the perspectives, space, and practices that matter in the broader landscape of international politics, highlighting popular culture as a site for the performance of identities and (in)securities in everyday life (ROWLEY – WELDES 2012). Looking into the realm of the ordinary, the everyday, the quotidian, and the vernacular enables the analysis of how local discourses may challenge, transform, or reinforce the dominant elite discourses surrounding the war at national and global levels. This also requires reconsidering the evolving nature of audiences as active participants in the global politics of popular culture, with a stronger focus on audience interpretation, emotions, and affective responses (CRILLEY 2021).

This special issue therefore looks at the "synthetic experiences" that have shaped and will be shaping the knowledge about Ukraine, both within and outside of it. As Daniel and Musgrave (2017) point out, popular culture has been used in IR teaching, but much less so in theorizing, with popular culture being relegated to the status of a useful tool despite its potential for *reinforcing identities & beliefs* (SEE ALSO SCHMID 2023). We argue that this special issue goes beyond this. The authors here engage with a multitude of IR topics and theoretical frameworks. From taking stock of the IR & popular culture literature (Saunders) to looking at practices of crafting (Greet) to examining video games (Lassin) or poetry (Kazanova), which some reviewers would dismiss out of hand as non-IR topics, this special issue centers Ukraine as a theory-building empirical case, though this status is often reserved for Western countries (BUZAN 2020). Given IR's heritage as a discipline focused on imperial relations, "race development" (VITALIS 2018), and its own myths (LEIRA – DE CARVALHO 2018), this issue works further to

dispel the "superpower bias" that has led to *"recreating the realist world of great power dominance"* around the world simply because generations of IR academics do not engage with other approaches (DUNNE – KURKI – SMITH 2021) or even read beyond the canon (HENDERSON 2017; OWENS ET AL. 2022).

It is undeniably disheartening, from a human and an international relations theory perspective, to acknowledge that the outbreak of a war is often a catalyst for heightened scholarly and public interest to the given region (KOVAL ET AL. 2022). The fact that scholarly attention tends to peak only when countries are plunged into the chaos of armed conflicts reflects a failure of the humanity in the attention economy (HARSIN 2015). It is indeed a somber reflection on our priorities that academic interest in international relations often surges only in the wake of devastating conflicts rather than in the pursuit of knowledge (VORBRUGG – BLUWSTEIN 2022), with a number of scholars using the war as a means of advancement of their careers instead of considering the ethical implications of their research (BURLYUK – MUSLIU 2023; HENDL ET AL. 2023) and its often extractivist nature (MORRIS 2024).

In light of the unfolding destructive war the significance of studying Ukraine as a full-fledged agent in global politics must be foregrounded. Within the realm of IR and its subdisciplines – peace and conflict studies, security and military studies, and foreign policy studies – the established hierarchies of knowledge production have resulted in a long-standing erasure of the Ukrainian subject in the study of global affairs (BURLYUK – MUSLIU 2023; KURYLO 2023; MAKARYCHEV – NIZHNIKAU 2023). Part and parcel of the prevalent decontextualized (yet far from unbiased) analyses of the war has been a skewed perception of Ukraine derived from Western- and Russian-centric epistemic frames. Recognizing Ukraine as an active agent of its decolonial resistance is essential for becoming receptive to its agency and distinct subjectivity, which are too often denied to it by the Western IR scholarship (MÄLKSOO 2023). The wide range of localized studies comprising this special issue presents an explicit response to the scarcity of empirical knowledge about Ukraine and the side-lining of Ukrainian and East European scholars in IR (O'SULLIVAN – KRULIŠOVÁ 2023). To rectify this, the special issue's articles contribute to the recent efforts to "provincialize IR" by situating Ukraine's complex history and identities within the global context (MÄLKSOO 2021).

What this thus far underscores is the intrinsically political nature of popular culture and, by extension, of the study of popular culture within the discipline of IR itself. Popular cultural artefacts establish lifeworlds and immersive experiences through which audiences design political maps of global politics. Within these constructed realities, audiences co-act in constructing narratives about proximate and distant societies that reflect and sometimes challenge prevailing norms, identities, and power structures. In essence, popular culture is a site in which situated actors are engaged in a perpetual battle over the prerogative to give meaning to global political events and processes. One implication of this is that every representation of Ukraine encapsulates a manifestation of power, wielding the potential to either marginalize or empower the nation. But there are also opportunities for Rancièrian acts of dissensus - moments of disruption and rupture in the established order driven by resistance from below. Politics and popular culture should therefore be seen as co-constituted.

The articles in this special issue operate under the premise that all knowledge is inherently socially conditioned and entwined with specific contexts and power relations. Thus, it has been imperative to engage thoroughly with Ukraine's complex history marked by imperial subjugation and the struggle for emancipation from Russian colonial violence (OKSAMYTNA 2023). By addressing these complex dynamics, the special issue endeavors to foster a more nuanced understanding of the intertwining of popular culture, Ukraine, and world politics. By explicitly centering the perspective of Ukraine, it harbors a broader ambition to contribute to the ongoing efforts to decolonize knowledge production within both IR and East European studies. In a wider sense, moreover, the special issue contributes to the endeavors within IR scholarship to reconsider the separation and hierarchy between academic and "popular" knowledges, challenging the assumption that academics always "know better" with regard to how wars and global politics work than the general public (CIUTĂ 2016). We thereby assert the call for greater reflexivity on the processes involved in the generation of knowledge on popular culture and global politics in a way that is sensitive to the inequalities and injustices embedded within the discipline and the world at large.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

In his contribution, *Robert Saunders* offers a bird's-eye view on the feedback loop of popular culture wherein the region's (non-)state actors adjust their images or make them mimic other images for consumption abroad, and specifically looks at how the "everyday foreign policy assemblage" (GAUFMAN 2021) works across borders, particularly in cases where nationalism is packaged into consumable products for foreign consumption in the Anglophone West. As Saunders argues, actors such as the State Meme Bureau (*Державне Бюро Мемів*) and Armed Memes of Ukraine (*Збройні Меми України*) have successfully framed Russia's full-scale invasion in global popular-political cultural terms, and the resulting memes reach audiences much faster and more effectively than messages from pundits and journalists. Drawing from the years of his scholarship on popular geopolitics, Saunders provides the readers with a convincing account of the ways in which different publics and global audiences are intertwined through popular culture(s).

Zooming in on the specific issues of ontological security in popular culture, *Anastasiia Poberezhna*, *Olga Burlyuk*, and *Anja van Heelsum* highlight how certain narratives not only serve to consolidate Ukrainian identity in times of war, but also serve a deeper psychological purpose for the Ukrainian population. The authors explore political myths that 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 in the face of 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.

In line with a vernacular approach to geopolitics, *Jacob Lassin* explores the development of non-elite geopolitical knowledge, focusing on how the online video game community has responded to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The article examines how players form their geopolitical understandings through game-playing, identifying noticeable differences between Anglophone and Ukrainophone content. The study sheds light on how diverse online communities use video games to interpret global

issues, which impacts offline perceptions of history and current events. It also raises questions about the implications of using the video game *EUIV* as a means of making sense of Ukraine's history and politics for the broader engagement of ordinary people with geopolitical events.

Alina Mozolevska moves the analysis to the visual discursive dimension of the Russo-Ukrainian war. She analyzes how visual artefacts on Ukrainian and Russian social networks, particularly memes, participate in forging collective national identities on the basis of a heightened distinction between the self and the other. The article offers a comparative perspective on the divergent meaning-making mechanisms and iconography sources in the Russian and Ukrainian participatory environments, shedding light on the competing narratives and cultural differences that were intensified by the invasion. The analysis reveals that both participatory cultures tend to frame the Russo-Ukrainian War as a struggle between good and evil but with drastically differing means and implications.

Mark Sachleben offers a counterweight to the American popular culture›s view of Ukraine & Ukrainians in film. By looking at the films of Oleksandr Dovzhenko (also transliterated as Alexander Dovzhenko), he shows that cinema is both a reflection of the evolving national identity and a medium for its construction and reinterpretation. Examining films from the 1930s, a period marked by violence, persecution, and emigration, he captures the struggles of maintaining a coherent identity narrative during turbulent times. The paper emphasizes the significant role of popular culture in shaping collective memory. It also illuminates the symbiotic relationship between film and politics, illustrating how cinema is inescapably political.

In her contribution, *Elżbieta Olzacka* delves into the significance of war-related posters in contemporary conflicts, with a focus on the surge in Ukrainian posters during the Russian invasion. The article focuses on two main issues: the impact of online media on poster creation and their transition to offline formats, on the one hand, and posters as tools of participatory propaganda, on the other. Despite the decline of print media, Olzacka argues that posters maintain their importance in wartime propaganda by adapting to digital channels while retaining a presence in physical spaces. Online platforms enable the creation of personalized political

posters, thus contributing to participatory propaganda. The case of wartime Ukraine illustrates how posters transcend state control, becoming tools for grassroots activism.

Yulia Kazanova's article is one of the deeper interdisciplinary contributions to the special issue. While the term "soft power" is well-established in IR literature, there have been relatively few contributions on poetry in IR (EDKINS 2013; JENSEN – CORPORAAL 2016), even though there are several interventions that argue that, for instance, Russian culture is often weaponized as a tool of imperial conquest, prompting a deep reflection in the Ukrainian cultural space (ZHURZHENKO 2021; KURAPOV ET AL. 2022; AVERBUKH, 2023). Kazanova's contribution offers a reflection of the ways poetry functions during the war, which include shaping the national narrative of the war by undertaking factual and emotional witnessing of the wartime reality, and fostering international poetic solidarity and collective resistance within Ukraine (ZHADAN 2023):

> *and language, like a lung burnt out by pain,*
> *comes back to life, does its work*
> *pours sounds into us like wine*
> *like lighting*

> [*і мова, наче легеня, спалена болем,*
> *оживає, відлунює, творить свою роботу,*
> *наповнює нас звучанням, ніби вином,*
> *наче світінням*]

Finally, *Winter Greet's* engagement with traditional embroidery can be connected to the exploration of crafting in international relations. The vyshyvanka, a traditional Ukrainian embroidered shirt, has become famous around the world as a sign of solidarity with Ukraine in times of war, and a spiritual armor. Greet provides a short history of the vyshyvanka in her contribution, reflecting on the feminist, commercial, and identity-building aspects of the garment. As she notes in the conclusion, she sought to

"uncover how something that was once a domestic, feminine pursuit, has developed into an internationally identifiable symbol of 'Ukrainianness' in the face of Russian neo-imperialism."

CONCLUSION

This introduction to the special issue has set out the argument for why it is crucial to study Ukraine in popular culture in order to understand the ways in which the social imaginaries of Ukraine develop in non-elite settings. Analyzing popular culture allows researchers to explore the ways in which individuals and communities navigate complex geopolitical realities, elucidating the socio-cultural dynamics at play in identity and war-making. As the contributions to the special issue attest, popular culture serves as a powerful mirror reflecting societal values, perceptions, and the collective consciousness, but it also plays a subtle role in constituting them. Exploring the popular representations of Ukraine amidst the Russo-Ukrainian war provides a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted ways in which cultural elements, ranging from memes to poetry and posters, participate in *"the continuation of war by other means"* (Saunders, this issue). The collection of articles in this special issue also sheds light on the role of popular culture in shaping geopolitical narratives and encouraging political resistance, and its potential impact on foreign policy. Examining how Ukraine is depicted in various forms of media, including films, literature, and social media, offers insights into the construction of national identity, the shaping of public opinion, and the dissemination of narratives related to the war. These representations not only influence domestic sentiments but also contribute significantly to the global perception of the Ukrainian subject.

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Research Articles

Ukraine at War: Reflections on Popular Culture as a Geopolitical Battlespace

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ABSTRACT	Drawing on my previous work on how Western cultural producers have constructed the post-Soviet realm, as well as the feedback loop of popular culture wherein the region's (non-)state actors mould their images for consumption abroad, this article reflects on popular culture as a mechanism of the Ukraine-Russia war (2022–present). The specific focus is on how Russia's full-scale invasion and Ukraine's defence of its territory exemplify the current state of popular culture as a geopolitical battlespace. following a brief overview of the popular culture-world politics continuum, I delineate the pivotal role that social media memes play in the current military conflict via a case study of the twitter/x feed of Ukrainian Memes Forces (UMF), which employs various forms of youth-oriented visual intertextuality and comedic pastiche to establish Ukraine as a 'cool,' adaptable, non-ideological agent against an 'uncool,' hidebound, ideological foe (Russia-Putin-USSR).

INTRODUCTION

As 2022 drew to a close, the American weekly news magazine *Time* announced its Person of the Year. Beginning in 1927 as "Man of the Year," the award has recognised notoriety nearly as often as it has lauded greatness: Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, and Ruhollah Khomeini are all alumni. Given the state of international affairs in late 2022, it came as little surprise that the individual who graced the cover then was Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the president of Ukraine (see Figure 1). A hero in the West and an archvillain in Russia, Zelenskyy-as-wartime-leader has inarguably emerged as the face of the conflict. As such, he echoes the on-the-ground corporeal defiance shown by only a handful of leaders over the past century: Norway's Haakon VII and Britain's Winston Churchill come to mind. However, it was not Zelenskyy alone that won the laurels: he shared the designation with the amorphous entity known as "the spirit of Ukraine." Given that any representation is a manifestation of power (CF. RANCIÈRE 2004, ROWLEY AND WELDES 2012), it is worth examining the *Time* cover in some depth. Zelenskyy's brown eyes, which are curiously tinted blue,[1] and his face tilted slightly upwards, endow his visage with a combination of defiance and optimism. He is flanked by an anonymous host of Ukrainians clearing rubble from missile strikes and marching in support of their nation's independence. The masses are foregrounded by more identifiable figures representing medical professionals, artists, activists, and public servants.

FIGURE 1: MSNBC COMMENTATOR AND RETIRED ADMIRAL JAMES STAVRIDIS COMPARING THE UKRAINIAN PRESIDENT TO BRITISH WARTIME LEADER WINSTON CHURCHILL

Two key symbols frame this inspiring collage of humanity: the Ukrainian flag and the sunflower. Independent Ukraine's blue-and-yellow bicolour bridges past and present, first appearing in Lemberg (L'viv) during the Springtime of Nations, a series of popular uprisings that rocked the Habsburg Empire from 1848–1849. Spurred by republican ideas flowing into *Mitteleuropa* from France, Italy, and elsewhere, Ukrainians (qua Ruthenians) were one of many peoples who revolted against Austrian rule, hoping to build a new world based on democratic principles, plural liberalism, and – most importantly – national self-determination.[2] Minor gains were made, but independence was deferred. The flag was hoisted again in the wake of the Russian Revolution in 1917, only to be banned under the Soviets. In 1992, it rose over the Verkhovna Rada, but continued to compete with its Soviet-era red-and-azure counterpart in certain circles until that banner was banned by Kyiv in 2015.

Little recognised outside the region until a few years ago, the dramatic colour combination of a deep sky blue and a rich sunflower yellow is now synonymous in Europe, North America, and Australia with support for Zelenskyy and the Ukrainian people, decorating coffee mugs, T-shirts, and car bumpers alike. Blending Ukraine's geographical features with vexillological attributes has indeed emerged as a common form of political communication in the current campaign to "win hearts and minds" in the West via visual-discursive tactics that speak to a shared patrimony of resistance, as a recent Ukrainian Memes Forces (hereafter UMF) post commemorating the country's independence demonstrates (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2: UMF MEME LINKING THE COLOURS OF THE UKRAINIAN FLAG WITH ITS GEOGRAPHY, WHILE ALSO LINKING THE COUNTRY'S DEFENCE TO THAT OF THE UK DURING WORLD WAR II
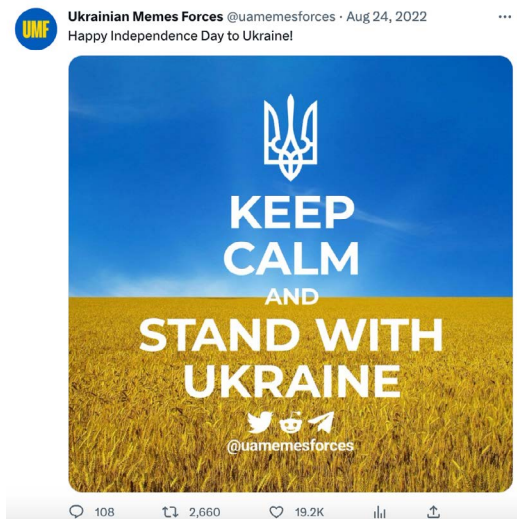
While flagging the nation is a traditional form of mimetic (geo)political messaging (SEE BILLIG 1995), the yoking of the semiotics of the common sunflower (*Helianthus annuus*) to the Ukrainian nation is somewhat more innovative. A favourite subject of Post-Impressionists such a Vincent van Gogh, the sunflower has long been celebrated for its *"exuberant and lively form,"* and has more recently come to represent the *"antithesis of the destruction now being suffered by the Ukrainian people"* (BAILEY 2022). Significantly, Ukraine is the world's third-largest exporter of sunflower oil, with roughly half of its cropland under Russian occupation at the time of writing. The invasion has resulted in once-fecund fields being turned into muddy, bloody battlegrounds. In its juvenile stage, the annual bloom – known in Ukrainian as *soniashnyk* – tracks the sun through the sky, reflecting a "sunny disposition" that metaphorically represents the optimism of the wartime Ukrainian "spirit." However, on the first day of the war, such optimism turned morbid via a viral Twitter post showing a Ukrainian woman handing some pips to armed Russian soldiers with the invocation *"Take these seeds so sunflowers grow here when you die,"* thus ominously linking the violent world of war-making, social media, and the cultural (and actual) landscape of Ukraine.

Recounting this story, Mufarech (2022) binds the sunflower to Ukrainian notions of peace (the flower was planted when the country handed over its nuclear weapons to the Russian Federation in exchange for Moscow's commitment to the country's territorial sovereignty), as well as the annual's function as a hyperaccumulator employed at the site of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster to help extract toxins from the soil (Russian troops temporarily occupied the site before retreating due to radiation poisoning after their disturbing of the contaminated soil within the "Zone"). In this simple exchange going viral, we see a resonant manifestation of the *"assemblage of micro-practices and discourses enmeshed across physical and digital spaces, inside and outside the body"* (GAUFMAN 2021: 7). Examining the coming together of these two bodies (one female Ukrainian civilian and one male Russian soldier)[3] and the discursive exchange that frames our geopolitical as well as existential understanding, we are witness to a performance of national identity, a reflection on human mortality, and an invocation of the natural world as a purifying agent – all of which now exists in 1s and 0s in cyberspace, where anyone with an internet connection may access

it (barring national firewalls and social platform bans such as those employed by China, Russia, and other autocratic states).

Returning to the cover of *Time*, the twinning of Zelenskyy – an actor who portrayed the president of Ukraine in *Servant of the People/Слуга народу* (2015–2019) before assuming the office – and an abstract concept – namely the *Volksgeist* of a nation that its invader, the Russian Federation, questions as to whether it exists at all – is a tantalising intervention for International Relations (IR) scholars who see the imbrication of popular culture into our work not only as *"imperative but also inevitable"* (HOLLAND 2019: 45). Moreover, when cast against the visuals of the country's flag and its national flower, the lure proves irresistible (hence this special issue of CJIR). For poststructuralist scholars of IR, this geopolitical moment was, as Holland notes, unavoidable, coming as it did in the wake of several key irruptions. Apropos of the current subject, we should look first to Donald J. Trump's "reality-TV presidency" (which featured a number of must-see episodes involving Zelenskyy) and Vladimir Putin's ongoing sculpting of his elective "special military action" in Ukraine (the use of the term "war" was for a time punishable with a five million rouble fine [$60,000]) as a response to the "Nazism" of its Jewish head of state (ALBRECHT 2022). When one counterpoises these meta-streams of the popular culture-world politics (PCWP) continuum (GRAYSON – DAVIES – PHILPOTT 2009) against two failed QANON-prompted coups d'état (in the USA and Germany) contra the so-called "deep state" (REINHARD – STANLEY – HOWELL 2022), global conspiracies centred on the COVID pandemic and the resulting vaccination campaigns (VIDMAR HORVAT 2021), the social media-abetted ethnic violence in Myanmar (TÄHTINEN 2021), Russian television's *"reinvention of reality"* in the late Putin era (POMERANTSEV 2014), and what *The Atlantic* magazine has labelled as our full-scale entry into the Metaverse (GARBER 2023), it is increasingly difficult *not* to conclude that popular culture as the *"battlespace of international politics"* (TAKACS 2015) has indeed entered Version 2.0. While the author does not seek the mantle of a latter-day von Clausewitz, it can be plausibly posited that popular culture seems to have become the continuation of war by other means.

In order to contextualise Russia's full-scale invasion in early 2022, the subsequent military conflict between Kyiv and Moscow, and larger geopolitical questions involving security in Europe, Russia's place in world

politics, and the continued sovereignty of Ukraine, this article examines the PCWP battlespace[4] of the Russia-Ukraine War. I do so with the aim of fleshing out how the *"everyday foreign policy assemblage"* (GAUFMAN 2021) works across borders, particularly in cases where nationalism is packaged into consumable products for foreign consumption (e.g. clothing, beer, memes) – in this case consumption in the Anglophone West. Employing analytical tools drawn from the field of popular geopolitics, this intervention examines how various geopolitical codes, visions, and orders manifest in popular culture, therein establishing a resonant and protean feedback loop linking the Anglophone West, Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), and the post-Soviet realm in the contemporary digital era.

In terms of the present article's structure, I start by revisiting thematic elements of my published work and that of other scholars of the PCWP continuum who have trained their gaze on the zone that binds the so-called "West" (hereafter, simply the West) and the geopolitical construct of the "post-Soviet East." Here, I reflect on the co-constitution and co-production of identity; or more specifically, 1) how various polities within and beyond the region view themselves; 2) how they view others; 3) how they think others view them; and 4) how they would like to be viewed. From here I proceed to a curated analysis of inflection points in the Russia-Ukraine War wherein popular culture has surfaced as a pivotal aspect of the conflict. In the third part of the article, I provide a case study examining UMF as emblematic of larger flows of Western-facing popular culture as a battlespace weapon, a tool of national identity-building, and a field of reality-making. Via a close reading of selected tweets, I interrogate how UMF's meme production engages in a popular culture analogue to Ukraine's shift in its strategic narratives (ROSELLE – MISKIMMON – O'LOUGHLIN 2014) since the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution and the subsequent annexation of Crimea and invasion of the Donbas by the Russian Federation.

Before proceeding, a brief introduction of the meme as a techne of (international) politics is order. The meme is much older than its appellation as such, finding purchase as a (popular) cultural form as early as the printing revolution and coming of age during the French Revolution (VESSELS 2021). Coined by the ethologist Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1976), the concept of the meme is linked to the notion of repetition, but requires more than simple copying of the original, and now is associated

with the act of going "viral" (i.e. both spreading and mutating at unpredictable rates). While serving as a *"basic unit of culture"* (BORENSTEIN 2022: 10), it is also a medium of political communication that lends itself to satirical representations of power, though such messaging can often manifest in oblique, even recondite ways as was the case with the WWII-era meme of "Kilroy was here" inscribed by American GIs in Europe. In the digital age, where prosumption (production + consumption of media) has steadily become the norm, the meme has shifted from a marginal, sophomoric form of speech/imagery to one that can command enormous power and ultimately prompt a shift in *"public culture"* and influence *"social identities and values"* (WOODS – HAHNER 2020: 10). Anonymity of the creator is the norm, with any given meme being recognised for its intelligibility across diverse audiences rather than as the output of some auteur. A meme need not be understood in the same way by every individual who sees it; rather, it simply requires *resonance* to be seen as successful, i.e. its affect is amplified by the "*synchronicity*" that is produced when two or more disparate ideas come together in a way that becomes more meaningful than any single idea in isolation (DITTMER – BOS 2019: 121). Consequently, any given meme exists on its own, but is also always embedded in an assemblage of meaning-making through indexing, imitation, reinvention, and repurposing.

THE PCWP BATTLESPACE: A SELECTIVE AND IDIOSYNCRATIC HISTORY

By way of introducing the not-so-novel concept of the PCWP battlespace and its relevance to the Anglophone world, CEE, and the post-Soviet realm, I will begin with a brief discussion of a figure that unfortunately continues to serve as a cypher for the region despite his British origins: Borat Sagdiyev. In the early 2000s, the Cambridge-educated comedian triggered the ire of the Republic of Kazakhstan with his satirical portrayal of the now infamous reporter from Kuzçek. Bumbling, benighted, and bigoted, Sacha Baron Cohen's creation was a pastiche of various Western stereotypes of *Homo post-Sovieticus* cobbled together to form a cultural cat's paw to elicit the stultifying array of classist, racist, homophobic, misogynistic, and xenophobic attitudes simmering beneath the British and American society (SAUNDERS 2007). Borat returned to the big screen in 2020; however, we did not need or want him in a world defined by lockdown-accelerated flame wars on everything from Black Lives Matter, transgender identity,

and #MeToo to the Great Replacement Theory, Wokeism, and Pizzagate. Perhaps the only interesting thing about *Borat Subsequent Moviefilm* was that, in the end, it collapsed two streams of popular-geopolitical tropes of the post-Soviet subject into a single entity. I have previously labelled these as the 'post-Soviet buffoon' (e.g. Garry Trudeau's Berzerkistani president-for-life Trff Bmzklfrpz, *The Terminal's* Viktor Navorski, and the generic *gopnik*, a.k.a. the "squatting Slav") and the *"post-Soviet bogeyman"* (i.e. wild-eyed terrorists, mad scientists, and revanchist *siloviki*). The sequel does this by positioning Borat as an unwitting carrier of the coronavirus, seeding the zoonotic plague across the globe in response to the triumphalist laughter of the West at the post-socialist neverwhere that Baron Cohen was complicit in constructing over two decades $\overline{\text{(SEE SAUNDERS 2017)}}$. Borrowing from Freudian psychoanalysis, this "revenge of the repressed" theme is one that scholars of the PCWP continuum – and particularly those working across CEE, Russia, and Central Asia – should be particularly attentive to as we see ever more powerful feedback loops of popular culture being weaponised for use in geopolitical conflicts $\overline{\text{(SEE SAUNDERS – STRUKOV 2017)}}$.

For those in IR who continue to dismiss the power of pop-culture to cross the boundary from art into politics, look no further than the early winter of 2014, when *The Interview* – a satirical portrayal of a clueless American journalist and his producer triggering a revolution that brings down Kim Jong-un – triggered real-world impacts. A hacker group calling themselves the Guardians of Peace attacked Sony, released sensitive documents, and corrupted the company's servers over the depiction of the People's Democratic Republic of Korea and its "Glorious Leader"; their veiled threats to movie-goers caused the farcical romp to be pulled from theatres, with an online release available only through certain platforms willing to risk subsequent acts of cyberterrorism. In his last speech of that year, the sitting president, Barack Obama, felt compelled to address the imbroglio, drawing a bold line under the notion that popular culture matters in world politics, something that we have known since Aeschylus penned *The Persians* in 472 BCE $\overline{\text{(SAUNDERS 2018)}}$. *The Interview*, more than simply provoking an international crisis, continues to serve as a paragon for contemporary (Anglophone) popular-geopolitical interventions, particularly when it comes to the undying utility of the (post-)socialist East. Like Hitler's "goose-stepping morons" (i.e. Nazis), the ideological enemy of the "Soviet" remains pregnant with possibility in contemporary

representation. Indeed, it is worth remembering that the closing scenes of *The Interview* are set to the extradiegetic music of The Scorpions' power ballad "Winds of Change" (1990), a track so synonymous with the end of the Cold War that some have suggested the Central Intelligence Agency had a hand in its writing (CHICK 2020).

With regard to representation, I do not mean to imply that those whom Western popular culture, or as it is known by its synecdoche "Hollywood," depicts, lack agency. This is far from the case. Rather, the proven suasive power of popular culture to shape what Wittgenstein deemed world-images (*Weltbilden*), and – when placed in an assemblage – result in what Heidegger called world-formations (*Weltbildungen*), has proven to be didactic in its own right, prompting those peoples whose life-ways are being represented to seek tools and techniques to not only challenge the geopolitically-coded representation, but to seek redress, and rebuke, revise, recycle, and reverse content, structure, and tactics to achieve their own goals.[5] Revisiting my own work, I will point to three interventions that guidepost a concerted effort on the part of the Russian Federation and its para-state allies to employ social media to achieve a geopolitical advantage on the global stage. In each case, this effort was undertaken through divisive sloganeering, derisive memes, and incendiary "fake news" to advance the Kremlin's goals of weakening societal cohesion and attitudes towards democratic pluralism in the West (CF. THOMPSON – LAPOVSKY 2018, FOSTER BHUSARI – VASUDEVAN – NASRIN 2022).[6]

My first example is the positioning of Vladimir Putin, or more accurately the media-construct known as VVP, as part of Russia's return to superpower status in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Via a highly-choreographed *"intertextual bricolage of Cold War pop-culture tropes"* (SAUNDERS 2019: 292), including staged photos and action-packed videos of Putin hunting big game, descending the Arctic Ocean in a submersible, and dousing wildfires from a military aircraft, Russian media outlets served up a Bond-like supervillain familiar to Western audiences. Playing on deep-seated stereotypes of Russian leaders as incorrigible strongmen, this construct eventually became raw material for the blooming hero-worship that would become commonplace in certain quarters of the American far right, not to mention similar fanbases in places like Greece, Serbia, Great Britain, and India. Indeed, this contagious *"cult of personality"* based on

the (conspicuous) consumption of *"images and paraphernalia,"* rather than state-issued propaganda (CASSIDAY – JOHNSON 2010: 685), undoubtedly influenced the rise of Product Trump with its MAGA line of merchandise in 2016.

My second example features big-budget Russian cinema, and specifically the films *Viking* (2016) and *Guardians* (2017). The former recounts the rise of the founder of Kyivan Rus' (and Putin's namesake) Vladimir/Volodymyr I. The celluloid intervention leans heavily on the current obsession with all things mediaeval and employs a visual rhetoric reminiscent of *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), deftly eliding the "*Viking-era* Männerbund" with contemporary *"Russian masculinity"* (SAUNDERS 2021: 147). *Viking's* diegesis provides a contemporary strategic narrative retrofitted to the director Andrei Kravchuk's imagining of 10th-century geopolitics in an effort to buttress the Russian state's claims on Kyiv as its point of origin. *Viking* likewise taps Third Romism themes, scripting the Varangian conqueror as a Norse Putin, particularly in the realms of state-building and foreign policy execution. The latter film, *Guardians*, functions as a sometimes-laughable derivative of the MCU's *Avengers* films (2012–2019), while also shamelessly borrowing from the *X-Men*, *Iron Man*, and *Guardians of the Galaxy* franchises, alongside older tropes from Marvel Comics. *Guardians* pits a team of post-Soviet superheroes against a mad scientist wielding Reagan-era American space weaponry against modern-day Moscow. While forged in the mould of Marvel, *Guardians* represents a trenchant example of the pop-cultural populist style of securitisation, wherein *"linguistic-discursive and aesthetic repertoires"* composed of *"language, rituals, images, narratives, and tropes"* are impressed into the service at the behest of the state (even if not funded by it) (KURYLO 2022: 132). Led by a sexy Russian major in skin-tight fatigues and Ray-bans, the motley band of reluctant meta-humans – including a werebear from Siberia, an invisible woman from Moscow, an Armenian telekinetic, and a teleporting Kazakh swordsman – battle an army of *"faceless enemies,"* who were poignantly labelled as *"opposition forces"* in Russian media coverage of the film (SAUNDERS 2021: 156). In its resolution, *Guardians* provides a not-so-subtle message that when acting *collectively*, the former states of the USSR – via organisations such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) – are destined to defeat their foes (alternatively, NATO, "Gayropa," a Soros-back New World Order, etc.).

My third instance involves the now-defunct youth orientated off-shoot of RT (formerly *Russia Today*) known as ICYMI. Launched in 2018, the online platform featured RT's London correspondent Polina "Polly" Boiko serving up snarky, satirical analysis of geopolitical events in a manner attractive to millennials, particularly white, male English-speakers disaffected by mainstream approaches to world affairs. Employing pastiche and parody, ICYMI worked with a system of knowledge-production that favoured a *"cynical form of antipolitics based on individuals' opinion-driven, or so-called 'critical thinking', capabilities"* (SAUNDERS – CRILLEY – CHATTERJE-DOODY 2022: 699), replete with winks and nods to a variety of conspiracy theories. ICYMI's barbs targeted its viewers' own governments (i.e. Washington and London), as well as other entities who might provoke the ire of libertarians, anti-globalists, and those who opposed the so-called "woke agenda." In short, ICYMI – a media outlet that was funded, at least in part, by the Russian state – took the meme-based social engineering experiment that began with the 2016 presidential election and moulded it into a more robust exercise that came to serve as a paragon of *geopolitical culture jamming* (IBID.: 697).

TO ARMS, KALUSH ORCHESTRA, GLIMMER MAN, AND Z-NATION! POPULAR CULTURE GOES TO WAR

Consider for a moment two relevant "truths" for this special issue: 1) American conservatives, in obeisance to the greatest Cold Warrior, Ronald Reagan, have long been reliably anti-Russian in their geopolitical orientation, seeing their progressive opponents as unrepentant "Pinkos" in thrall to Moscow; and 2) Ukraine had long languished under the image of "Little Russia," a state and nation perpetually bound to its imperial overlord, and unable to provide any difference or distinction that would be meaningful to those beyond the Soviet realm. Today, Ukraine is the darling of the American Left, with blue-and-yellow *"Slava Ukraïni"* banners dotting the yards of MSNBC viewers up and down the progressive coasts of the US. While American right-wingers have yet to don the "Z" t-shirts in opposition, there is a groundswell of anti-Ukrainism and pro-Putinism finding fertile ground among the conservative base, continuing a trend that began among right-wing media under the Obama administration (SAUNDERS 2019). Indeed, the former Fox News personality Tucker Carlson became a reliable mainstay on Russian television sets, railing against Western

support for Kyiv and deriding Zelenskyy as corrupt (conveniently forgetting that Trump's failure in geopolitical racketeering triggered 45's *first* impeachment).[7] What binds the suburban Zelenskyy fanboy/girl and the barstool-bound haranguer of the actor-turned-president is the undeniability of the fact that Ukraine is (now) NOT Russia, no matter how much VVP would like it to be so. All the nation-branding in the world could not accomplish what Number One's conscripts and Yevgeny Prigozhin's prisoner-brigades did in the face of fierce Ukrainian resistance: they made a Ukrainian nation real *and* meaningful for the world (or at least the West).

Writing in the Ukrainian foreign affairs journal *Zovnishni Spravy* back in 2008, I summarised Kyiv's conundrum with regard to its troubled nation brand: on the one hand, Ukraine conflated its identity with those of its East Slavic, Orthodox sibling states (Russia and Belarus), while on the other, the country sought to establish its quiddity by distancing itself from the Eurasian, even "Asiatic" behemoth that is Russia (SAUNDERS 2008). The Orange Revolution (2004–2005) allowed a brief moment of clear differentiation, but political in-fighting among Europhilic liberalisers, Russophones' fears about "Ukrainianisation," and the growing power of Russia-linked oligarchs proved the solubility of a distinct Ukrainian nation in short order. Fast-forward to the winter of 2013–2014: protests against President Viktor Yanukovych's rejection of closer ties to the European Union (EU) triggered a political tsunami that saw Kyiv lurch westwards and "Little Green Men" occupy the Crimean Peninsula. Western sanctions followed, and for a moment the world cared about Ukraine. By the end of 2015, Putin declared that military specialists indeed were in the Donbas to support separatists who sought to (re)establish Novorossiya ("New Russia") east of the Dnipro; yet international interest waned. Trump won the US presidency and railed against his own intelligence services in Helsinki as he stood beside Putin, signalling something far more than a rapprochement with Moscow: a budding bromance that saw an obeisant Donald in thrall to a smirking Vladimir. The memes were legion (see Figure 3).

FIGURE 3: AN EXEMPLAR OF ACTIVIST PUBLIC ART BEING TRANSMEDIATED INTO THE
MEMESCAPE, THUS EXTENDING THE (SEXUALISED) CRITIQUE OF US PRESIDENT DONALD
J. TRUMP'S COSY RELATIONSHIP WITH RUSSIAN PRESIDENT VLADIMIR PUTIN

Playing both sides against the middle, Trump – the (self-)reputed master of
the "art of the deal" (1987) – notoriously extorted Zelenskyy for information
on the "Biden crime family" as part of closing the loop on Congressionally-
approved military aid in a "perfect phone call." Importantly, this exchange
triggered the first of the American president's two impeachments (the sec-
ond stemmed from his incitement of the mob that stormed the US capitol
on 6 January 2021). A year after Trump's successor took up residence in
the White House, Russia began a full-scale invasion of Ukraine – an act
that brazenly violated deeply-held norms of state behaviour in a post-
1945 world (particularly in Europe). A breathless international media,
steely military experts, and seasoned foreign policy analysts were of one
mind: Russia would rapidly make mincemeat of the Ukrainian resistance,
taking Kyiv and everything east of the Dnipro. In a seeming miracle, the
Ukrainian resistance held fast, pushing the Russians back and crystallis-
ing the European, North American, and Australian resolve in the face of
Russian aggression (importantly, China, India, and South Africa took a de-
cidedly more nuanced stance on the conflict). However, the war raged not
only in the Sea of Azov, the Pontic Steppe, and the cities of Kyiv, Odesa, and
Bakhmut; it occurred on social media, cable news networks, and across
popular culture, with interventions in mediums as diverse as pop songs,[8]
craft beer releases,[9] and comic books (see Figure 4).[10]

FIGURE 4: A REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE OF THE ICONOGRAPHY OF SCOTT DUNBIER'S COMICS
FOR UKRAINE: SUNFLOWER SEEDS SHOWING AN UNARMED UKRAINIAN "DAVID"
STANDING AGAINST A RUSSIAN "GOLIATH" WIELDING THE WEAPONS OF SOVIETISM

In 2023, Europe's premier pop-culture event Eurovision served as the high-water mark in such interventions, as the runner-up UK (and a strident defender of Kyiv and a critic of Moscow) hosted the music competition on behalf of the previous year's victor: Ukraine. In 2022, the folk-rap group Kalush Orchestra (KO) took top honours with "Stefania," a tribute to motherhood. Given that Russia invaded Ukraine two days after KO was chosen to represent the country in Turin, Italy, the song emerged as a wartime anthem; the accompanying music video, featuring women soldiers rescuing children and returning them to their mothers, was filmed in Bucha and other war-torn cities, therein heightening its resonance as an artefact of popular geopolitics. Security concerns prompted the shift in venue (the previous year's winner normally hosts the event), despite President Zelenskyy's hope that a quick victory against the invader would ensue as a *"victorious chord in the battle with the enemy is not far off."* The European Broadcasting Union (EBU) concluded that Eurovision, the *"world's largest live music event, which reached over 175 million viewers on TV and online,"* could not be held in the winning country for *"safety and security reasons"*

(EBU 2022). Importantly, the EBU banned Russia within 48 hours of the invasion of Ukraine, thus precluding its participating in the 2022 or 2023 event (Russia has won the event once, in 2008, while Ukraine is a three-time winner: 2004, 2016, and 2022).

Seeing its voice diminished in the West as the opprobrium for its naked aggression rose in capitals from Tallinn to Ottawa to Canberra, Moscow has generally opted to employ pop-culture techniques to "sell" the war at home rather than trying to implement a counter-program in spaces where a pro-Ukrainian sentiment reigns, though in key instances, such "domestic" action reflects engagement with the flows and ebbs of a popular culture continuum that very much is connected to the outside world. Take for instance, Putin's signing of a February 2023 decree honouring the veteran-albeit-marginalised American actor Steven Seagal – the star of films including *Under Siege* (1992) and *The Glimmer Man* (1996) – with the Order of Friendship for his efforts at enhancing peace, cooperation, and understanding between nations. Importantly, Seagal, who was granted Russian and Serbian citizenship in 2016, has publicly supported Russia's view of events, putting him in the crosshairs for US sanctions (POWER 2022). However, as mentioned earlier, certain elements of the far right and conspiracy theorists have taken up the cause for Russia, magnifying Kremlin talking points about the conflict and/or fabricating stories. Some have even gone as far as to suggest the entirety of the war in Ukraine is a psyop (psychological operation) performed on the global stage for all to see: staging of bodies, "crisis actors," deep fakes, and the use of Zelenskyy "body doubles" have made the news since the ground invasion, with mainstream media outlets scrambling to back up genuine reporting from the front (COLEMAN – SARDARIZADEH 2023). Twitter, reddit, 4chan, and other social media platforms have emerged as key battlegrounds for sharing "theories" about the war, tapping into a much broader realm of conspiracy, including chemtrails, QAnon, Lizard Overlords, and the New World Order.

While there has been a notable dearth of effective campaigns to sway the West (as discussed above), one arena where a form of Russian popular culture has exploded is that around the use of the letter Z. The appearance of the Z scrawled on Russian tanks and trucks prior to the crossing of the Ukrainian border – ostensibly to help avoid instances of friendly-fire attacks by the Russian Armed Forces – triggered patriotic mimicry

across portions of Russian society (commercially supported by RT's sale of Z paraphernalia on the state-owned media outlet's website), as well as coming to serve as a marker for those outside the country to signal their support for the invasion. Critics of the Kremlin have also seen the image used as a form of intimidation for speaking out against the war (DEAN 2022). Given its orthography (i.e. a letter from the Roman rather than the Cyrillic alphabet), the origin of the Z is ambiguous; however, it is popularly understood to stand for *zapad* ("west"), therein providing an oblique reference to the direction pursued by Soviet forces against their Axis enemies as they moved towards victory in the Great Patriotic War. Such historical indexing thus buttresses the notion that Russia's "special military operation" is meant to quash the purported "fascist regime" in Kyiv, replacing it with an acceptable (pro-Moscow) alternative after "de-Nazifying" the country.[11] In a piquant example of pop-culture feedback loops at work, Ukrainians began sardonically referring to the Z as a "Zwastika," counterprogramming its imagery within a shared repertoire of geopolitical codes, but tapping into an alternative geopolitical order.

CASE STUDY: UKRAINIAN MEME FORCES QUA THE PEAK POP-CULTURE FEEDBACK LOOP

While there are many units, fronts, and spectra of engagement across the PCWP battlespace between Kyiv and Moscow, one that has been particularly representative of the depth and sophistication of the feedback loop between the intertwined cultural realms of the Anglophone West and the post-Soviet world is Ukrainian Memes Forces. UMF was established in late February 2022 and operates primarily as a Twitter-based agent at the handle @uamemesforces, which as of October 2023 commanded approximately 380,000 followers on the social media platform (now called X). UMF is just one battalion in the international online army that includes a host of meme-wielding agents such as the North Atlantic Fella Organisation (NAFO), State Meme Bureau (Державне Бюро Мемів), and Armed Memes of Ukraine (Збройні Меми України), among others (see Rakityanskaya 2023). Considering the richness of Ukraine's memescape, it is important to recognise (Russophone) Ukrainian social media users as the paragon of the contemporary cyberspatial interlocutor between "open" and "closed" societies (here Ukraine vs. Russia and Belarus), positioned alongside similar polities such as the Taiwanese and Hong Kongese (China), American

and other diasporic Persians (Iran), etc. Bridging both worlds, such actors are able to offer sophisticated, polyvalent, and resonant perspectives on international politics, as was the case with the David-vs-Goliath-tinged repurposing of the Star Wars iconography to frame the initial defence of Ukraine (see Figure 5).

FIGURE 5: A STAR WARS-BASED MEME THAT APPEARED ON REDDIT IN THE EARLY DAYS OF THE INVASION, PROVIDING A SUCCINCT FRAMING OF THE CONFLICT VIA A WELL-KNOWN POPULAR CULTURE REFERENCE FIELD

In the Ukraine War, the meme is part of the battle, being launched from both sides with various intended audiences in mind (though it is a tactic that often results in collateral damage).[12] Memetic warfare avoids the frontal assault, instead favouring information distribution tactics that are analogous to various forms of insurgency, wherein local cultural knowledge is grafted onto messages and circulated via person-to-person networks rather than some attempted form of mass broadcast (HARVEY 2022). However, it is important to keep in mind that memes operate inside a communication system that has two components: history and culture. As Rakityanskaya reminds us: "Memes are inherently linked with their references, and therefore, when the latter disappear the former become incomprehensible" (RAKITYANSKAYA 2023: 13). As a result, there is a spectrum of intelligibility across various audiences, with relevant factors including nationality, age, gender, personal experience, ideological orientation, and countless other factors. Yet, in the current digital, deterritorialised

realm of international engagement, there is a vibrant shared marketplace of ideas that allow state, parastate, and non-state actors alike to engage in various forms of everyday IR production and consumption (CF. SAUNDERS 2014, BJÖRKDAHL – HALL – SVENSSON 2019, GAUFMAN 2021).

STRATEGIC NARRATIVES IN THE ERA OF MEMES

Nations tell stories to make their case on the world stage, while also seeking to build consensus at home. In IR, we refer to these identity-constructing yarns as strategic narratives. Considering the *"omnipresence"* of such mediated myths within the conduct of international relations (SAUNDERS 2021: 154), the Ukraine meme wars present a fecund environment for assessing symbolic action and national storytelling via popular culture. As Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin (2014) discuss, strategic narratives are typically divided into four categories: 1) characters/actors; 2) setting/environment/space; 3) conflict/action; and 4) resolution. Such a framework is a helpful tool for examining the content, messaging, and potential reception of UMF's memes. In terms of characters and actors, UMF key figures are a mixture of real-world figures (Putin, Zelenskyy, and other world leaders) and meme-culture avatars (Doge, Wojak, Chad, etc.). The setting or stage of the UMF memes is usually within Ukraine, with a particular focus on contested battle zones such as Kherson, Mariupol, and Crimea; however, the environment in which the meme takes place is often metaphorical, mentally mapping the war onto the imagined geographies and fantastical geopolitics of Middle-earth or Westeros. Most commonly, the setting is the mind's eye, as UMF's memes predominantly work to universalise the Ukrainian cause by presenting the current conflict as something existential.

Regarding conflict and, more specifically, action, reaction, and interaction, the ongoing war provides an ample supply of content for UMF, with Ukrainian advances, Russian setbacks, and shifts in international policy toward Kyiv serving as the font of most of its memes over the past 18 months of the conflict. However, as I explore below, larger questions of history should also be contextualised within current temporalities, as everyday understandings of *"real and imagined pasts, presents, and futures"* are key to how any engagement with the narrative is interpreted by the audience (SAUNDERS 2021: 157). Likewise, we should not ignore the importance

of the *"foreign gaze"* upon post-Soviet Eurasia, which is something which *"haunts"* contemporary cultural production across the region (BORENSTEIN 2022: 73). Russia and Ukraine's shared post-Soviet identity, alongside key differences between Moscow and Kyiv, are frequent elements of UMF memes, as are Ukraine's EU/NATO aspirations. Lastly, we have the resolution or suggested outcomes of UMF's meme narratives, which provide(s) a normative dimension. Here, human agency is privileged in seeking the imperative. In other words: What is to be done? As Berenskoetter notes in his work on Russia's strategic narrative, every state – like every person – grapples with their *"being-in-the-world,"* and must work with time, space, and their own situatedness to achieve what is best for them (BERENSKOETTER 2014: 264). For UMF, its memes make clear that this should be full independence for Ukraine, the humiliation/destruction of the Putin regime, and the solidification of a unified democratic Europe against the forces of imperialism, autocracy, and post-truth politics. Keeping these components of Ukraine's pop-culture strategic narrative in mind, I will now provide a potential typology of UMF memes with relevant examples and analyses for each (see Table 1).

TABLE 1: A TENTATIVE TYPOLOGY OF UMF TWEETS

Category	Content Types	Common Figures	Predominant Themes
War Reporting	Military photos; historical footage; maps; visual-textual updates on victories/framing of setbacks	Ukrainian service personnel and heroic civilians; beleaguered Russian soldiers	Plucky resistance of Ukrainians; Russia qua Nazi Germany; Russian army as ineffective
Post-Soviet Divergence	Meme versions of iconic Soviet-era imagery; region-specific pop-culture pastiche and doctored cartoons	Volodymyr Zelenskyy; Vladimir Putin; Alexander Lukashenko; Viktor Orbán	"Western" Ukraine vs. "Soviet" Russia; Putin as Hitler/Stalin; truth vs. disinformation; echoing of Anglo-American triumphalism
Ukraine as a Postcolonial Model	Historically-resonant memes; visual-textual indexing of existential conflicts	Ukrainian Cossack qua the Indigene; Adolf Hitler; Joseph Stalin; mythological heroes and villains	Ukrainians as the (white) subaltern; Ukraine as the frontline against Russia's revanchist imperialism; cultural genocide
'Global' Popular-Political Culture	Generically consumable memes based on "global" pop-culture referents; utilisation of deep meme characters/references	Winnie the Pooh, Bart Simpson, Harry Potter, *Game of Thrones* characters, Doge, Chad, Feels Guy (Wojak)	Ukraine as righteous/Russia as villainous; shaming of Russian backers; support for Ukraine equals geopolitical "masculinity"

WAR REPORTING

The most straightforward type of UMF meme is that which provides timely visual-textual commentary on developments in the conflict. Tweets that fit this mould include: 1) delivery of meaningful information about the progress of the war; 2) shifts in international support for Kyiv vs. Moscow; and 3) pivotal events associated with the occupation and resistance that are outside of warfighting. Pragmatic and simple, such posts include images of captured Russian tanks, updates on the destruction of ammunition depots, the transfer of military hardware from the West, and strikes against Russia on its own territory. Often doctored with Russian and Ukrainian flags to provide context, these visuals can be news footage, historical images, stock photos, original artwork, cartoons, logos, maps, bits of text, or GIFs sourced from film or TV (SEE RAKITYANSKAYA 2023); however, even if the original source material is unknown to the viewer, the meaning is plain, with the encoded information only enhancing the effect if properly decoded (SEE HALL 1973). An exemplar of such a meme was posted on 25 March 2022, and it shows a couple sitting on a park bench looking out at smoke billowing off the coast of Berdyansk with the caption *"The Best Date Ever: We Look Together at the Burning Russian Ship."* Exemplifying what Gaufman calls *"everyday militarism"* (2021: 1), the meme functions as a pop-culture variant of war reporting on the destruction of one of the Russian navy's Alligator-class landing ship tanks and the damaging of Ropucha-class landing ships early in the war (SUTTON 2022). A more recent example focused on the Russian Air Force's accidental bombing of its own city Belgorod on 20 April 2023. While the city has been targeted by drone strikes launched from within Ukraine, the friendly-fire incident, which left a 20-meter-wide crater in an apartment-lined boulevard and sent several people to the hospital, was the most dramatic event of the war for city residents.

For those who prefer social media as their primary form of news consumption, this type of visual-textual information delivery is quick, easy, and effective. For others, such informational salvos prompt them to investigate the underlying messaging, thus drawing the viewer into an active engagement with the ongoing conflict via various resonances that are affect-inducing (ranging from tragic-comedic to patriotic-nostalgic). While much of the war reporting style of meme work focuses on "good news" about the Ukrainian war effort, there are ample examples of

reporting "bad news" combined with specific framings, or what might be labelled as gallows humour. These usually employ references to historical villains or infamous calamities. For example, in March 2023, Vladimir Putin visited the occupied city of Mariupol, hoping to put a positive spin on the war effort despite Ukrainian forces retaking modest pieces of territory in the prior months. UMF responded with a side-by-side comparison using Russian news footage of Putin and a historical photo of Adolf Hitler touring the city with members of the Wehrmacht's Army Group South in December 1941.

Taking a holistic analysis of those tweets that function as a popular-populist form of war reporting, it is possible treat UMF's output as a barometer of Ukrainian sentiment about the conflict since it is easier to "read" than communications coming from official sources. As a form of participatory culture, such timely cultural emissions open up ways of seeing a conflict in new ways, often employing *"absurd juxtapositions"* to make their point (SEE BORENSTEIN 2022: 32). However, given their linkages to specific events and verifiable information, such memes are limited in the ways in which they tell a story. As I explore below, the same cannot be said of ones that engage with larger strategic narratives that flag up the differences between Russia and Ukraine, present Ukraine as a model of postcolonial pluck, and/or comment on Ukraine's narration of its place in the world by *"speaking the language"* of popular culture (SEE SAUNDERS – STRUKOV 2018: 2).

POST-SOCIALIST/POST-SOVIET DIVERGENCE FROM RUSSIA

In this category of memes, we see Ukraine represented in a way that portrays the country as meaningfully different from Russia in its historical trajectory, often contextualising it alongside other "developed" states in opposition to a retrograde Russia mired in Sovietism, autocracy, corruption, imperialism, or other non-progressive praxes. A relevant example from 31 March 2023 is "Presidents with their dogs," showing a smiling Joe Biden (USA), Emmanuel Macron (France), and Zelenskyy (Ukraine) with actual dogs, and Putin (Russia) with a miniature Alexander Lukashenko on his lap. By positioning the Belarusian president as Putin's "lapdog," Ukraine simultaneously links its trajectory to that of Western democracies, while besmirching its neighbour as slavishly loyal to a Putin. Lukashenko as an obsequious pet is a common theme, appearing in another meme called

"Authoritarian Family," which is a parodic pastiche of the American situation comedy *Modern Family*, with Putin and Xi Jinping (China) as a gay couple in domestic bliss holding their baby Viktor Orbán (Hungary), and being nuzzled by their dog (Lukashenko).

Many of the memes in this category reflect a stridently anti-Soviet worldview that plays into a Western and, more specifically, Anglo-American triumphalism associated with the so-called "winning" of the Cold War that is deeply vested in the PCWP continuum that finds humour in everything from the banal anti-Semitism of Borat to the geopolitical laughter prompted by Santo Cilauro's character Zladko Vladcik's banging track "Elektronik Supersonik" (SAUNDERS 2017: 162). One such instance employs the visage of someone whom many post-Soviet citizens would consider to be a secular saint: the first human to survive space travel. In the meme, the smiling cosmonaut is shown in his space suit under the headline *"Yuri Gagarin didn't drink, didn't smoke and trained all his life in order to spend 108 minutes outside the Soviet Union"* (Figure 6). Coming from a Ukrainian source, this "joke" conveys a particular resonance.

FIGURE 6: A UMF MEME INVOKING THE "SECULAR SAINT" OF THE USSR, YURI GAGARIN, THE FIRST PERSON TO SURVIVE SPACE FLIGHT, AS A WAY OF CRITIQUING LIFE UNDER SOVIET RULE

The Ukrainian "style" of memetic warfare often operates in a self-referential way, marking out the pro-Ukrainian meme as a modus

for combating Russian propaganda. This structure works well in Europe, and specifically among those nations that have lived or received experience with the USSR's *"active measures"* campaigns of *dezinformatsiya* ("disinformation," or what we might today refer to as "fake news"), which date back to the 1920s. As Maharias and Dvilyanksi (2018: 23) state: *"The goal is to create discord and confusion, and amplify existing divisive issues in order to further expand the space separating the targeted audience; thereby, making reconciliation between any two sides of a divisive issue even more difficult to achieve."*

Such efforts did not end in 1991 but have been continually employed by the Russia Federation and its parastate allies, particularly through the medium of social media in Nordic Europe, Germany, US, UK, and Ukraine itself. Reflecting this extension of Moscow's geopolitical influence into social media spaces, UMF and other meme-makers frequently produce content that speaks to Russian adherence to Soviet norms of disinformation, while framing their own output as unfettered by this legacy. An exemplifier features a young man complaining that he has *"stepped in shit"* in the top panel, with the lower panel showing the bottom of his shoe with a sticker reading *"Russia state-affiliated media"* replete with the Twitter icon of a podium cum microphone that is applied to all RT output.

UKRAINE QUA THE MODEL OF POSTCOLONIAL INDEPENDENCE

Drawing on the specificity of Ukraine as part of tsarist Russia and the USSR, as well as a country occupied by Nazi Germany during World War II, these memes are rooted in historical contexts that may elude audiences outside CEE and the former Soviet Union. Others are meant to produce resonance among those who have suffered genocide (Shoah, Holodomor, Porrajamos), cultural decimation (Indigenous populations from the Welsh to the Quechua), or the privations of imperial dominion and the postcolonial condition (denizens of the former Habsburg, Ottoman, Romanov, British, French, and Portuguese empires). Consequently, a sizeable percentage of UMF memes reference the aforementioned Hitler or Joseph Stalin together with the current president of the Russian Federation. However, in other cases, UMF pivots to a metaphoric representation of a threatening Russia via pop-culture icons. This was the case with an eerie post featuring Pennywise. In it, the ancient, trans-dimensional child-killer beckons

potential victims into a World War II-era bunker with the promise of "Free Hugs" under the heading *"Russia in the eyes of its Central and Eastern European neighbours"* (Figure 7).

FIGURE 7: EMPLACED IN A COLD WAR-ERA BUNKER, THE SIGHT OF A LURKING PENNYWISE (QUA RUSSIA) CREATES A MULTI-LAYERED INTERFACE BETWEEN POPULAR CULTURE AND WORLD POLITICS FOR A GENERATION OF EUROPEANS WHO CAME OF AGE IN THE (FORMER) SOVIET BLOC

While Kyiv is certainly in a position to situate its cause in global terms, and even appeal to those in the global south, UMF reflects a predilection to speak to a narrower audience, though one which was more likely to come to its aid: the Anglophone West. Importantly, there was an inherent risk that the postcolonial message might not compute, given that its intended receivers were (historically speaking) purveyors of the very forms of violence being indicted. Seen from another angle, however, perhaps the cultural producers behind UMF (rightly) recognised that such critique would hit the mark as American, British, Australian, and other Western societies grapple with their respective postcolonial unconscious via variegated forms of "wokeness" -based guilt that might just be soothed by helping out Ukraine's (visibly white) subalterns (SEE DE OLIVEIRA 2022). Regardless, contemporary Ukrainian national identity is deeply informed by the recognition that – as a people – they have long been marked as "Other," both from the vantage of Western Europeans, who saw them as European "Orientals," and from the Russian/Russophone metropole, which views them as inferior, backward, retrograde *khokhols* ("sheafs")[13] – that is, if they are considered a separate people at all (RIABCHUK 2016).

It should be noted that part of meme culture is the requirement to engage with popular cultural flows of meaning-making, which may often manifest in indexing of key texts that circulate across different cultural communities regardless of nationality. Whereas the Bible, Greek/Roman mythology, or mediaeval lore such as King Arthur once functioned as the "glue" that bound together disparate cultures, today it is the "language" of *Star Wars*, Harry Potter, and Marvel/DC superheroes that provides a common medium for communicating ideas. Apropos of this shift, UMF offered up a nuanced meme in November 2022 that comments on the divergent paths taken by Kyiv and Minsk with regard to the imperial metropole, Moscow. The meme features the two arch-wizards of Tolkien's fantasy epic *Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf the Grey (Ukraine) and Saruman the White (Belarus), in a pivotal scene in which the former learns that his mentor has thrown in his lot with Sauron, the scourge of Middle-earth. Harmonising Tolkien's fantastical political machinations with contemporary geopolitics, Saruman-Belarus declares: *"Against the power of Russia there can be no victory. We must join Russia, Ukraine. It would be wise, my old friend."* To which, Gandalf-Ukraine replies: *"Tell me, 'old friend', when did you abandon reason for madness?"* (Figure 8) Within this brief exchange, the careful and critical consumer of popular geopolitics finds a profligate reservoir of meaning across time and space, and one which provides a stinging rebuke to the "banal colonialism" of Russia vis-à-vis its East Slavic brethren (IBID.: 78).

FIGURE 8: DEMONSTRATING THE CONTINUED UTILITY OF TOLKIEN'S LORD OF THE RINGS AS A POPULAR-GEOPOLITICAL PALIMPSEST, UMF MAPS MINSK AND KYIV ONTO SARUMAN AND GANDALF RESPECTIVELY, NEATLY SUMMARISING THE CHALLENGES PRESENTED TO POST-SOVIET STATES VIS-À-VIS MOSCOW (SAURON)

Delving deeper, first, we should consider the colour of Saruman (white), and that Belarus or formerly, Byelorussia, translates as "White Russia." Second, Belarus is a member of the EAEU, which thus links it geopolitically and economically to the Russian Federation (as well as Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan). Perhaps more importantly, Belarus – alongside the Russian Federation – is the junior partner in a political condominium known as the Union State, which dates to 1996, so in effect it has *already* joined Russia (i.e. the forces of Mordor) to preserve itself against the power of Putin (i.e. Sauron). Third, Belarus and Ukraine are two states that share a common culture, history, and religion, but also served as co-equal members within the political constellation that was the Soviet Union, while also holding their own seats as members of the United Nations (alongside a third, the RSFSR). Such a unique patrimony gifts these countries a shared understanding of their relationship with both Russia and the greater international community, and one that manifests in this meme as a nuanced intertextual patina that blends geopolitics and literary references. Via a deeper reading of the text, one could further conclude that Ukraine is positioned as a Christ-like figure through its elision with Gandalf. The wizard, after escaping the clutches of Saruman, will suffer a "death" in his battle against the demonic Balrog, a beast of shadow and flame. He will then be reincarnated as Gandalf the White, a saint-like warrior-mage who will lead a motley coalition of Men, Elves, and Halflings to victory against the would-be conqueror of Middle-earth.[14] By merging Gandalf with Ukraine, we see foreshadowing, or least some wishcasting, of a successful outcome for Kyiv in the coming conflict. Such a meme requires fluency in both the Belarus-Ukraine-Russia dynamic and J.R.R. Tolkien's complex cosmology; however, other UMF posts are denuded of such regional specifics.

"Global" Popular-Political Culture

In this last category of memes, the representational blend of image and text is generically consumable across multiple cultural realms, requiring little in the way of historically- or geographically-specific information about either Ukraine or the Russian Federation. Instead, the visual-textual messaging of these memes trade in critiques of Russia and its supporters (North Korea, Iran, Hungary, China), jocular goading of fence-sitting nations like Germany, and issuing kudos to Ukraine's supporters such as Poland,

Lithuania, Finland, the UK, and the US. However, these representations tend to privilege pop-culture tropes that would be lost on many outside the Anglophone world, hence limiting their purported "globality." Assuming wide intelligibility among the Millennial, Gen-Z, and Generation X age cohorts across the Anglophone West, UMF makes ready use of pop-culture mainstays, including *Star Trek*, Harry Potter, *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, Austin Powers, Sonic the Hedgehog, *Tom & Jerry*, *Scooby-Doo*, *Jurassic Park*, *Shrek*, *The Office*, *Sponge Bob*, *Family Guy*, *Rick and Morty*, professional wrestling, and various Disney/Pixar/Marvel properties, from *Star Wars* and *The Lion King* to *The Incredibles* and the X-Men.

A good example of this trend can be found in a mashup of Xi and Putin sitting opposite each other at their spring 2023 summit in Moscow, cast against an animated still of Winnie the Pooh and Piglet, which clearly conveys a sense that the larger Xi/Pooh is the dominant player in his relationship with the smaller Putin/Piglet.[15] Or in another meme, we see an oft-repurposed image of the ne'er-do-well Bart Simpson at the chalkboard copying a sentence over and over again: in this case, "*Russia is a terrorist state*." Similarly, we have a text-free meme of the English actress Emilia Clarke (who portrayed Daenerys Targaryen in *Game of Thrones*) laughing with a cigarette in hand superimposed on a photograph of the Crimean Bridge in flames following its bombing on 8 October 2022. Such a post taps into the complex tapestry of the HBO series' popular geopolitics, particularly Daenerys' sobriquet as the "Breaker of Chain," referencing her monomaniacal campaign to end slavery across Essos, an imagined geography that maps neatly onto post-Soviet Eurasia and the greater Middle East.

Other posts blend geopolitics with deep meme culture, reaching out to a sophisticated, youthful audience with fluency in such arcana as Pedro the Monkey Puppet, Non-Player Character, Shrug Rage, and Buff Doge/Baby Cheeks. One example that features regularly on UMF is the poorly-drawn Chad cartoon. Chad is a gendered artefact of alt-right internet culture, indexing hypermasculine men who have all the right moves, thus marginalising timid males, virgins, and incels (involuntarily celibate men) who either lack the skills or are afraid to romantically pursue women. In one, we see the "Chad" version of Lithuania, which: 1) designated Russia as a terrorist country; 2) recognized Russia's actions in Ukraine as genocide; 3) supports Ukraine's European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations; 4) stopped

importing Russian gas, oil, and electricity; 5) began sending lethal military aid to Ukraine a month before Russia invaded; and 6) remembers the glorious times when Russia didn't exist (Figure 9). Herein, UMF proxy-models behaviour for other European countries, setting up one-half of the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (which suffered its demise due to the imperial ambitions of neighbouring Russia, Prussia, and Austria) as a paragon post-Soviet resistance, ready and willing to make unambiguous moves against its former oppressor. By extension, those CEE states that exhibit obsequious behaviour towards Moscow-qua-Putin (Hungary) or espouse a geopolitical ambivalence in the face of Russian power (Bulgaria) or balance support for Ukraine against rising energy costs (Czechia) are marked as geopolitical "beta cucks," i.e. weak or craven actors in the jungle of world politics. However, if one is untutored in the ways of Chad, none of this makes any sense.

FIGURE 9: VIA THE MEME ICON "CHAD" AS A COCKSURE LITHUANIA, UMF DEMONSTRATES ITS FLUENCY IN THE TRANSNATIONAL DISCOURSE OF MASCULINIST YOUTH CULTURE WHILE SIMULTANEOUSLY ISSUING A FILLIP TO OTHER CEE STATES TO GO AND DO LIKEWISE

Similarly, the bald black-and-white outline character known as Feels Guy or Wojak appeared in the very first meme posted by UMF in March

2022. In it, we see the poorly rendered Feels Guy experiencing deep depression before being emotionally and physically transformed by the implied introduction of the Turkish-made Bayraktar TB2, a medium-altitude, long-endurance unmanned combat aerial vehicle, into action (Figure 10). Ukraine began taking delivery of the drone in 2019, and evidence began emerging in the month after the start of hostilities that its surveillance and lethal capabilities were being brought to bear on Russian forces, prompting songs to be sung in their honour and a flurry of videos being spread across the internet (PHILIPPS – SCHMITT 2022). UMF's use of Wojak in its opening salvo in the PCWP battlespace would not be an isolated incident, as he regularly appeared in UMF tweets well into 2023, doing everything from lambasting the UN for its ineffectuality to ridiculing Russian trolls.

FIGURE 10: UMF AGAIN DRAWING ON ESOTERIC MEME CULTURE TO DRIVE HOME A SIMPLE TRUTH: WITH THE RIGHT SUPPORT, THE UKRAINIAN MILITARY WILL PREVAIL IN THE DEFENCE OF THE HOMELAND

CONCLUSION

No one can foresee the final outcome of the current Ukrainian conflict but given the dire predictions of an imminent Russian victory in the first days of the war versus the reality on the ground nearly two years after tanks rolled across the border, one thing is certain: this war is a defining moment for European security. This article, along with the others compiled in this

special issue, seeks to illuminate the critical role that popular culture plays in contemporary military conflicts. To be clear, I do not suggest that there is anything new about this state of affairs; indeed, the past is peppered with pop-cultural interventions, from militarist Roman graffiti to anti-Napoleon cartoons to Frank Capra's *Why We Fight* film series. What is perhaps novel about "where we at" – to borrow a phrase from Crilley (2021) – is the imbrication of the popular-cultural production with the conduct, reception, and outcomes of the war. Today, agents of war-making see their performance as instrumental to the ultimate success of their side on the battlefield; moreover, in the current conflict in Ukraine, being seen as on the right side of history has become essential (perhaps more so for the Ukrainian forces than the Russians, but it is nonetheless a factor on both sides). In previous eras, popular culture mostly dealt with wars via metaphor or belatedly (think *Lord of the Rings* as a treatise on the World Wars or *M*A*S*H* as a meditation on the Vietnam War). Today, bloggers, meme-makers, and similar cultural prosumers are active agents in the conflict, often reaching pivotal audiences faster than journalists, diplomats, or policymakers. As I have attempted to demonstrate, this reality is something that has been in the making for some time. Ukraine (and to a lesser extent, Russia) make use of dynamic, polysemous, and meaningful feedback loops that connect audiences from Australia to Austria and from Chicago to Chișinău to frame the war. From Wojak's tears to Gandalf's entreaties to the repurposing of the letter Z, the war in Ukraine manifests Bourdieu's (1978) maxim that when one speaks of popular culture, one speaks of politics.

ENDNOTES

1   Responding to questions about the potentially inflammatory "Aryanising" of the Jewish leader's brown irises qua the public digital square (i.e. reddit), and given the tortuous discourse of Nazism that has characterised the conflict since 2014, Time's competitor Newsweek's director of photography Lauren Joseph stated that *"the images around Zelensky appeared to be reflecting in his eyes which is another nod to the Ukrainian flag"* (qtd. in Cole 2022).

2   Here I use the historical, imperially-inflected term Mitteleuropa rather than the more contemporary and comparatively neutral term of Zentraleuropa to highlight geopolitical hierarchies of power vis-à-vis the nations between the German-speaking domain and tsarist Russia. Specifically, the former refers to the Habsburg lands following the conclusion of the 'German Question', later becoming a discursive element of the plan for a German-dominated eastern Europe following the Brest-Litovsk Treaty (1918), in which an independent Ukraine featured prominently (see Kann 1980).

3   With regard to the gendered nature of popular cultural representations of the conflict, the above vignette is emblematic of one of many framing techniques employed across the PCWP battlespace, wherein a proud, resilient, and humanised female form stands in opposition to a comparatively anonymous (often faceless) male agent of the Russian "empire." However, as my case study demonstrates, other framings of the conflict are predominantly masculinist in their depictions of Ukrainian resistance, often employing emasculating tropes to frame enemies of the country.

4   Drawing on military definitions of the battlespace (as opposed to the older term of the 'battlefield') and aiming to further reify Takacs' notion of popular culture qua a battlespace of international politics, I define the PCWP battlespace as an assemblage of environments, factors, and conditions whereby the weapons of war (in this case, news broadcasts, social media content, films, television series, cartoons, songs, fashion, symbols, fads, jokes, etc.) are brought to bear on a given conflict to successfully 1) protect the force; 2) achieve political, strategic, tactical, and operational goals; and 3) maintain morale on the home front and deplete the will and capacity of the enemy to continue the fight.

5   Importantly, we should distinguish between the world-formation (*Weltbildungen*) and the world-view (*Weltanschauung*), with the former being a more passive inheritance based on various inputs received over time and the latter being a more active modelling of the world based on preconceived, often religious or ideological orientations (see Naugle 2002).

6   The intervention in the 2016 US presidential election represents a critical milestone in such efforts; however, when examined from a neutral perspective, Russian attempts to sway the American voting public in favour of a preferred candidate is simply a latter-day, social media-abetted retort to the 1996 election campaign, when three American political operatives assisted Boris Yeltsin's campaign for re-election with the connivance of then-President Bill Clinton (see Kramer 1996).

7   Almost immediately after being fired from his position at Fox News, Carlson received a job offer from RT, underscoring his utility in reaching key segments of the American electorate.

8   In 2023, Zelenskyy lent his artistic talents to American country music-star Brad Paisley's single "Same Here," which highlights commonalities between the US and Ukraine, including freedom, community, familial values, and a love of country.

9   As part of an industry initiative entitled "Brewing for Ukraine," a number of craft breweries launched special beers in support of Kyiv and/or donated proceeds to assisting Ukrainians impacted by the conflict, with the most famous beer of this sort being Russian River's *Putin Huylo* ("Putin is a dickhead"); see Borenstein 2022 on the history of the phallocentric epithet.

10   In 2022, the comic industry veteran Scott Dunbier crowd-funded a project entitled *Comics for Ukraine: Sunflower Seeds*, which teased contributions from such luminaries as Alex Ross (*Amazing Spider-Man, Kingdom Come, and Justice*) and Bill Sienkiewicz (*New Mutants, Elektra, and Moon Knight*).

11   As Riabchuk discusses, this is simply a continuation of an invented "*dramaturgical framework*" that Moscow constructed to destabilise the pro-European administration that swept to power in the Orange Revolution (2016: 81).

12   A number of scholars have already begun examining how war-themed memes are being disseminated, amplified, and negotiated as part of the conflict (cf. Kreps – Lushenko – Carter 2023; Toymentsev 2023; Volkovskaia 2023). Recognising that memes are more than play, a group of western academics quickly established the Saving Ukrainian Culture Heritage Online (SUCHO) project to archive the meme content produced, thus preserving an *"important and fragile element of internet communication that manifested itself abundantly since the beginning of the war"* (Rakityanskaya 2023: 1).

13   The Russophone epithet, which has been turned into a badge of honour for the purpose of self-identification, carries both agricultural and physiognomic connotations. Given Ukraine's role as the breadbasket of Europe, it reflects an association with grain cultivation and the peasants who did the work. However, the term also signifies the characteristic (male) Ukrainian Cossack hairstyle of a single tuft of hair on an otherwise-shaved head (also known as *oseledets or chub*), which has long served as a semiotic marker of Ukrainian nationalism.

14   (Central) Eastern Europe is seen as Middle-earth, as CEE is itself an interesting PCWP feedback loop, as reflected in the X feed Middle-earth of Eastern Europe (@Me_of_EE), as well as Tolkien's geopolitically-inflected representations of space which manifest in his magnum opus.

15   Winnie the Pooh is a popular stand-in for President Xi, resulting in Chinese censors banning the character's likeness.

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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 short-comings 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 onto-logical insecurity, but over time a new definition, and a "security of being" are achieved – seeing oneself as a complete, continuous person who is un-derstood 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 physi-cal danger prompt individuals, communities and states to build relation-ships 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 inclu-sion (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 po-litical, 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 ques-tions about oneself and the community.

In the case of Ukraine, the search for ontological security also re-quires 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 justifi-cation 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 simulta-neously 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"* $\overline{(IBID.:\ 22)}$. 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 $\overline{(IBID.)}$. 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)
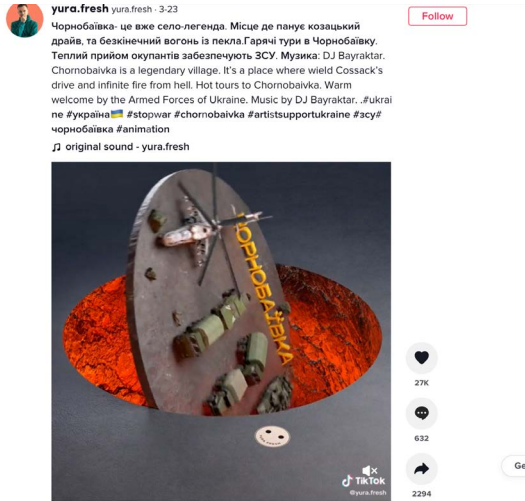
Here it is important to know that the Cossacks are associated with magic. Cossack sorcerers (*kharaktérnyk* in Ukrainian) were respected members of their communities, and they were known as shapeshifters, enchanters and soothsayers (SYSIN 1991). We notice the references to Cossack sorcerers and witches 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 une-qual 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 humilia-tion 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 attributed 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 narratives 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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NOTE

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Vernacular Geopolitics through Grand Strategy Video Games: Online Content on Ukraine in *Europa Universalis IV* as a Response to the Russo-Ukrainian War

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ABSTRACT

Europa Universalis IV, (better known as EUIV), is a popular grand strategy PC game. Players choose a country to play as and start in the year 1444 with the option to plot new courses in history such as allowing players to form Ruthenia, the game's version of Ukraine. In this article, I investigate how both Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian online content creators have been making content related to Ruthenia and Ukraine as a response to Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. I highlight how this content allows creators and viewers to voice their opinions on the war, build a sense of solidarity with the Ukrainian military, debate issues related to the war, and raise money for Ukrainians in need. Through close readings of this content, I offer an analysis of how this community uses the game to build a "vernacular geopolitics" in which information about and understandings of international relations and conflicts develop in non-elite settings.

INTRODUCTION

Europa Universalis IV (EUIV) is a computer game made by the Stockholm-based developer Paradox Interactive (fig. 1). Paradox specializes in grand strategy games that place players in control of countries or dynasties during different periods in history. Some of its games focus more on domestic policies, some are centered on the lives of individual characters, and others, of which *EUIV* is the best example, are concerned with foreign conquest and expansion. Often, the desires to create different historical narratives through the game are motivated in response to current geopolitical events such as the ongoing genocide of Uyghurs in China (MASTEROFROFLNESS 2021). In the past developers have responded to these tendencies and have added playable and formable nations such as Taiwan (called Tungning in the game) and Israel to the games. Users also use these games and such nations in them to create counter-historical narratives and comment on geopolitical conflicts (PARADOX WIKIS N.D.A, N.D.D).

FIGURE 1: SPLASH PAGE FROM PARADOX INTERACTIVE ADVERTISING FOR *EUROPA UNIVERSALIS IV*
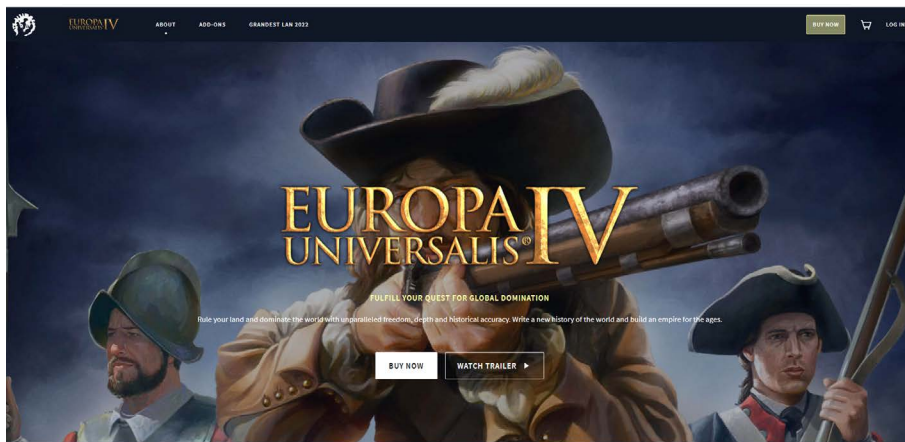
Source: <https://www.paradoxinteractive.com/games/europa-universalis-iv/about>.

In this article, I explore how the online community of *EUIV* players use the game to learn about and respond to a particular conflict, Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, from both etic and emic perspectives. I find that the *EUIV* community's content, responses, and discussions concerning Ukraine constitute examples of vernacular geopolitical knowledge, and ways of understanding international relations, conflicts, geography, and politics in non-elite settings.

To make this argument, I draw from several different sources, including YouTube videos of players playing the game, the dedicated wiki and online forum for the game, information from the game itself, and journalistic reporting related to *EUIV*. Playing the game, watching videos of others playing it, and participating in the ancillary activities related to the game such as reading the wiki, provide avenues for individual players to form their own understandings of geopolitical issues and conflicts. I demonstrate in my investigation of the *EUIV* community's content surrounding Ukraine how this vernacular knowledge, awareness, and participation are developed. Through this study, I intend to illustrate the necessity of looking to areas such as games as valid and productive sites through which we can better understand how geopolitical events are understood, internalized, and reacted to among non-elites. Moreover, due to the fact that *EUIV* players are a rare example of a community of non-elites who are deeply interested in global politics, history, and warfare, I find that it permits a particularly rich area for understanding the emergence of vernacular geopolitical knowledge. Throughout this essay, I am guided by a number of questions. How do content creators use *EUIV* to comment on and inform audiences about Ukraine's history and its current geopolitical status? How do Anglophone and Ukrainophone content differ in their presentation of the situation and the types of commentary they solicit? What can the example of *EUIV* during the Russo-Ukrainian war tell us more generally about the use of video games among non-elites to understand geopolitical events and allow for them to participate in these events? To begin this investigation, I will offer some background information on *EUIV*.

BACKGROUND OF EUIV

EUIV was released in 2013 and has been supplemented over the years with a variety of expansion packs, downloadable content, and patches that have added new countries, game mechanics, and other elements to create a more immersive and engaging experience. *EUIV* has an estimated 4 million copies sold on Steam, the world's largest computer game retailer, and has been reviewed over 115,000 times by players (STEAMDB N.D.). The game is highly complex and comes with a steep learning curve to play proficiently. A common, half-joking refrain heard from the fan community is that it takes 1,000 hours of gameplay to finish the game's tutorial.

The standard starting date within *EUIV* is November 11, 1444, the day after the conclusion of the Ottoman victory at the Battle of Varna (fig. 2), and if it is played normally, the game automatically ends on 3 January 1821. The fact that *EUIV* ends in the time of the Napoleonic Wars (this section of the game is referred to as the Age of Revolutions) provides enough chronological distance to mitigate some of the more visceral reactions that people could have regarding more sensitive moments of global history. Even with this distance though, there are plenty of moments within the game that allow players to take part in issues such as the forced destruction and assimilation of Indigenous communities and profiting from the transatlantic slave trade, albeit in a sanitized and abstracted format (LOSITO 2023). This historical distance when playing as Ukraine allows players to avoid delicate issues such as the Soviet rule over Ukraine or examples of Ukrainian nationalist collaboration with the Nazis that could lead to more confrontational encounters.

FIGURE 2: THE *EUROPA UNIVERSALIS IV* MAP OF EUROPE AT THE GAME'S 1444 START DATE

Source: <https://www.quora.com/How-accurate-are-the-borders-of-countries-and-world-situations-in-the-starting-date-which-is-1444-of-the-video-game-called-Europa-Universalis-4>.

In the simplest terms, an individual game of *EUIV* (often known in the community as a campaign in keeping with the militaristic nature of the game) involves a player choosing a country and attempting to expand it territorially, economically, and technologically. Depending on the country selected, it is possible to form larger countries once certain requirements are met within the game. These usually entail possessing certain territories

or certain levels of technology that unlock as a player progresses. For example, Muscovy can eventually form Russia, any of the Japanese daimyos that start the game can work to form Japan, and, as I will demonstrate in the following section, it is possible for some countries to form *EUIV*'s early modern version of Ukraine: Ruthenia. Before addressing the Ukraine-specific content made by the *EUIV* community, I will discuss the theoretical bases and methodologies I use to understand how *EUIV* can help develop vernacular geopolitical knowledge and its implications for non-elite understandings of conflicts and international relations.

THEORY AND METHOD

There is a growing body of literature developing the concepts of folk geopolitics, vernacular security, vernacular international relations, and vernacular geopolitics, drawing scholarly attention to an important and understudied element of how global conflicts are interpreted, discussed, and integrated in non-elite contexts (BUBANDT 2005; HAYWARD 2009; JARVIS – LISTER 2013; STEVENS –VAUGHAN-WILLIAMS 2016; CROFT – VAUGHAN-WILLIAMS 2017; JARVIS 2019). In addition, this work is informed by research into popular geopolitics, which centers popular culture in its approach to understanding how geopolitical events and issues are understood in everyday life (DITTMER – DODDS 2008; DITTMER – GRAY 2010; SAUNDERS – STRUKOV 2018). While these terms may differ in their specific foci, I view them as a constellation of related and interlocking topics that can be viewed together to help increase our understanding how geopolitical events filter into quotidian contexts, informing and (re)producing knowledge. Throughout this article, I offer thick descriptive work that provides a sampling of the different ways that the game is used to understand the war in Ukraine from both Ukrainian and international perspectives as a way of providing a deep and comprehensive investigation into the quotidian responses to the war (LÖFFLMANN – VAUGHN-WILLIAMS 2018: 383). The most important sources for this are YouTube videos of people playing the game and comments on various fora dedicated to the game because of their communal aspects and the wider reach of the formats. All of these sources are from after Russia's invasion in February 2022. This research also adds to the literature that shows how popular culture plays a major role in developing social imaginaries related to international relations (WELDES – ROWLEY 2012).

In addition, this work adds to scholarship that investigates the ties between video games and the promotion of militarization (DER DERIAN 2001; STAHL 2006; POWER 2007; DYER-WITHEFORD – DE PEUTER 2009; GAGNON 2010; HITCHENS – PATRICKSON – YOUNG 2014). As I will show in the examples below, this trend continues among the *EUIV* community. Previous research elucidates how video games acculturate players to military life, ideas, and tactics as well as normalizing the uses of violence. Moreover, this past research speaks to how video games are useful in blunting criticism of military actions and decisions to use military force. Other scholars note how games can foster greater critical reflection with regard to war and violence (BOS 2023). I investigate how these theoretical ideas play out in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, finding that video games in this situation are largely adding to the militarization of everyday life for Ukrainians. This article also adds to this literature by providing accounts from a lesser-considered region. Much of the previous work on these topics focuses on the experiences and histories of Western Europe, the West, the Middle East, and East Asia. There is less attention to Central and Eastern Europe, and thus my work here helps make the literature more comprehensive in its scope.

This article also identifies how *"culturally dominant views on social conflicts and ethical dilemmas' are formed and communicated"* in games through an analysis of the assumptions that game developers build into the games and the responses to them from various constituencies (BOURGONJON ET AL. 2011: 93). My exploration of the structures and definitions of the game that work to guide players toward particular outcomes discusses this tendency in greater detail. Moreover, this work presents an investigation of so-called "'second order' representations" and analyzes how these representations offer new venues through which to better understand the broad impacts of geopolitical events that are often not included in the larger discourses surrounding international conflicts (NEXON – NEUMANN 2006).

Grand strategy games operate within a system whereby there is a *"negotiation between the game designers' understanding of a profitable interpretation of the past and the player's own interaction with and reading of the history presented"* (GISH 2010: 177). Within the context of examining *EUIV*, Greg Koebel notes that the game's hardcoded trade system reinforces certain assumptions about the history and growth of certain countries, presenting an example of how this negotiation works and how it persuades players

to make certain decisions, reinforcing the game's claims about and interpretations of history ⎯(2018: 63). *EUIV*, like other grand strategy video games, *"reaffirms the general idea that expansionism and capitalistic endeavors are necessary if society is to thrive"* ⎯(CASSAR 2013: 339). The goals and structure of the game, however, encourage players to actualize the developers' historical arguments. In this article, I will show how players conform to or oppose these historical arguments through their gameplay and in their comments within the community and to the game developers.

To explore these issues and questions with regard to how the *EUIV* community uses the game to discuss the Russo-Ukrainian war, I employ a number of methodological approaches. I offer an investigation into how the developers create a specific historical narrative regarding Eastern Europe. I interpret and analyze the game's mechanics to offer an understanding of how certain historical assumptions are embedded in the game. In addition to looking at the developers' side of the story, I perform close readings of videos from content creators to understand how players use the game to construct their own narratives and understandings of geopolitical events. I also examine how modders (people who make new software that modifies aspects of the base game) choose to go against or add to the game mechanics and allow for different types of content and reactions from the game's community. Finally, I consider the ways that *EUIV* has sparked some controversies both in its own community and beyond, including areas directly related to the Russo-Ukrainian war.

In the remainder of this article, I will analyze content related to Ruthenia and Ukraine within the *EUIV* community, comparing how international and Ukrainian audiences use the game to discuss the war and develop vernacular geopolitical knowledge. To accurately reflect how vernacular geopolitics varies among linguistic communities, I examine online content in English intended for an international audience and Ukrainian-language content intended for a Ukrainian audience separately. Readers will note that I do not address Russian-language content in this article. This reflects the reality of *EUIV* content. While there is Russian-language content in the game, I have not found any Russian-language content of the game that involves forming Ruthenia or Ukraine. Even when I investigated Russian-language content dedicated to Russia in the game, there has been little concern with or interest in invading and conquering Ukraine

or how Ukraine is depicted and treated within the game. Instead, this content about Russia is more concerned with game mechanics or historical roleplaying than any sort of commentary on contemporary events within the confines of the game. This silence could be seen as its own example of how the formation of vernacular geopolitical knowledge in the game works, and the lack of content on Ukraine from Russian-language creators could perhaps indicate a lack of interest in or concern with the issues from that sector of the community. In the next section, I offer some further explanation on how Ukraine is played and depicted within EUIV.

HOW TO FORM UKRAINE IN A FEW EASY CLICKS

To form Ruthenia, the player's nation must have either Byelorussian or Ruthenian culture (this is how they are referred to in the game) as its primary culture. Ruthenia is clearly meant to be seen as a forerunner to the modern Ukrainian state, as it sports a blue flag with a yellow *tryzub* symbol, one that is identical to Ukraine's current coat of arms. Players often think of and refer to Ruthenia and Ukraine synonymously in the context of the game so throughout this article, I will use both terms. I will use the term Ruthenia when a player is using playing a standard version of the game and I will use the term Ukraine specifically when referring to players who are playing as custom nations or using modified versions of the game that specifically allow them to play as Ukraine.

As for territory, to form Ruthenia, the player must control the provinces of Kiev and Zaporizhie (these are the names for the provinces are used in the game and thus they are the names for them I will use throughout the article) as well as controlling either the province of Volhynia or that of Halicz. While this does not seem like a lot of territory, these provinces are not adjacent to one another and thus the player must typically also control the territory between them as well. In addition, these territories are located between some of the most powerful nations at the start of the game, which makes them difficult to attain and hold. Finally, the player must also have reached an administrative technology level of ten to attain them. Players develop levels in administrative, diplomatic, and military technologies by spending "monarch points" which accrue as the game goes on. This requirement ensures that the player cannot form Ruthenia until about 100 years of in-game time has elapsed.

The territorial requirements for Ruthenia present a subtle, but telling definition of what the game's designers see as the core of Ukraine and Ukrainian culture. Kiev's centrality to this question is unsurprising, as it constitutes the center of not just the Ruthenian ethnic group, but all of the East Slavic ethnic groups in the game. The game's flavor text – the historical narrative elements that aim to immerse the player within the time period of the game – for the decision to form Ruthenia offers some powerful commentary on Ukraine's role in the East Slavic world with interesting parallels to the contemporary war in Ukraine. The text speaks of Ruthenia's opposition to Moscow and the Muscovite state (fig. 3).

FIGURE 3: SCREENSHOT OF THE MESSAGE THAT APPEARS WHEN PLAYERS FORM RUTHENIA

Reclaim Ruthenian Legacy   id

Please help with verifying or updating this infobox. It was last verified for version 1.33.

Centuries ago the land of the Rus' was united under a single banner and ruled from the legendary city Kiev. But then came the Mongol hordes, advancing from the great steppe, pillaging and burning. They destroyed our kremlins and the towns fell one by one, even Kiev itself could not avoid this fate. In terror our people fled the plains of Rus' and went north. Into the forests and hinterlands of the land we today call Russia.

Now a new and arrogant city of the north is on the rise. It draws in the petty states around it and its ruler envisions a new Rus'. A Rus' centered in Moscow and not Kiev.

However us Ruthenians will not go silent into the pages of history. We will not allow newcomers and pretenders to claim the legacy of our forefathers. Kiev shall rise once gain and we shall restore it to its former glory and splendor. So too shall the Rus'.

[Expand]

Source: <https://eu4.paradoxwikis.com/Ruthenia>.

The message of this text presents a proud Ukraine and offers an interpretation of history that confirms its place as the source of Rus' culture. At the same time, the history of Russian control over these regions still affects how the game refers to the territories. All of the names of these provinces are derived from transliterations from Russian (or in some cases the Polish versions of the names) rather than Ukrainian; hence, for example,

the game uses the spelling "Kiev" rather than "Kyiv". These decisions in nomenclature indicate that even when creating a text that is meant to offer opportunities for roleplaying and alternative histories, certain narratives and categorizations remain dominant and *de facto* normative.

In addition, the decision to mark Zaporozhie as a core part of Ruthenia, signifies the centrality of the Cossacks within *EUIV*'s conception of Ukraine. The Cossacks are such an integral part of the game's depiction of Ruthenia and Ukraine because Cossacks are well-known internationally as a symbol for the country, thus helping to attract players unfamiliar with the region, and also because the designers included content related to Cossacks into the game. Finally, the requirement to have either Halicz or Volynhia and yet nothing in the Donbas region, reinforces an early modern definition of Ruthenia or Ukraine as rather a part of Central Europe than the Russian heartland (PLOKHY 2009).

The most common, and most "historically accurate," way for a player to form Ruthenia is to begin as Lithuania, which has the option of releasing a number of Orthodox, Ruthenian vassal states, including Kiev, Galicia-Volhynia, Chernigov, and Zaporozhie (fig. 4). When releasing a vassal state, the player can then choose to play as the released subject. In this scenario, the player's first goal is to win their independence from Lithuania and then they are able to conquer the lands necessary to form Ruthenia.

FIGURE 4: SCREENSHOT OF LUDI ET HISTORIA'S RUTHENIA CAMPAIGN SHOWING
THE RELEASED VASSAL STATES; KIEV IS THE LOWER BLUE COUNTRY
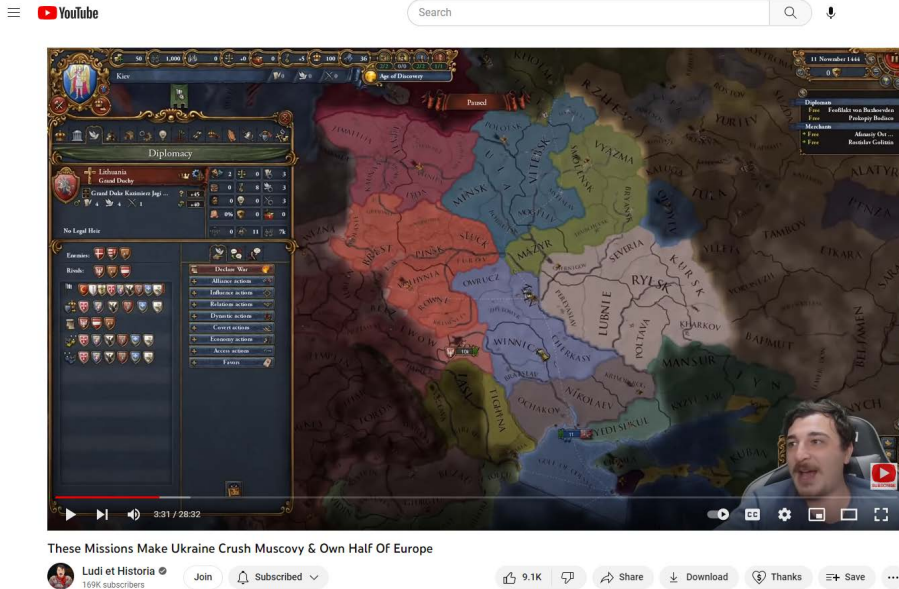
Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s1oP2827NZ4>.

USING RUTHENIA TO HELP AN INTERNATIONAL
AUDIENCE UNDERSTAND THE WAR IN UKRAINE

I will begin this investigation into the use of *EUIV* as part of a development
of vernacular international relations for an international audience through
an analysis of one of the most prominent content creators in the *EUIV*
community, Ludi et Historia (often shortened to just Ludi). Ludi's reach
within the community is enhanced by the fact that he produces content
in English, making it more accessible. He was one of the first *EUIV* content
creators to directly comment on the war in Ukraine. Ludi's videos, and
many of the others that I comment on in this article are what are known
as "Let's Plays." As the name implies, these are recordings or live streams
of a player just playing through a given game. Often, these series are rath-
er long, spanning a number of different playing sessions. Another core
feature of a Let's Play is that it shows as much of the game play as possible
and allows viewers who are not actually playing the game to still have an
immersive experience (GLAS 2015).

A video that Ludi posted on March 4, 2022 offers an interesting explanation of the way that the war was received within the *EUIV* community and how he translated contemporary geopolitical realities into the context of the game (LUDI ET HISTORIA 2022). The video itself has 145 thousand views as of July 2023, which is about the average for his other videos that he posted in the same time period (IBID.). Ludi uses humor as a way of making the geopolitical content more accessible to his audience. For example, in this video, he makes a joke about the fact that his name Ludi is the same as the Ukrainian word for people (*liudi*) and uses clips from a speech by Volodymyr Zelenskyy where he makes the plea that "Ludi" (people) will suffer in the war. He also jokes that Putin began the war because he saw Ludi's previous video of him successfully playing as Russia and wanted to recreate the borders Ludi created in the game. He continues to use humor by commenting that he spoke to Zelenskyy and they agreed that the best thing he could do in this situation is make a video of him forming Ruthenia (IBID.). In addition to trying to break some of the tension surrounding such a serious topic with humor, Ludi also engages in concrete actions to support Ukrainians. In the video, he asks his viewers to consider donating to the Red Cross and other charities as a way of helping refugees and those whose lives are being affected by the war, placing links to these organizations in the description of the video. This is a clear example of the ways that the community surrounding the game is able to use *EUIV* to organize material actions toward contemporary geopolitical events, independent of elite structures.

In Ludi's campaign to create Ruthenia, he chooses to play as Kiev. Ludi provides historical information throughout the video. He notes, for instance, that the reason why the Ruthenian lands are under Lithuania at all in the time-frame of the game is the Lithuanian victory in the Battle of Blue Waters (1326). This offers viewers some context to better understand the historical and political factors that have influenced borders to the present day. Moreover, through the game's structure, Ludi makes explicit connections to contemporary geopolitics. *EUIV* does not include an independent Byelorussian state. But, as Ludi tells his audience, the country Polotsk, which is also releasable from Lithuania, is the closest approximation to a forerunner of Belarus that exists in the game. Through these comments, he is able to inform the audience of how to better understand the historical map in the context of twenty-first century borders. Moreover,

in his game, Polotsk allies with Muscovy, which leads Ludi to sarcastically ask his audience where they have seen Belarus supporting Russia in the past (IBID.). Such a comment is clearly an attempt to have his audience connect his Ruthenia campaign to the ongoing war.

Ludi goes on to make more explicit connections between his own game and the current war in Ukraine. He notes that just like Ukraine, he too must fight to carve out a space between a number of larger powers to ensure independence and sovereignty. Through playing this campaign, Ludi expresses his admiration for the Ukrainians in the war and once again exhorting his audience to donate to Ukraine and placing links for making such donations in the description of the video. In sum, Ludi's video presents a way for his international, Anglophone audience to gain information about the history of Ukraine and better understand the factors behind the war.

EUIV AS A MEME GENERATOR

Much of the focus in this article has been on how members of the *EUIV* community use the game to create alternative versions of history or to right what they see as wrongs in the historical record. As demonstrated above, this usually entails staying within the normal confines of *EUIV* as a game and using its early modern setting as a place through which the player can create a strong and influential Ruthenia/Ukraine as a response to Russia's military aggression in the current moment. However, this is not the only way that *EUIV* is leveraged to discuss the war. One video, titled "Russian/Ukrainian War in EU4," uses a modded version of the game (that is, one that has been modified to have different features) to present a condensed version of the war (JABREAD 2022).

The modifications to this game bring the time-frame into the twenty-first century, update the countries' flags and borders to their current iterations, and change the names of the leaders to reflect the present reality. The video does not have any voice over from the creator. The soundtrack at the beginning of the video consists of a song from the video game *Cyberpunk 2077*, which plays over the gameplay while pictures of Putin looking excited are interspersed in the video. Eventually, a clip of Putin announcing the "special military operation," is presented and Russia begins its war against Ukraine. The beginning part of this war involves the

Russian army occupying a great deal of Ukraine and destroying many of its armies. However, about midway through the video, the soundtrack suddenly changes to the song "Yankee Doodle," while a clip of US President Joe Biden plays. The video then moves to showing a player playing as the US sending a great deal of money to Ukraine. Finally, the soundtrack switches one more time to the patriotic Ukrainian military song, "The March of the New Army" (*Marsh novoi armii*). The depicted gameplay moves to showing the player playing as Ukraine using the newly gifted money to build up his army and swiftly using it to drive Russia out of Ukraine, retake the occupied land, and eventually even take Moscow itself.

Only four minutes long, the video uses the familiar structures of *EUIV* to tell a part of the story of the war via the use of memes, jokes, and other elements. The video's creator, Jabread, also offers some subtle but interesting commentary in the description of the video, where he writes the simple phrase "*US aid go brrrrrr!*" (IBID.). This language derives from a meme that originated in 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic with one character telling the US government to not "*artificially inflate the economy by creating money to fight an economic downturn*" while the other character in the meme, representing the United States Federal Reserve, responds with "*haha money printer go brrrrr*" (fig. 5). Within the meme's context, "go brrrrrr" is supposed to approximate the sound of a machine, like the money printing machine in the image above, working very quickly. What Jabread is implying with this comment is that the US government's large financial support is the major difference that has allowed for Ukrainian gains in the war. This four-word description offers a telling example of the ways that vernacular geopolitics knowledge is developed through the use of *EUIV*. Jabread's description here is, on one level, the repetition of a meme for a new context, and is meant to elicit laughter. On another level, though, it is his own modest commentary on the recent events.

FIGURE 5: THE ORIGINAL MEME USING THE PHRASE
"*GO BRRRRR*," FROM WHICH JABREAD'S JOKE DERIVES

Source: <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/money-printer-go-brrr>.

The comments to the video show how vernacular geopolitical knowledge is spread and develops. One commenter, anonymooseplays3905, praises Jabread in a partially ironic tone, saying the video was *"greatly informative and helpful, I now have a complete understanding of geopolitics. Thank you[,] kind sir."* Clearly this commenter does not actually believe that he has full expertise in the subject just by watching this video, but it does show that some genuine information and knowledge was communicated even in a humorous format. Jabread's response to this comment also makes a clear statement about where they gained their own understanding of the conflict: *"all that [sic] hours of mine reading reddit threads should amount to something."* His admission that he gained this knowledge from Reddit demonstrates that traditional news media are not the only places where people are gaining information about contemporary geopolitical events. Jabread's comment shows how they take the vernacular knowledge learned in one non-elite, online context and is able to apply it and disseminate it in another format for a different audience. This entrepreneurial approach presents new ways of understanding how information about international relations circulates in non-elite contexts.

The comments section also shows the power of response and conversation that is a hallmark of social media. In the same video, another commenter, Raleyg, notes that Jabread *"forgot to include the sunken flagship event"*, referring to the Ukrainian navy's sinking of the Russian ship Moskva (IBID.). This comment shows that the audience is looking to improve

the knowledge presented in this context to make sure that it is more comprehensive so that future viewers would get a fuller picture of the war. Jabread responds to this comment by stating, *"man, I really wanna [sic] redo the video, there's too many events I could have included"*, which demonstrates the collaborative nature of this knowledge production as well as the desire for accuracy among content creators (IBID.).

Comments on the internet, of course, are not always productive. Often, they include criticism of the original content and can devolve into arguments over that content or ideas expressed in it. This video is no different, with one commenter writing, in Russian, *"oh those Ukrainian fantasies…"* (*okh uzh eti ukrainskie fantazii…*) (IBID.). In response, a commenter with a Ukrainian flag in their profile name responds, again in Russian, by asking the original commenter why he made such a comment when the video creator is not Ukrainian and wants him to explain what he meant in the original comment. I highlight these comments for a number of reasons. First, the fact that they are posted in Russian on the channel of a creator who exclusively makes English-language content shows how this type of vernacular geopolitical knowledge can transcend international boundaries and bring together very different groups into a single conversation. Second, the back and forth between these commenters underscores the rather ambiguous nature of the video. Is Jabread in favor of or opposed to US aid to Ukraine? Does Jabread think the West should be involved in the war? Does Jabread think Russia's actions are right or wrong? None of these questions are answered explicitly in his content and thus are up to interpretation from the audience. This lack of hierarchical and institutional knowledge is a quintessential element of vernacular geopolitics, but can also lead to ever more muddled and confused understandings of events. This small disagreement in Jabread's comments section is just one example of how *EUIV* content can lead to larger existential debates about the merits and motivations of geopolitical actions. I continue this investigation into internet comments as a site of vernacular geopolitical knowledge formation by directing my attention to how the often-controversial topic of Ukrainian and Russian ethnic origins is discussed in them.

ARGUING NATIONALITY IN THE COMMENTS

The question of the relationship between the Ukrainian and Russian peoples has been a key feature in the conflict. The Russian government and many Russian elites have been adamant in their assertions that Ukrainians and Russians are two parts of the same people. Vladimir Putin, in his article discussing the relationship between Russians and Ukrainians, refers to them as *"one people, a single whole"* (PUTIN 2021). The Russian government has used these arguments to assert their nation's descent from Kyivan Rus' and to make claims over Ukrainian territory (WEISS-WENDT 2020; KHISLAVSKII 2022; SHLAPENTOKH 2022). At the same time, Ukrainians have worked to assert distinctions in their history, language, and culture and there has been a strengthening of Ukrainian civic identity within the country from the post-Soviet period and especially since Russia's initial military action in Ukraine in 2014 (STEBELSKY 2009; AREL 2018; KULYK 2018; BARRINGTON 2022). These debates are not only the purview of state actors, but have become commonplace in everyday life.

YouTube comments for *EUIV* content are no exception. The comments to a video from another of the most prominent *EUIV* content creators, The Red Hawk, highlight how these debates influence non-elite spaces and are constitutive parts of forming vernacular geopolitical knowledge. A user named Dutch Skeptic starts the conversation by commenting on the fact that The Red Hawk was able to secure an alliance with Muscovy in his game writing: *"Ruthenia (Ukraine) being created with the help of Muscovy (Russia) is very ironic today"* (THE RED HAWK 2022). This comment is an obvious reference to the war and Russia's aggression toward Ukraine. While seemingly minor, the comment sparks a range of responses. First, a commenter named Joseph Williams remarks on the closeness of the Belarusian, Ukrainian, and Russian national identities. After receiving pushback on these comments, he follows up on them by stating, in part, *"Ukrainian identity developed very gradually between around 1300 and 1800… The Russian identity gradually emerged during the same timeframe."* In response, a user by the name of Vasyl Konstantinov writes, *"[t]his is a myth. Russians weren't even slavs. In Moscow slavic language replaced finno-ugric languages with the introduction of orthodox religion. And that's a proven fact using the geographic names around Moscow. The first Muscovite claim for Ruthenan legacy was made in 1721 by taking name of russia. It had nothing to do with ruthenia before [sic]"* (IBID.).

Vasyl Konstantinov's comment repeats some strident and extreme Ukrainian nationalist positions that aim to deny any possible connection between the Medieval Rus' state and contemporary Russian identity and culture (SHLAPENTOKH 2013). Such an extreme comment demonstrates how particular historical narratives and interpretations concerning topics such as the origin of a nation are integrated into and then reformulated in a variety of quotidian settings. The facticity of Vasyl Konstantinov's comments is, of course, not very high. But that is not what is most important here; rather, it is the way that he deploys these arguments in the comments to a video about a game as a means of defining the nation and policing its boundaries that offers an illustration of how vernacular international relations knowledge is communicated and used in online discussions. Vasyl Konstantinov is attempting to reset the common narrative and offering a rebuttal to notions of kinship between Russians and Ukrainians that have been weaponized by the Russian state.

Joseph Williams then responds once more, writing, *"Dont know what wacky alternate history they're teaching in Transnistria or whatever, but its [sic] so hilarious [sic] divorced from reality that I see no use continuing [sic] the conversation."* Here too, Joseph Williams also offers an example of vernacular geopolitical knowledge (THE RED HAWK 2022). Making the claim that his opponent is from Transnistria is meant to paint him as uneducated and dismiss his point as he is seen as someone who is biased based on common stereotypes about that region. But, despite its being based on stereotypes, it does at least display some knowledge of the region as Transnistria itself is not well-known around the world. At the same time, it also demonstrates some of the limitations of vernacular geopolitical knowledge. Transnistria is well-known to have a rather pro-Russian government and its continued existence is guaranteed by the Russian state. Therefore, it would be rather unlikely for someone from Transnistria to argue that Russians are not Slavs. These examples offer a moment to reflect on how the lack of institutionalization when it comes to vernacular geopolitical knowledge can lead to false information and wrong assumptions proliferating. In an era rife with worries over "fake news" and misinformation that is spread all the more easily via social media, these platforms can become generators of misinformation in the creation of vernacular geopolitical knowledge. It appears that as vernacular geopolitical knowledge develops, it is often informed by biases which impact how events are interpreted and can help to

spread these biases. The relationship between misinformation and vernacular international relations is one that demands greater attention moving forward. These previous examples have all been from Anglophone content creators. In the following section, I will address how vernacular geopolitics develops in Ukrainian-language content meant for Ukrainian audiences.

LET'S PLAYS FOR THE UKRAINIAN-LANGUAGE COMMUNITY

Let's Plays show the audience every moment of the game and the decisions that the given player made in the given scenarios. Because of their longer time commitment, Let's Plays are rarer than shorter, condensed, and edited videos like the ones mentioned above. For example, one of the series I will be discussing below spans over thirty videos, each about a half hour in length or longer. Thus, such series demand not just a deep time commitment from the video creators but also from the audience, if it is to watch through a whole series.

When looking at Ruthenia- or Ukraine-specific Let's Plays for *EUIV* it is unsurprising that this space is dominated by Ukrainian-language accounts. Especially given the geopolitical circumstances, it makes sense that a Ukrainian-speaking audience would be the most likely and most enthusiastic audience for a campaign where Ukraine becomes a great power in the world, with all of it narrated in Ukrainian. Moreover, the decision to play the game as Ukraine and in Ukrainian is also a way to broaden the appeal of the game to this community. Ukrainian is not one of the languages for the game that Paradox Interactive, *EUIV*'s developer, supports. As a result, players wishing to play in Ukrainian must download a localization that translates the game for them. Throughout the series, one sees many different commenters asking the user Shkiper how he managed to play the game in Ukrainian and he shares this localization mod with them. From the comments, it is evident that there is clear excitement about the fact that he is narrating the game in Ukrainian and playing a Ukrainian version of the game, with many commenters thanking him for creating Ukrainian-language content. This desire for Ukrainian-language content can be understood within the context of the push to decolonize Ukrainian culture from the influences of the Russian language and culture (BETLII 2022; EPPINGER 2022).

Changing the language in the game is an example of modding (modifying the base game to add more or different content and features). Paradox encourages adding modding to its games, offering a dedicated section on each games website to showcasing mods to its games and providing tools to allow for individual users to begin modding its games to increase interest in and brand loyalty to their games (Paradox Mods). Modding allows ordinary players to change the historical narratives that the developers include in the game.

There are a number of mods relating to Ukraine and the region that are available for download through Paradox's website. One that relates directly to Ukraine is called "Ukraine in EU4" and has a sister mod called "Belarus in EU4"; when a game is played using these two mods, players have the option of choosing between a number of new independent nations such as Carpatho-Ukraine and the Minsk State, neither of which is present in the base game (KIKI 2017A, 2017B). These mods are designed to offer opportunities to create alternative histories and not to be forced into the narrative that the developers have placed into the base game. These mods also represent useful sites of vernacular geopolitical knowledge. Kiki, the creator of both mods, makes clear in his description that he knows that the use of the term Ukraine is anachronistic for the time period. However, he uses it because it is the term for the area that is the most legible and identifiable for a broad audience and fits with the overall goals of the mod – to allow players to create alternative historical narratives where Ukraine and Belarus are major regional players in *EUIV's* time period. As I will show below, the modified aspects of the game are common features in these Ukrainian-language Let's Plays due to the greater flexibility they afford players who are looking to create specific alternative historical narratives within the game. These alternative historical narratives are key tools that players can use to advance their own vernacular geopolitical knowledge about the current war in Ukraine.

In this section, I will analyze the Let's Play series of two Ukrainian-language users, ShkiperUA (generally known as Shkiper) and Entrix, as they play through campaigns as Ukraine. The reach of these videos is much smaller than that of the English-language ones discussed above. Shkiper's first video in his series received 27 thousand views, but later the corresponding figure tapered off to a few thousand on average for

subsequent ones (SHKIPERUA 2022). Entrix, meanwhile, only had a few hundred views per video in his series. These two Let's Play series and the associated comments demonstrate how *EUIV* presents a productive site around which communal development of vernacular international relations knowledge coheres and moves.

Shkiper's game is a bit different than the other Ruthenia and Ukraine games that I have discussed. Rather than starting as one of the Ruthenian-culture vassal states of Lithuania, he uses a game feature that allows him to create a custom nation of Ukraine, much like the mod that I mention above. His Ukraine starts out as slightly bigger than the nation of Kiev in the game and most importantly, it does not start out as a vassal state, but rather as an independent country, making it much easier for him to expand it in the earlier parts of the campaign (fig. 6).

FIGURE 6: SCREENSHOT OF THE MAP OF UKRAINE AT THE BEGINNING OF SHKIPERUA'S CAMPAIGN

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z8b2Vdx6-Qk>.

During a replay, Shkiper actually has to restart the game because in his previous game, he ended up in a difficult position. He does not show the audience every detail of the gameplay, but instead offers some highlights up until about the point where his original campaign began to decline. This ability to simply restart the game and hope for a better RNG (random number generation; this determines what events will occur during

the game) in the game is a unique feature of a video game, as opposed to other forms of media, not to mention actual history.

The decision to restart the game demonstrates that achieving something akin to realism or historical recreation is not the main goal in creating *EUIV* content for platforms like YouTube. Rather, there is still an imperative to entertain and show a sort of "best case scenario" that would demonstrate the full abilities of the given nation (in this case, the Ukrainian nation) in the game. Given the context of Shkiper creating this series in the wake of Russia's invasion and for a Ukrainian audience, it is clear that an important part of this series is its aim to boost the morale and raise the spirits of Ukrainians. This ability to show Ukraine in all its glory is one of the things that make a game like *EUIV* attractive and interesting to an audience. Through watching Shkiper's gameplay, the audience can have its anxieties assuaged and its desires fulfilled. The modded games provide an opportunity to witness a re-formation of the world where – in the minds of this Ukrainian audience – more just outcomes are produced and historical subjugation is eliminated.

Shkiper's foray into alternative history works to offer a diversion that can buoy fellow Ukrainians in this period of great uncertainty and stress, offering a parallel experience that is rooted in military actions, and it can give viewers a feeling of active participation in something that is similar to the ongoing geopolitical conflict. This interpretation is supported by the comments that Shkiper received for this video series. There, viewers offer their own suggestions about what to do to make for better gameplay. In addition, some users also offer their encouragement to Shkiper. These comments illustrate how communities can form through engagement with the game and the desires of parts of those communities to see certain outcomes.

Comments on these videos also demonstrate the connection between the viewers' interest in the content and their desires to see a Ukrainian military victory. For instance, the first comment to Shkiper's third video in the series specifically praises the SBU, the state security service of Ukraine, demonstrating a connection between the game activities and the ongoing war even though there is no explicit connection between them in the game itself. Moreover, at the end of each video he often makes comments about

ongoing events in the war and offers the well-known Ukrainian slogans *"Glory to Ukraine"* and *"Glory to the Defenders of Ukraine"* (SHKIPERUA 2022). This praise for the nation and the armed forces as a reflexive act for both Shkiper and many of the commenters in these videos appears to be a manifestation of what Roger Stahl calls the identity of the "virtual citizen-soldier," whose ability to be critical and political has largely been curtailed due to the realities of war and the actions of the military being depicted as more important and vital (STAHL 2006: 125–126).

Within the context of Ukraine, Greta Uehling provides a useful counterexample of critical militarization developing in the country through her study of a military themed café run by demobilized soldiers. Rather than a glorification of warfare and violence, she found a place where the related questions were interrogated (UEHLING 2019). She contends that the nuances of such interrogations are essential for recognizing and ensuring that we can better understand the *"conscious and deliberate practices that ordinary non-state actors use to mold others' thoughts and feelings about war"* (IBID.: 345). However, unlike Uehling, I do not see much self-reflection happening within Ukrainophone *EUIV* content. I hypothesize that this might be due to the different types of social interactions that we are researching. Uehling's work took place in the physical space of a café where patrons would come face-to-face with veterans and the instruments of war. In contrast, my research addresses an entirely virtual space, and thus the realities of warfighting in this case are abstracted and remote, allowing for the emergence of a more typical militarization.

Within the alternative narratives that the online content creators make, the names of provinces take on an important significance. If a country gains control of a province, its name changes to better reflect what this owning country would call it. Not every province in the game has varied names, but it is a common occurrence when provinces trade hands from one country to another. After Shkiper takes the province of Voronezh from the Great Horde, the user roma_nik8991 comments that it should be renamed to something like Bavovno or Khlopok, the Ukrainian and Russian words for cotton, respectively. This is a sly reference to Ukrainian slang, where words for cotton are used to mean an explosion (PEREBENESIUK 2022). This euphemistic use of *khlopok*, the Russian word for cotton, can also mean the sound of a clap or a pop; it has been used to replace the

word for an explosion in Russian media as a way of mollifying any wor-
ries about explosions (KOVALEV 2020). The user suggests this name change as
a bit of dark humor due to the fact that there had been multiple explosions
near Russian military installations in the Voronezh region. Shkiper takes
his commenter's advice and renames the province to Bavovna, thus add-
ing an element of the present-day conflict to the game. He also does this
with other provinces, renaming Novorossiysk to Bayraktarivsk, after the
Turkish-made drones that have been such an integral part of Ukraine's de-
fense, and Tsaritsyn to Shkiperohrad, in a rethinking of history in which
he names things after himself rather than after the tsar.

A climax of sorts for the series comes when Shkiper finally declares
war on Russia. The episode is titled *"War with the Muscovites,"* again under-
scoring his desire to differentiate his Rus' from Muscovy. In the comments
section for this video, the sense of excitement is palpable. One comment-
er using the name Lipetsk-tse Ukraina (Lipetsk is Ukraine) writes, *"I have
waited for this for a long time."* Another commenter, offers their own inter-
pretation by writing, *"Finally! The fight with evil"* (SHKIPERUA 2022). From these
comments, one sees the ways that the simulated game acts as a proxy for
the ongoing war in Ukraine. In the following video, the same user writes
a long comment where he offers his belief that *"the main thing is that the
Muscovite culture should be Ukrainianized to its core"* in Shkiper's campaign,
and says that he wants the *"de-muscovization of Muscovy."* This powerful
comment acts as a response to the Russian state's insistence that there
is no separation between the Russian and Ukrainian nations. This com-
ment pushes back and responds to the historical Russification with a hope
for seeing a flourishing of Ukrainian culture. Interestingly, such rhetoric,
when decontextualized, could sound like what the Russian government
has accused the Ukrainian government of doing in Donetsk and Luhansk,
namely discriminating against Russians and denigrating Russian cul-
ture, what Uilleam Blacker refers to as the *"much-hyped threat of forced
Ukrainianization"* that is often invoked as a justification for the war (2022:
23). However, it is important to remember that the videos primarily deal
with a video game and even if people are airing their thoughts and emo-
tions about a current geopolitical situation in the comments, it is a very
different situation than the actual war. Perhaps most tellingly a viewer sees
this sort of de-Muscovization when Shkiper finally captures the province
of Moskva later in the campaign and renames it Boloto, the Russian and

Ukrainian word for a swamp or backwater, which is also a reference to Moscow's terrain and an older name for a specific area of the city (LEONT'EVA – MOKIENKO 2021). The act of renaming Moskva to Boloto enables Shkiper to reset the historical narrative, at least in the context of the game. Rather than having Muscovy and Moscow be the center, the focus moves to Kiev and Ukraine. By changing the name of the province to such a dismissive and derogatory name, he makes a statement that moves it to the periphery both geographically and conceptually, offering an alternative narrative of both history and contemporary geopolitics.

Aside from the gameplay offering new ways to reconceptualize Ukrainian history, these videos also offer insight into how people in Ukraine are dealing with the realities of the current war. Entrix places certain disclaimers before his videos in his Ruthenia Let's Play series that mention the difficulties he faces in producing these videos. In addition, he explains in the descriptions for the videos that the realities of the war have meant that electricity is limited in his location, making it difficult for him to render longer and larger video files. As a result, starting with the sixth video in the series, he notes that he may have to break episodes up into smaller parts (ENTRIX 2022). These small elements forge a stronger connection between the realities of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and playing the game. The fact that Russian military actions are impeding the creation and uploading of these videos offers a small illustration of how even the acts of playing this game and creating content for the wider *EUIV* community are also linked to the wider struggles of Ukraine in the war against Russia. In the final section of this article, I will explore one other area where the war has directly impacted on the game and its community.

CONTROVERSIES OVER HISTORY IN THE EUIV COMMUNITY

On February 7, 2023, nearly a year after Russia began its invasion of Ukraine, Paradox released a developer diary, an update on how they would be adding to the game in the coming weeks (OGELE 2023). This update involved some of the specific updates that Muscovy/Russia would be receiving in the new expansion of the game. Due to the timing of the announcement, many members of the *EUIV* community took to the comments section of the post and other online fora to air their displeasure at Paradox's decisions.

Paradox told the press that it was *"not mindful of the timing"* of the release (PHILLIPS 2023).

In addition to the timing, a number of comments on the developer diary expressed the users' unease with calling one of Russia's missions "Liberate Ruthenia." A user named vaLor- responded to these comments by asking, *"Are you really trying to retroactively cancel the Russian Empire? Are you going to have this same fervor against the fact that China has a mission to conquer Taiwan, Ottomans to conquer Syria, and everything else that goes on in EU4 that happens in the world [sic]? Get over yourselves."* Here, the user is expressing their frustration at players attempting to project contemporary geopolitical issues onto the game. Using the language of "canceling" the Russian Empire here is also akin to the rhetoric that has been used against Ukrainian de-Russification and de-Sovietization efforts, and links discussions of *EUIV* to larger issues regarding historical revisionism.

Adrianople, one of the users who raised the issue of changing the name of the mission, responded to vaLor- by stating, *"Nope, and your reaction is rather telling, as I was proposing that 'liberate', which especially in Ukrainian and Belarusian history has a problematic connotation whenever Moscow comes into the picture (except for 1944, and even then that was a process of being juggled between Soviet and Nazi Totalitarianism) [sic]."* Adrianople, whose profile picture in the forum is a depiction of a Cossack warrior, offers historic grounding and context as to why they oppose the use of the verb "liberate," as they connect the issue not only with the current Russo-Ukrainian war, but also with conflicts from the past, a moment that evidences vernacular geopolitical knowledge. These criticisms and subsequent rebukes demonstrate how players are bringing their own views concerning geopolitics to the fora and desiring for them to be reflected in the game.

The developers of *EUIV* have demonstrated awareness and sensitivity when their decisions caused controversy among the player base. On February 15, in a different thread, a user named fr-rein asked that Russia's mission "Liberate Ruthenia" be changed to *"to the more neutral 'Seize Ruthenia.'"* That same day Johan Andersson, the lead designer on *EUIV*, responded by saying that it would be changed.

These debates over the concept of "liberation" boil over into the historical questions of cultural and linguistic repression and forced assimilation. One user, Romanix90, questioned why there should be separate Ruthenian and Russian cultures in the game as he believes they are one and the same, writing that in *"Russian Imperial times people there [in what is now Ukraine] were called Little Russians and [the] language itself Russian or [a] dialect of Russian."* A user called Testeria pushes back on this assumption, advocating for a distinctiveness of the Ruthenian culture in the region, and stating, *"Ruthenian – yes, Russian – no. The russification [sic] of Kyiv by Muscovy was fierce and brutal with burning books and language suppression."* Finally, one additional user known as FishieFan, who has since been banned from the forum, adds their own thoughts about the history of Russification, writing, *"[The] Russofication of Kyiv didn't see book burning or language suppression, just the dialect of the literarti being taught over common vernacular [sic]."* This exchange shows how culture, language, and ethnicity are negotiated and debated within the context of a vernacular community centered on a video game. The types of evidence used are not rigorous or sourced, but users wield them to provide grounding and support for their positions. References to the historical record are presented as self-evident justifications for why certain elements of the game should or should not be included in it and the "proper" way to interpret them. The desire to hew as closely to historical "truth" and "reality" as possible appears to be of paramount importance to *EUIV* players, no matter how they view the history.

Paradox's public relations blunder in announcing the updates that would be given to Muscovy/Russia offered a prime opportunity for members of the community to discuss and debate how Ukraine's history ought to be depicted and interpreted in the game. The highly contentious question of how Russia's historic annexation of this territory should be framed presented a clear moment where the production and dissemination of folk geopolitical knowledge could be seen in full force. For these commenters, the forum is not just a place for discussing what a mission in a video game is called, but an area in which they can voice opinions about how Ukrainian and Russian history ought to be understood in the contemporary moment and how the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian war should be considered in that interpretation. Moreover, the media coverage of the issue brought much wider attention to *EUIV* and its community and likely helped in getting Paradox to apologize and make changes as well as bringing the issue of

commemorating the one-year anniversary of the start of Russia's invasion to wider audiences. This incident offers an example of how vernacular geopolitical knowledge developed through *EUIV* has "real world" implications that can go beyond just those of playing the game.

CONCLUSION

The *EUIV* community's creation and responses to content related to Ukraine and the 2022 war offer a clear example of how vernacular geopolitical knowledge is developed and spreads in non-elite communities. Understanding how information about the history and politics of Ukraine and Russia is absorbed and then replicated through the use of a video game demonstrates the necessity to consider less traditional informational venues. Greater investigation of such venues ensure that researchers gain a more holistic view of how the related events are understood by different populations. This article also helps to broaden the views of scholars of video games and geopolitical events through its use of examples from a region that is not well-represented in the literature. Offering these examples will provide and form more complex and nuanced understandings of how culture, history, and game design all impact the ways that games can be sites of geopolitical knowledge production in a variety of global contexts.

EUIV offers an especially interesting case due to the fact that the game is centered on warfare, geopolitics, and history. From my analysis, I find that in the content for non-Ukrainian audiences, the tendency is to create shorter forms of content that are able to draw in viewers with memes and exciting new elements of gameplay but also provide them with some information about Ukraine, the war, and even potential ways to support Ukrainians. Ukraine-centric content is seen by this linguistic community as more of a novelty and a way for content creators to offer their own assessments of the situation and capitalize on the heightened attention that the war has brought to Ukraine from audiences around the globe.

Meanwhile, for Ukrainian audiences, longer-form content is much more prevalent. I contend that this is due to their greater identification with the subject matter. The desire to see Ruthenia or Ukraine formed and become a strong world power presents an example of a desired counterfactual that can be quite comforting, especially in a time of great anxiety and

potential danger. Moreover, these longer videos take a great deal of time and effort to create. As a result, they can be seen as a player's own contribution to the Ukrainian war effort. Ultimately, this research illustrates the need to look to areas such as video games to more fully understand the ways that knowledge and ideas about international relations develop in non-elite settings and their potential impacts on how populations will respond to foreign policy.

Online comments concerning *EUIV* content and Paradox's further developments of the game demonstrate that they are lively sites where the abstractions of history, culture, and geopolitical events are made real. Debates over seemingly miniscule issues such as the particular wording of a video game event become referenda on the proper interpretations of the past, conflicts over representation and identification, and exhortations over how a corporation and individuals should think and talk about an ongoing war. This research shows that these disputes are from being overreactions to trivial aspects of a popular culture product; instead, they represent a tangible moment where non-elite individuals can have real impact on how others think about geopolitical events.

Further research is needed to see how these dynamics play out both in different games' communities and with regard to different geopolitical events. Comparative work that would analyze various games, linguistic communities, and geopolitical conflicts is necessary. The preceding research also raises a number of questions that require further research to answer. Do the game mechanics, design, and affordances present in *EUIV* make the sort of content and vernacular geopolitical knowledge produced by it differ from those of other games? How do different cultural norms and expectations within both different game communities and different linguistic communities affect the ways that games are used to develop vernacular geopolitical knowledge? In addition, since this research only considers content made in the first year of the war, it will be fruitful to see how the content related to the war develops over time. How will interpretations of the narratives produced in this content differ over longer periods and how will a greater distance from the beginning of the war change what is produced? Research into how online communities react to current geopolitical events is useful for scholars from a wide range of fields, since it allows them to better understand the ways that people use media to learn

about, interpret, and react to issues occurring around the world. The virtual battles and campaigns can have an immense impact on how history and current events are interpreted offline.

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A Solidarity Narrative: The Soft Power of Ukrainian Wartime Poetry

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ABSTRACT

This article undertakes an analytical reading of the new wave of contemporary Ukrainian poetry after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, in particular the poems written and published online and/or in print between 24 February 2022 and May 2023. This Ukrainian post-invasion poetry serves as a cultural response to the war, shaping the national narrative of the war by undertaking a factual and emotional witnessing of the wartime reality and creating an empathetic connection that engenders a solidarity of the international audience with the Ukrainian people. It therefore functions as a tool of soft power which promotes the foreign-policy goals of Ukraine, namely European and transatlantic political solidarity in countering the Russian aggression.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural diplomacy has played an increasingly significant role in Ukrainian foreign policy of the past decade. According to Tereschuk (2016: 43), its *"confident ingression"* took place after the Revolution of Dignity of 2014, and since 2017 public and cultural diplomacy have been incorporated into Ukraine's foreign policy and funded from the state budget (ФІЛАТОВА 2021: 54). Its role has become even more pronounced after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Karnaukh and Kravchuk (2022: 46) qualified this *"activation of cultural diplomacy as soft power"* as Ukraine's asset and suggested that the culture and creative industries were *"one of the strongest means for highlighting Ukraine internationally"*. A major actor in this field is the Ukrainian Institute, which is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine and explicitly defines its mission in terms of cultural diplomacy (UKRAINIAN INSTITUTE 2024). In 2022, the Institute presented 205 events and projects in 26 countries, claiming to have reached 56 million people in the media and 362 million social-media users (UKRAINIAN INSTITUTE 2022: 19). In March 2023, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs supported Ukraine's Cultural Diplomacy Month on Wikipedia, promoting a greater coverage of the Ukrainian culture in this web encyclopaedia. Among these outreach events were also poetry readings, for instance within the framework of Ukraine Day at the Cheltenham Literary Festival.

A token of recognition and endorsement of Ukrainian cultural diplomacy efforts is the numerous global literary prizes which have recently been awarded to Ukrainian cultural actors. For instance, in 2022 the poet and novelist Serhiy Zhadan was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature, and Eugenia Kuznetsova had her novel *Ask Miyechka* nominated for the European Union Prize for Literature. In 2023, the poet Liuba Yakimchuk received the Emerging Europe prize for her *"commitment to giving testimony of the war to a global audience"* (EMERGING EUROPE 2023). Codina Solà and McMartin (2022: 344) aptly conceptualise the European Union Prize for Literature and similar awards as tools for disseminating supranational values and instruments of soft power which, *"through the prizing of a certain set of aesthetic, political and commercial values"*, achieve foreign policy goals.

In this article, I would like to consider recent Ukrainian war-themed poetry within the lens of cultural diplomacy. In particular, following

Carbó-Catalan and Roig-Sanz (2022: 1), I view writing and reading poems as *"a cultural practice that ties in with both domestic and international policy"* of Ukraine because it consolidates its national identity and its international image. I will analyse the poems written and published, in print and/or on-line, during the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war from February 2022 to May 2023, and argue that they may be seen as a potential tool of soft power which furthers the goals of Ukrainian foreign policy by creating a solidarity narrative that fosters an empathy of the global audience for Ukraine. The article starts with a brief overview of Ukrainian poetry from 2014 onwards, which provides the baseline for the focus on the post-invasion poetic texts. I have analysed the poems in their original Ukrainian language versions, and, for the purposes of this article, quoted their English translations if they had already appeared in print; if not, I used my own translations. In my analysis, I will highlight the distinctive social and linguistic features of these poems, and then explore their key themes and trends, such as emotional and factual witnessing of wartime, a cultural response to the war and a specific temporality, and consider their implications for domestic and international audiences.

UKRAINIAN CONTEMPORARY POETRY FROM 2014 TO 2022: THE CONSOLIDATION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

The vibrant landscape of Ukrainian poetry, described by Kruk (2017: 14) as *"one of the most productive and fast-evolving forms of contemporary Ukrainian culture"*, is currently shaped by multiple generations. These include poets of the post-Soviet cohort born between 1950 and the 1970s, such as Boris Khersonsky, Yuri Andrukhovych, Oksana Zabuzhko, Oleksandr Irvanets, Marjana Savka, Halyna Kruk, and Serhiy Zhadan, as well as the millennial generation who were born in the 1980s and debuted in the independent Ukraine: among others, Kateryna Kalytko, Iryna Tsilyk, Kateryna Babkina and Lyuba Yakimchuk. The diversity and vitality of this literary environment are captured in several recent collections of poetry and prose in English translation – *Letters from Ukraine* (2016), *The Frontier* (2017), *The White Chalk of Days* (2017) and *Voices of Freedom* (2022). These anthologies include texts written from the 1970s up to the present moment – an era, in the words of Mark Andryczyk (2017: 2), *"characterized by vigor, experimentation and upheaval"*.

One of the key impulses of contemporary Ukrainian literature is its articulation of a new national identity. It was initiated by the poetic generation of the 1980s, represented by, among others, Yuri Andrukhovych and Oksana Zabuzhko, who, as Andryczyk (IBID.: 5) put it, re-examined *"Ukrainian and world history and culture to begin assembling the fragile new post-Soviet Ukrainian identity"*. Rewakowicz (2018: 239) argued that contemporary Ukrainian literature written between 1991 and 2011 *"amply reflect[ed] the nexus of complex identities present in post-independence Ukraine"* and contributed to the construction of these plural national, linguistic and cultural identities. This ongoing process, on both the individual and the collective level, has been exacerbated by the onset of the Russian-Ukrainian hybrid war.

The Euromaidan of 2013, which was termed by Ekman (2023) *"a critical juncture"* that changed the Ukrainian foreign policy course, had substantial repercussions for Ukrainian contemporary culture, and, in particular, Ukrainian poetry. Surveying poems written in 2014-2015, Lozynsky singled out the Euromaidan and the Russian annexation of Crimea as the starting points of this distinct period, in which poets produced reflective, narrative and documentary poems, acting as *"independent [...] voices that reflect on traditions and history, as well as their own role in the situation of undeclared war"* (ЛОЗИНСЬКИЙ 2017). In a similar vein, Yuri Andrukhovych (2016), in his preface, identifies the Euromaidan and the hybrid war as two major leitmotifs of the poetic anthology *Letters from Ukraine*. Although not specifically focusing on the war, the anthology *The White Chalk of Days* ends with the poem 'decomposition' ('розкладання') by Lyuba Yakimchuk (2017), which records the destruction of the Eastern Ukrainian towns and cities that parallels the elimination of the author's personal identity as embodied in her name: it falls apart into syllables in the same way as the names of the bombed and occupied towns of her native Donbas.

War is the central focus of the poetic anthology *Words for War*, which showcases the works of 16 contemporary poets. Interestingly, half of these are women and only one, Borys Humenyuk, is an active combatant. In the preface, the translators and editors describe this collection as *"an interpretative response to war"* and *"a form of testimony"* to *"cognitive transformations and semiotic shifts experienced by people in liminal situations"* (MAKSYMCHUK – ROSOCHINSKY 2017: XIII). In the afterword, Polina Barskova (2017: 192) argues that

"Ukrainian literary identity is being shaped today within the realm of poetical expression", which represents the *"experience of historical trauma: from the original impulse of [the] Revolution [of Dignity in 2014], poetic language proceeds to the difficult and yet exhilarating work of mourning"*. Barskova outlines several major poetical strategies triggered by the Revolution of Dignity and the Russian-Ukrainian War: the prosaic 'journalistic poetry' of intersubjectivity written by Serhiy Zhadan, the exploration of the de- and reconstructive potential of language in the poems by Liuba Yakymchuk and Anastasia Afanasieva, and pro-Ukrainian poetry in Russian, as exemplified by Boris Khersonsky's texts.

This focus of poetic texts on the consolidation of the Ukrainian identity as shaped by the experience of the hybrid war correlates with recent sociological findings. According to Kulyk (2016), the Euromaidan and the ensuing Russian aggression increased the salience of the Ukrainian national identity, which incorporated *"a pro-Western foreign policy, the nationalist historical narrative and the legitimacy of both [Ukrainian and Russian] languages with the symbolic primacy of Ukrainian"*. The collection *Words for War* demonstrates this general trend towards the rearticulation of the Ukrainian national identity. It also demonstrates the latter linguistic tendency with a marginal presence of Russian-language texts written by Ukrainian authors.

UKRAINIAN POST-INVASION POETRY: SOCIAL AND LINGUISTIC ASPECTS

Although organically connected with the preceding period, the poems written and published after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 have a number of significant distinctive traits, particularly in terms of their number, distribution and gender patterns.

The most prominent is an exponential increase in the quantity of poetic texts produced and distributed online by both professional and amateur authors. Shortly after the Russian full-scale military attack, the Ukrainian Ministry of Culture and Information Policy launched the web platform 'The Poetry of the Free' with the telling motto *"wars end, poetry doesn't"*, which enabled anyone to publish their poetic texts online (МІНІСТЕРСТВО КУЛЬТУРИ ТА ІНФОРМАЦІЙНОЇ ПОЛІТИКИ УКРАЇНИ 2023). As of May 2023,

the platform included nearly 29,000 poems by well-known and new authors. In the meantime, recognised poets published their new texts via their Facebook feeds. As Halyna Kruk recalled, after February 24 she posted new poems on her Facebook profile, so that they became *"a peculiar form of diary entries... a form of spontaneous reflection [about the ongoing events]"*, which received instantaneous public feedback (QTD. IN ЯКОВЛЕНКО 2023). Since March 2023, Pen Ukraine (2023) and *Chytomo* (ЧИТОМО 2023) regularly compiled and published selections of new war poems on their websites.

These online publications were later incorporated into anthologies and supplemented with print publications. The new Ukrainian-language collections included Поезія без укриття [Poetry without Cover] (Discursus, 2022), Весна озброєна. Антологія воєнної лірики [*Spring Weaponed. An Anthology of War Lyric Poetry*] (Lira-K, 2022), *In principio erat Verbum.* Україна: Поезія часу війни [*In Principio Erat Verbum. Ukraine: Poetry of Wartime]* (Astroliabia, 2022) and *Війна-*2022*. Щоденники, есеї, поезія* [*Viyna-2022. Diaries, Essays, Poetry*]. Poems written during the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war were also included in two anthologies of 20th and 21st-century Ukrainian love poetry, *Книга Love* (2022) and *Книга Love 2.0. Любов і війна* (2023), published by *#книголав*, a publishing house specialising in popular bestselling books. Some new war poetry in English translation was also published in the anthology *In the Hour of War: Poetry from Ukraine.*

The publication of poetic anthologies was complemented with single-authored poetic collections. The well-known poets Yaryna Chornohuz, Dmytro Lazutkin and Kostiantyn Moskalets published their new book-length poetry collections. Lyuba Yakimchuk presented the second edition of her sold-out collection *Абрикоси Донбасу* [*The Apricots of Donbas*]. A comparatively new form of distribution that responded to the public demand for poetry was self-publication via pre-orders, which was used by non-professional poets. For instance, Pavlo Vyshebaba, formerly an eco-activist and currently a squad leader in the Ukrainian armed forces, self-published his first collection of poetry in 15,000 copies, a record printing run for a debut, and it was sold out on pre-order and has now gone into a second edition (КУРІННА 2022).

Overall, the increased poetic output, which correlated to the increased popular demand, was accommodated via a combination of traditional paper book publishing, self-publishing and online distribution using social media channels such as Facebook.

In terms of the gender ratio, the post-invasion poetry features a strong female presence, which develops the trend carried over from the post-2014 poetry. Female poets prevail in the anthologies *Війна-2022* and *In the Hour of War* (11 out of 18, and 14 out of 27, respectively). This tendency is also visible in the online poetic publications. Taras Pastukh singled it out in his analysis of the first post-invasion wave of poetic texts published on Facebook from February to October 2022, noting that *"the female voice is more quantitative and has a greater range of thematic and expressive modulations"*, although it is complemented with texts by male authors, such as Vasyl Makhno, Oleksandr Irvanets, Dmytro Lazutkin, Yuri Lischuk and Lesyk Panasiuk (ПАСТУХ 2022А). This tendency in poetry corresponds to the strong female presence in Ukrainian post-independence fiction and critical discourse, which was singled out by Rewakowicz (2018: 236). However, at the same time it veers away from the conventional idea of martial poetry associated with male combatant authors sharing their battlefield experience. This shift could partially be caused by the ubiquitous nature of this particular war, which affects not only combatants at the frontline but nearly the entire population of Ukraine. Another possible explanation might be the increase in the number of women in the Ukrainian armed forces, which, according to the figures released by the (then) Ukrainian Minister of Defence Oleksandr Rieznikov, was almost 60,000 in 2022, with approximately 41,000 servicewomen among them (УКРАЇНСЬКИЙ ЖІНОЧИЙ КОНГРЕС 2022). Many female poets are also directly involved in the war effort, usually as humanitarian aid volunteers, and some of them serve in the army: as of May 2023, Yaryna Chornohuz and Olena Herasymiuk were paramedics on active duty.

The last but not the least notable feature of post-invasion Ukrainian poetry is its resolute shift towards an exclusive use of the Ukrainian language. Before the outbreak of the full-scale war, there was a group of renowned Russian-language poets who, as Barskova (2017: 195) put it, used to *"identify themselves with Ukrainian political goals and the building of a national identity, but still write [pro-Ukrainian poetry] in Russian"*. After the

Russian invasion, these poets, in particular Anastasiya Afanasieva, Olena Stiazhkina and Borys Khersonsky, have abandoned Russian and switched to writing in Ukrainian. This dramatic transformation is visualised in Afanasieva's poem '*Нова пісня тиші*' ['New Song of Silence'] (АФАНАСЬЄВА 2022), which starts in Russian and vividly describes an escape from the basement of her native Kharkiv as it is being shelled by the Russian troops. The final four stanzas of this 13-stanza poem, however, switch to a stilted Ukrainian with a noticeable Russian-language interference, and convey Afanasieva's categorical refusal to speak "thieves and executioners language", which is discarded in favour of *"the new song of quiet [which] all my people are writing"* (AFANASIEVA 2023: 93). This veering away from the Russian language in post-invasion poetry correlates with the trend outlined by Ekman (2023: 9) in the Ukrainian foreign policy narrative towards Russia in the period from 2014 to 2022, as in this period, the perceived image of Russia changed from that of *"a strategic (if difficult) partner to… [that of] an imperial radical other that could not be trusted"*.

UKRAINIAN POST-INVASION POETRY: A COLLECTIVE TESTIMONY ABOUT THE WARTIME REALITY

Predictably, one of the key themes of the post-invasion Ukrainian poetry is the depiction of and reflection on the wartime reality. Written from various perspectives by authors who serve in the army, work as volunteers or attempt to continue their daily civilian lives in Ukraine or abroad as refugees, these poems function as individual statements which collectively form a running factual and emotional chronicle of wartime. Writing and reading such texts, according to Carbó-Catalan and Roig-Sanz (2022: 1), can be regarded as *"a cultural practice that ties in with both domestic and international policy by consolidating a given collectivity and shaping its image on the international arena"*. I will therefore briefly explore the major trends and themes of these poetic texts and then consider their implications for domestic and international audiences.

The majority of post-invasion poems are documentary and/or reflective texts that record and process the first-hand experience of the war, mostly at the home front. The Odessa-based poet Borys Khersonsky (2022A, 2022B) wrote a cycle with three dated poems that resemble a versified personal diary documenting his personal reaction to the invasion, starting

with 'Foreboding' (February 4–23, 2022) and ending with 'Explosive Wave' (March 1–18, 2022). Oleksandr Irvanets, who lived in Irpin and managed to escape the town in March 2022, recorded his anger and fervent belief in the Ukrainian national endurance in the poem beginning with the lines *"From the town crushed by missiles,/ I will shout at the whole world/ this Shrove Sunday/ I'm afraid I won't forgive everyone!"* (ІРВАНЕЦЬ 2023). Olena Stiazhkina, who fled from Bucha in March 2022, described her personal experience of surviving the Russian Grad missile bombardment (СТЯЖКІНА 2023):

> *At first the shop had no*
> *flour cereals and bread*
> *no yoghurts and no milk*
> *then time disappeared*
> *which day is starting?*
> *what time is it?*
> *the count goes on*
> *for destroyed enemies*
> *priceless moments of speaking to those*
> *who survive next to you…*

The wartime experience is conveyed as emptiness: first the absence of food on the shop shelves, and then the disappearance of objective clock and calendar time, which is counterbalanced by the precious moments spent talking to the poet's loved ones, alongside whom she survived the missile attack. Similarly to Stiazhkina, the Lviv-based poet Halyna Kruk (2023: 36) captured the liminal experience of living under a constant existential threat: *"with each passing day of war/ my emergency backpack/ has grown lighter"*. Her poem describes the process of discarding from her backpack material possessions and documents that formerly seemed important, until 'I' has been stripped to a bare self: *"i'm proof of my own existence… and it turns out even keys/ are non-essential"* (IBID.).

The poems recording first-hand experience of the war are complemented with works by poets who, although lacking direct exposure, reacted to the ongoing invasion and Russian atrocities, such as those committed in Bucha, Irpin, Borodianka and Mariupol. Ella Yevtushenko penned a poem with the telling title '#BuchaMassacre'. In addition to 'Psalm to Bucha' (*Псальма Бучі*), the New-York based Ukrainian poet Vasyl Makhno has

written poignant poems on the bombing of a Mariupol maternity hospital ('*З Маріуполя*') and a commemoration of child victims of Russian air strikes in residential areas in Ukrainian towns ('*Псалом скорботи*'). Olena Herasymiuk's poem '*Я поет, яка пише невидимі вірші...*' ['I am a poet who writes invisible verses'] (QTD. IN ПАСТУХ 2022A) commemorates the casualties of the aviation bombing of the Mariupol Drama Theatre. The record of the first-hand and mediated experience of wartime in this strand of new Ukrainian poetry has been conceptualised by Kruk as *"emotional poetic witnessing"* and the *"poetry of emotional fact"* (QTD. IN ЯКОВЛЕНКО 2023).

There are strong creative continuities between these new texts and the prose-like 'journalistic poetry' singled out by Barskova and developed by Serhiy Zhadan after 2014, for example in the poetic cycle 'Why I am not on social networks'. Published in the collection *Життя Марії [The Life of Mary]* (2015), this cycle includes unrhymed narrative poems that tell life stories of various Donbas residents in the times of the hybrid war, such as a 32-year-old tattoo artist who was shot by mistake, a displaced woman grieving over her dead brother buried in a mass grave and an army chaplain overburdened with the soldiers' confessed sins. However, while Zhadan resorts to a distancing third-person narration, many of the post-invasion poems are written in the first person as they deliberately fuse the personality of the author and the lyrical 'I' of the poem to engage the reader's empathy. Similarly to Zhadan's intersubjective 'journalistic poetry', these texts are often *vers libres* written in different voices which document a varied spectrum of subjective responses to the war. Taras Pastukh defined this trend of the new poetry as 'the literature of fact', or more specifically, 'the poetry of statement', which approaches non-fiction and attempts to depict life as it is, with no rhetorical embellishments and with only a minimum of literary devices that enable the creation of an aesthetically expressive text (ПАСТУХ 2022B). These features are graphically present in the poem 'When you clean your weapon' ('*Коли чистиш зброю*') by Borys Humeniuk (2023), who has been on active duty in the Ukrainian armed forces since 2014, and, in his text, creates a visual snapshot of a soldier's daily routine and thoughts at the frontline.

In addition to recording the wartime reality, some poems also explore the existential and theological dimension of the narrator's situation. In particular, a cluster of vivid 'journalistic' poems by different

authors intertextually engages with Christian imagery. For instance, Marjana Savka $\overline{\text{(CABKA 2023A)}}$ and Olena Herasymiuk $\overline{\text{(2022)}}$ wrote poems in the form of the Lord's Prayer, but modified it in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Whereas Savka's work closely follows the original prayer text, Herasymiuk's interpretation is an emotional plea of a first-hand witness of military combat at the frontline $\overline{\text{(QTD. IN ПАСТУХ 2022A)}}$.

> *Our Father!*
> *God of sovereign Ukraine!*
> *I raise my tapik in Thy name,*
> *Unto the receiver I call Your alias,*
> *I say: How do you do?*
> *Smurf the boy and Hera the girl are calling you.*
> *[...]*
> *Our Father!*
> *Phone signal is fucked,*
> *The sky is falling, people are flying down,*
> *Please receive them, they will pass on my message.*

(my translation)

Herasymiuk, a paramedic in the Hospitallers volunteer medical battalion, dedicated this idiosyncratic prayer to the memory of her colleague who was killed in 2019. The poem is a fervent prayer spoken into a military handset flippantly referred to by soldiers as a *tapik*. The Lord is addressed informally, like a war comrade or a commanding officer, with the usage of military slang and expletives, which convey the speaker's raw rage at the enemies, calm resignation in the face of her own possible death, and anxious plea for God to protect her war comrades. Implicit in this poem is the questioning of God as a commander who sanctioned the bloodshed, human deaths and mass destruction of this war.

This existential and theological reflection on questions posed by the ongoing war also runs through Savka's poems, in which she reinterprets the trope of soldier-as-Christ. Stout $\overline{\text{(2005: 23)}}$ identifies this trope as *"a regular convention"* of British and American poetry of WWI, specifically works by Herbert Read, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. In Savka's poem written on Easter Eve 2022, Jesus Christ is depicted as

a Ukrainian humanitarian aid worker who was *"was struck down by a fragment of a missile to the chest"* (SAVKA 2022):

> *Here lies the Lord. Slain in a coffin.*
> *The Resurrection, it seems, is off schedule.*
> *He was a volunteer in the last most terrible war.*
> *Drove around the city so calm, unarmored*
> *Delivered bread through the hellish traffic.*
> *Told those around him: don't live in anger.*
> *[...]*
> *Here lies the Lord. He was kind. He divided the bread.*
> *He came from somewhere – from Izyum, from Bucha, from Popasna.*
> *He's lying in a coffin. We're awaiting the wonder of wonders…*

This text poignantly revises the central Christian myth of the resurrection to commemorate the civilian casualties of the Russian shelling of Ukrainian cities, including an unnamed Christ-like volunteer, and tentatively suggest their redemption. In another poem, Savka reimagines Jesus Christ as a paramedic at the frontline, urging him to tend to the wounded (САВКА 2023B):

> *… Son of Mary, take them away, hold them,*
> *Stop the blood, apply your tourniquet.*
> *Just stay next to them all.*
> *And it will feel easier for me here.*

Opposed to this image of Jesus Christ as an aid worker or paramedic, with the underlying leitmotifs of sacrifice and redemption, is a more militaristic interpretation by Oleh Kadanov, in which Christ is represented as a serviceman, and his psalms are equated with armour-piercing bullets (QTD. IN ПАСТУХ 2022C):

> *before entering the city*
> *god puts on his vest and helmet*
> *reads psalms*
> *filling his cartridge with*
> *psalm five forty five*
> *armour-piercing*

(my translation)

In a similar vein, in his poem published on Facebook in May 2022, Pavlo Vyshebaba used allusions to the crucified Christ for depicting a killed soldier in the grieving recollection of his war comrade: *"While death loads only blanks for me/ Your bare body on the cross towers above the hilltop"* (ЖУКОВА 2022).

This use of Christian forms and images in the new wave of Ukrainian poetry was interpreted by Kruk (QTD. IN ЯКОВЛЕНКО 2023) as a departure of literature from the aesthetic and entertaining functions and its rapprochement to *"a prayer, incantation or curse, to a confession or a memorial dedication"*, i.e. the forms typical for primitive syncretic poetry that resurface in wartime. The texts above represent and combine these forms of prayer-cum-incantation (Savka), prayer-cum-curse (Herasymiuk), incantation (Kadanov) and confession-cum-memorialisation (Vyshebaba).

POETRY AS A CULTURAL RESPONSE TO THE WAR

The 'emotional witnessing' of wartime in Ukrainian post-invasion poetry engenders a poignant self-questioning doubt about the viability of poetry in the war, intensifying the trend already present in the texts dating back to the hybrid war period of 2014–2022. *"Is poetry possible after:/ Yasynuvata, Horlivka, Savur-Mohyla, Novoazovsk"*, asked the Kharkiv poet Anastasia Afanasyeva (2016) in her eponymous poem written after the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2014, rephrasing Theodor Adorno's much-cited phrase about poetry after Auschwitz. In her Russian-language poem, she lists the locations of bloody battles between Ukrainian soldiers and Russian-backed troops, implying that these human losses undermine the idea of poetry and language as a means of meaningful communication: *"poetry has long since become [...] merely 'autistic mumbling'"; "talking is also impossible… Any and all possibilities are being negated"* (IBID.). This feeling of the impotency of language and poetry in the context of an ongoing bloody war was exacerbated after 24 February 2022. In his text 'In the Hospital Rooms of My Country' (*Абетка як палата для поранених*), Lesyk Panasiuk (2023), who resided in in Bucha and had to flee his hometown, suggests that the "Ukrainian word/ is ambushed", and graphically re-imagines the alphabet letters in the sinister wartime context, so that '*й*' resembles crutches, '*ф*'

has sewn-up side holes and 'ь' has its tongue torn out. Like Afanasiieva, Panasiuk (IBID.) conjectures that *"language in a time of war/ can't be understood"*, and *"words [are] incomprehensible/ like men, who, in wartime, refuse to speak"*. This grim recognition of the inadequacy of words and poetry in particular in the face of death was also articulated by Pavlo Korobchuk (КОРОБЧУК 2023A):

> *I cannot speak, I don't want to speak*
> *because words continue to exist*
> *but people killed by Russian scum don't*
> *how can one exchange words for those people*
> *so they would start to live again*
> *and we would stop saying some words…*

Dispensing with 'unnecessary' words is seen as a bitterly inadequate way to compensate for the non-dispensable human lives that have been irrevocably lost. Panasiuk and Korobchuk's personification of language, as well as the metaphoric equation of the individual and the word, evokes Liuba Yakimchuk's programmatic poem 'decomposition', which was initially published in her second poetic collection *Apricots of Donbas* (2015) and later included in three poetic anthologies of contemporary Ukrainian poetry (*Letters from Ukraine*, *The White Chalk of Days* and *Words for War*). As the names of the Eastern Ukrainian cities Luhansk, Donetsk and Debaltsevo disintegrate into meaningless syllables, the poet's name and self also fall apart, so that she *"can't do netsk"* and becomes *"so very old/ no longer Lyuba/ just – ba"* (YAKIMCHUK 2017). As the poet and translator Ilya Kaminsky (2017: XXIV) suggested, Yakimchuk in this poem *"refuses to speak an unfragmented language as the country is fragmented in front of her eyes"*; *"[a]s she changes the words, breaking them down…, the wrecked word confronts the reader mutely, both within and beyond language"*. These poems by Afanasieva, Panasiuk, Korobchuk and Yakimchuk expressively convey the anguish of a poet in wartime; however, paradoxically, their description of the impotence of language and poetry is in itself a creative act that testifies to the potency of the poetic word. Addressing Afanasieva's question, Barskova (2017: 196) tentatively suggested that *"if anything is possible after the war – it is poetry"*, probably because it *"has the capacity to react urgently and uses the fact of shattered language as its tragic building material"*.

This insight is corroborated in poems by Serhiy Zhadan, Yuliya Musakovska, Pavlo Korobchuk and Olena Herasymiuk, which confidently assert the viability of poetry in wartime. In his poem posted on his Facebook profile in April 2023, Zhadan emphatically declared:

> *...Hereinafter there will be music. Poems will be written.*
> *There will be many poems on impossibility*
> *of poetry after gas chambers, on irrelevancy*
> *of literature in courtrooms.*
> *But hereinafter there will be music and hereinafter there will be literature.*
> *Written by those who survived.*
>
> (СЕРГІЙ ЖАДАН [ОФІЦІЙНА СТОРІНКА], 2023)

In a poem written in March 2022, Musakovska gives her own succinct answer to Adorno and Afanasieva's question (МУСАКОВСЬКА 2023):

> *Who said that now words do not matter?*
> *[...]*
> *Our words*
> *reach out to our close ones – to everyone scattered*
> *across the bullet-riddled map of our country.*
> *Words – hard wires of bonding*
> *attached to the heart,*
> *taut cables of co-endurance.*
> *How intensely we can love together.*
> *How intensely we can hate.*

According to Musakovska, poetic language in this text becomes what Rory Finnin (2022) termed 'the poetic of solidarity', which mentally unites physically separated families and, on a larger scale, connects disparate individuals into a coherent nation, thus contributing to the formation of national identity. In a poem written a month later, Musakovska comes up with a different answer to the same question (МУСАКОВСЬКА 2022):

> *A magnolia is blooming in somebody else's garden.*
> *I want to die but I have to speak.*
> *My mouth is full of rocks and hobnails*
> *My mouth is full of blood.*

> *To pronounce words instead of those whose soul was taken away.*
> *How can I know what they wanted to say?...*

Although the poem starts with a fleeting reference to the blooming magnolia tree, evoking the rejuvenating power of nature, the prevailing tone is that of death and doubt. Nevertheless, the poet in this text accepts their role as a spokesperson for the victims who perished under the 'rocks' of rubble in the aftermath of Russian missile strikes and atrocities, evoked by the 'hobnails' and 'blood' in the mouth. This mission of the poet to speak for the dead was also formulated by Pavlo Korobchuk (КОРОБЧУК 2023B):

> *Poets have to speak for those who won't ever say anything*
> *They have to write to those who will never receive letters.*
> *To run a soot-covered finger across the white bandages.*
> *To lament in the voice of those whose voice has grown stiff.*

Olena Herasymiuk articulated a similar idea – that poetry gives voice to those Ukrainians who were silenced by death. Her poem commemorates the casualties of 16 March 2022, when the Russian troops dropped an aviation bomb at Mariupol Drama Theatre, then used as a civilian air raid shelter, and concludes with the following heart-wrenching lines (QTD. IN ПАСТУХ 2022A):

> *The voice of a Ukrainian poet brings into being*
> *the black symphony of genocide*
> *Only this kind of poetry*
> *may arise from the orchestra pit of war*
> *And it is covered with the ashes of silence.*

This text suggests that the mission of a Ukrainian poet is to provide a verbal testimony of the genocide of the Ukrainian nation. The striking definition of the war as the orchestra pit of poetry suggests that just like an orchestra is confined to a pit under the theatrical stage, poetry is delimited by its wartime chronotope. The use of the word 'pit' (*'яма'*) evokes sinister connotations of a grave in the underworld. However, this metaphoric definition also seems to imply that like a pit to the symphonic orchestra, a war may be the customary locus of poetry, for incessant violence is an inherent part of the history of mankind and European literature, which takes

its origin from Homer's military epic *The Iliad*. A similarly pessimistic idea is implied by the poem by Serhiy Zhadan which describes the end of the Trojan War, which is clearly superimposed on the hybrid war in Ukraine (ЖАДАН 2020: 92). Nevertheless, despite this disconcerting view of history as serialised violence, the above-mentioned Ukrainian contemporary poets still assert the viability of their craft and its mission to ask and attempt to answer difficult questions about human nature.

TEMPORALITY AND POSTWAR RECONSTRUCTION IN POST-INVASION POETRY

Preoccupation with time is one of the characteristic trends in the poems written and published during the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war. This concern is visible in the exact dating of many post-invasion poems, which implicitly invite the reader to place them in the corresponding wartime context. However, on the whole the temporality of these poems is often highly individualistic and subjective. For instance, the poem 'The Smell of a Siren' ('*Запах сирени*'), dated 10 May 2022 and written by Yakimchuk (2022), depicts the time that elapsed after the Russian invasion as a kind of Hegelian 'bad infinity'. Using free indirect speech, the poem conveys the story of an old woman who meticulously chronicles to the narrator her coronavirus symptoms day by day, starting from February 24, seemingly unaware of the outbreak of the war, so that when the narrator asks her if she heard the air-raid sirens, the woman confuses the last word with its homophone '*сірєнь*', the colloquial Surzhyk word that means 'lilac'. Uncannily, her story starts from the 24th of February and progresses to the 30th, 39th and then the 71st of February. Mildly poking fun at the self-centered old lady so engrossed in her ailments that she lives according to her own private alternative calendar, Yakimchuk also implicitly equates the coronavirus pandemic and the war, both of which distort the perception of time for those afflicted, who seem to be stuck in the nightmarish present, never-ending like the ill-fated February of the poem. A similar sentiment was articulated by Pavlo Korobchuk in a poem written on 20 June 2022: "*I don't feel summer. I feel the war. […] I feel February*" (КОРОБЧУК 2022). A poem by Oksana Kutsenko describes the moment when she closes her eyes to recollect the smells and sights of her native city Chernihiv, which she had to escape from, trying in vain to evoke childhood memories only to realise that "*war stole… [w]hat is left under the eyelids*", and that "*somewhere inside*

me time has stopped / Somewhere inside me death is lurking" (КУЦЕНКО 2022). In a similar vein, a poem by Olena Stiazhkina states that *"time disappeared"* for the duration of the air missile strike (СТЯЖКІНА 2023).

The subjective relativity of time is also voiced by Marjana Savka in the poem '*Богородице, радуюся*' ['Holy Mother, I rejoice'], published in August 2022. The poem points out *"the quirks of our language"*, namely "the distance between the words завмерти and вмерти", meaning 'to stand still' and 'to die' respectively, which, in Ukrainian, is two letters, and is either *"a second"* or *"a century"* (САВКА 2022). It takes a mere second to pronounce the two extra letters, but the subjective perception of the duration of these existential states, as they are lived through, may seem to be as long as a century. The poem concludes with a Hamletian question: *"What has wrecked our time?"* The answer in the following lines – *"He walks in an odd way / Between trip-wire mines"* – locates the war as the reason behind this temporal rupture.

These poems by Yakimchuk, Korobchuk, Kutsenko, Stiazhkina and Savka were written in the period of frequent Russian missile attacks on Ukrainian cities and thus could be linked to what Beryl Pong (2020: 18) termed 'blitz-time', defined as *"[t]he temporal phenomenology of being bombed [which] involves the feeling of a stolen present, caught seemingly interminably between past and future"*, combining *"the temporality of mourning the past and the intrusive temporality of a threatening and threatened future that seemed to have no end"*. Parallels have been drawn (MANSOOR 2022; THE UKRAINER 2022) between the WWII Blitz and the Russian aerial bombing of Ukrainian cities and civilian infrastructure. As demonstrated above, there is also a correlation between the perception of time as reflected in British Blitz-time writing and that experienced in the Russo-Ukrainian war: the Ukrainian poems above share an essentially Modernist concern with private time as opposed to standardised clock time, based on Henri Bergson's philosophy that prioritised the subjective experience of time, as encapsulated in his concept '*la durée*'.

Another common poetic strategy between British WWII poetry and contemporary Ukrainian poetry is their tendency to depict the future as the past. A cluster of texts by different authors published in 2015-2016 describes the end of the Russian-Ukrainian war and postwar reconstruction as a *fait accompli*. For instance, a poem by Yakimchuk, who was born

in Luhansk Oblast and is currently residing in Kyiv, from her collection *Apricots of Donbas* (2015) describes a homecoming in the following way (ЯКИМЧУК 2018):

> *we want to come back home where we grew old and grey*
> *where blue sky streams into the windows*
> *where we have planted a tree and raised our son*
> *where we have built a house that has grown damp in our absence.*

In a striking temporal warp, the poem unfolds a wish for a homecoming that has already been accomplished, in which the author, who is currently in her late thirties, already envisages herself as having grown old and completed the three proverbial life tasks. In a similar way, a poem by Serhiy Zhadan, who was also born in Luhansk Oblast and is now living in Kharkiv, captures the urge of the locals to rebuild their town after the war. Despite postwar losses and privations, *"they already polish rocks in the quarries [...] haul rocks into the town [...] rebuild the streets [...] make this world loveable again, so that it didn't feel so hopeless and mean"* for *"everyone who remained alive after the dismal plague [...] everyone who survived under heavy stars"* (ЖАДАН 2016: 116–117). *"[O]n easter [sic] morning we had no salt and no war"*, begins a poem by the Kyiv-based poet Svitlana Povalyaeva (2016), in which the end of the war is implicitly treated as a routine occurrence, such as running out of salt in the household, which necessitates going out. The poem ends with a vision of a time when all people, soldiers and civilians have come onto the streets and congregated in a church to pray for God *"to lull to sleep our inner berserks"* (IBID.). This retrospective treatment of the future is also noticeable in the principle of the compilation of the poetic collections. In particular, it involves revisiting *"recent or earlier texts which touch upon the theme of war"* and viewing them as *"an archive or a prophecy discovered post-factum"* (ЛОЗИНСЬКИЙ 2017). For instance, Yakimchuk's 2015 collection *The Apricots of Donbas* includes a verse cycle titled '*Ням і війна*' ('Niam and the war') that dates back to 2012–2013 and describes the beginning of the war. It has to be pointed out, though, that this warped temporality is not ubiquitous: for instance, Yakimchuk's poem could be matched with a poem by Musakovska (2022) on the same theme but written in conventional future and present tense. Zhadan's 2016 poem can be counterbalanced by the one that he posted on Facebook in April 2023, which describes the postwar poetry in simple future terms (СЕРГІЙ ЖАДАН

[ОФІЦІЙНА СТОРІНКА], 2023). However, the consistent presence of the future-in-the-past poetic strategy is a persistent tendency across works of various authors, which deserves a closer look.

The juxtaposition of Ukrainian wartime poetry and British WWII writing reveals the significance of this specific temporality. Conceptualised by Beryl Pong (2020: 20) as *"anticipation of retrospection"* within an *"aesthetic of pastness"* in British late-modernist prose, as represented by the novels of Patrick Hamilton, Graham Greene and Henry Green, this strategy involved an attempt: *"... to visualize the whole by making the unassimilable present itself retrospective: by imagining the present from the perspective of the future, as though it has already passed. Writers and artists thus not only drew on the past; they pictured the present as though it was itself 'the past' in efforts to elide wartime's disjunctures and to reach beyond an immediate future that seemed foreclosed... If the future will always have already happened, many of those caught within the whirlwind of war felt that there is – there must be – yet another future beyond to hold onto."*

Pong's observation offers interesting insights into the psychological and ideological aspects of British WWII prose, which could be transposed to new Ukrainian poetry and its function in wartime. Whereas this specific temporality may be a coping mechanism to come to terms with the 'Blitz-time' present, it also functions as a means to visualise not a 'foreclosed' but an open peaceful future. This visualisation of the postwar reconstruction complements the factual and emotional witnessing of wartime undertaken in post-invasion poetry, and enables us to draw a tentative conclusion about its implications for Ukrainian national identity and its international impact.

CONCLUSION

Reviewing several key thematic strands of new Ukrainian poetry, I would like to highlight their connection with the ongoing process of the consolidation of Ukraine's national identity and their potential implications for international policies.

First and foremost, the post-invasion poetry shapes the national narrative of the war by undertaking a factual and emotional witnessing

of the wartime reality. Following Theodor Adorno, the Ukrainian poets unflinchingly ask the question about the possibility of poetry after mass-scale wartime violence. Their texts indicate that poetry after Bucha is not only possible but essential for recording the wartime reality, so that, in the precise formulation of Czesław Miłosz (1983: 4), poetry itself acts as a witness. The significance of this function of contemporary Ukrainian poetry was endorsed when Liuba Yakimchuk received the Emerging Europe Award, and the judges extolled her *"commitment to giving testimony of the war to a global audience"* (EMERGING EUROPE 2023). This new poetry accommodates diverse perspectives, combining conventional battlefield experience with that of civilians in the 'Blitz-time' present who live through absence, loss, grieving and displacement. Moreover, this intersubjective 'journalistic' poetry also poses crucial existential and theological questions, as exemplified by the intertextual poems that rework the trope of a soldier-as-Christ and reappropriate the ritual functions of primitive syncretic poetry, such as praying, incantation and memorialisation.

The resulting narrative of the war, which is documented and conceptualised in the post-invasion poetry, promotes the poetic of solidarity (Finnin 2022) for both the domestic and the international audience. Within Ukraine, it serves as *"a form of collective resistance"* (ПАСТУХ 2022B) that unites disparate individuals into a coherent nation, thus contributing to the formation of the wartime national identity. On the international level, the poetic of solidarity in Ukrainian wartime poetry fosters an *"empathic human connection"* (FINNIN 2022: 240) between Ukrainians and their supporters. As the Holocaust scholars Hirsch and Spitzer (2016: 100) note, artistic works dealing with trauma *"ask for forms of attunement that constitute expanded notions of responsibility – responsibility not as accountability but, simply, indicative of the ability and willingness to respond"*. The thematically and technically diverse poems that shape the landscape of new Ukrainian poetry seem to have a strong potential to facilitate this empathetic responsible reading and thus contribute to Ukrainian cultural diplomacy.

The solidarity narrative forged by new Ukrainian poetry correlates with the values that underlie European foreign-policy decisions concerning the Russian war against Ukraine. As Bosse (2022) has demonstrated, these decisions, which included EU sanction packages against Russia and the adoption of the Temporary Protection Directive, stem from both

right-based and values-based norms. The former are linked to the principles of international law and *"a consensus on the norm pertaining to the responsibility to protect Ukrainian civilians against atrocity crimes and war crimes"* (IBID.: 540–541). The latter include values such as European solidarity, European identity and *"moral obligations vis-à-vis fellow Europeans"* (IBID.: 541). Contemporary Ukrainian poetry taps into both kinds of norms as it provides a factual and emotional testimony of the wartime reality and war crimes, and at the same time creates an empathetic connection that engenders solidarity with the Ukrainian people. It therefore functions as a tool of soft power which promotes the foreign-policy goals of Ukraine, namely the European and transatlantic political solidarity and military support in countering the Russian aggression.

None the less important in the post-invasion poetry is the theme of the postwar reconstruction. On the domestic level, the poems dealing with this theme can be seen as artistic works which, as Hirsch and Spitzer (2016: 100) suggest, may *"invite us to think about how historical narratives inflected by artistic accounts can become modes of repair"*. One of the poetic strategies that enables such repair is 'Blitz-time' temporality and the 'anticipation of retrospection' that visualises the end of the Russian-Ukrainian war and the victorious and peaceful postwar Ukraine. This strategy creates an intersubjective rhetorical space for mourning and working through wartime traumas, and cultivates an impulse towards healing and the reconstruction of language and daily reality. On the international level, postwar reconstruction has been identified as one of the major challenges of Ukrainian foreign policy in the future (KYCA 2023: 6) because it will require substantial external support, especially on the part of the European Union (TERZYAN 2022: 339–340). Ukrainian post-invasion poetry thus contributes to the narrative of national consolidation and international solidarity that will facilitate the postwar reconstruction of the country.

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NOTE

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Contested Indetities, Hunger, and Emigration: Themes in Ukrainian Cinema to Explain the Present Day

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ABSTRACT | Storytelling is an essential aspect of the creation of a community of the mind. Shortly after its invention, film became instrumental in cultivating national identity. States and national groups are keen to have their stories told in order to reinforce a sense of identity internally and claim relevance externally. This paper explores how film and popular culture help to explain politics and identity in Ukraine, examining how films are reinterpreted, reformulate a canon, and facilitate new political arguments. Therefore, through the films of Alexander Dovzhenko, we can see how the struggle to balance political ideology and national identity depicted in them helps to illuminate and explain politics today. A feature of Ukrainian cinema that is often overlooked is how films made by the diaspora perpetuated national identity, language, and culture through periods of hunger and subjugation. These films are both a statement of political and cultural identification and the basis for current political claims.

INTRODUCTION

In June 2022, a few months into the invasion of Ukraine, in a library display in the small town of Mullingar, Ireland stood a display of books and films from and about Ukraine. Four months after the Russian invasion, Ireland had already pledged to accept one million Ukrainians fleeing the war. At that time, while several books remained in the display, most of the films were already gone – a symbol of how much people rely on popular culture, and especially the motion picture, to understand the world, politics, culture, and history. What is perhaps not readily recognized by most scholars, is how much people rely on popular culture to understand what is most familiar: their own history, culture, and identity are often translated through popular culture.

Most people do not read massive academic tomes, carefully researched and meticulously cited, about the history or culture of their country. Written history is usually given a narrative quality that emphasizes causal relationships and a rational sequence of events (WHITE 1973: IX–X, 4–5, 7–11). This is even more evident when history is filtered through the lens of the more accessible popular culture, in which case it is usually presented with a definitive narrative. The complex thus becomes simplified. While we might recoil from the idea that popular culture is the beginning of our understanding, it is difficult to imagine a person developing a deep understanding of a topic without a spark to prompt it. There must be an introduction; it is with further investigation that one finds alternative explanations and complexity. But as we know, the process of research and investigation is never complete. Yet, for many who have neither the time nor the luxury for deep research, cinema, because of its expense and spectacle, creates a patina of authority that fashions an illusion of the definitive interpretation. Hence, addressing cinema's role in politics, history, and identity is important.

This paper explores how cinema produced in Ukraine is a reservoir for national memory and identity by remembering stories that make the country unique. Like in many other countries, in Ukraine the growth of popular culture in the early twentieth century became a medium through which language, culture, and ideas could be expressed to the masses (SHEVELOV 1987: 126). Consequently, film is a statement of nationhood, which

thereby is also a claim to statehood. From the beginning of the art form, national myths, nationalism and patriotism, religious beliefs, and historical justifications have been important subjects for feature films. While international relations theory focuses on the historical claims of states/nations, I argue that art and cultural claims are frequently overlooked in it.

Thus, after a short literature review, the article will explore the films of Alexander Dovzhenko from the silent era, which are highly regarded and serve as an inspiration for today's filmmakers. The themes and claims made in those films are passed down to a new generation of filmmakers, replicating the ideas of nationalism and national identity, though with slight changes, from one generation to the next. Historically adjacent to the silent period, the turbulent years of Ukraine's 1930s were a time of violence, displacement, persecution, and hunger. Much like today, the violence and displacement resulted in a massive wave of emigration from Ukraine. Motivated by the impulse to preserve their language and culture, exiled Ukrainian artists and performers created motion pictures and other forms of popular culture. But as time passed, and the events surrounding the Holodomor and pogroms slipped into memory, their films focused less on what actually happened and turned to the more aspirational desires of Ukrainian migrants in North America. By examining these films, we can discern several themes and ideas that help us to understand Ukraine, including the complexity of identity, the struggles of creating a clear narrative, and the role of emigration.

George Orwell postulated that artists, especially those who work in fiction, are trying to deliver a message (ORWELL 1940: 47). The role of art is not merely to entertain, but to educate, to persuade, and/or to offer different perspectives. Art is part of a culture conversation wherein, through symbols and reactions, societies ruminate, negotiate, and argue about pressing, and trivial, issues of the day (POSTMAN 1985: 4–6). More specifically, popular culture (novels, music, films) serves a similar role, but its reach, as its name suggest, is more widespread. Ideally, we would like to believe that it helps in illuminating problems, inequalities, and alternatives. Often though, it reinforces cultural norms and biases to such an extent that some groups and artists may challenge that (those) dominant narrative(s). Nevertheless, we should also be cognizant that art, and by extension popular culture, does not always represent minority perspectives equally.[1]

Similarly, the national identity and memory in Ukraine have changed over time. Stories of tribulations and injustices have given way to stories of more recent events, beginning with the Holodomor. Yet a narrative of interference and dominance from Russia is central to understanding the current national identity. A member of the Ukrainian parliament described the current conflict as follows: *"…[a] 1000-plus year fight for our identity, for our pure existence of Ukrainian nation [sic], for our language, culture, and all that, is happening right now"* (BBC 2022). Thus, many Ukrainian films revolve around the idea of preservation and persistence. While not a subject for this paper, Russian-Soviet cinema, likewise, responds to external and internal debates as well (GALEOTTI 2022: 253).

NATIONAL CINEMAS, IDENTITY, AND INTERPRETING POLITICS: A BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

The ability to assess the impact of film and popular culture on an audience is, at best, difficult to measure. It is very rare that members of the masses are asked about their political thoughts, ideas, and expectations in any in-depth or meaningful way. Likewise, historically speaking, we rarely have insight into how everyday people might have experienced cinema. Instead, we often rely on participants, critics, and scholars to make suppositions about the way in which a film might have impacted viewers. Because most films are designed for the masses, an interpretation of a film's impact can follow one's predisposition toward the masses. It can be understood either in connection with a more democratic approach to the attitudes or opinions of people or, contrarily, it can be seen as "low-class," mindless "trash," produced by and for the unsophisticated (BARBER 2018: 1, 3–5). As Ranger points out, because the masses do not have access to communicating their ideas and desires, popular culture provides a mechanism by which they can express their feelings, sometimes by something as simple as attending or participating in an event (RANGER 1975: 3–5). It is tempting to see cinema and popular culture as either an independent or a dependent variable acting upon or reacting to the political world (CARY 1990: 37). Yet, Street argues that we must see forms of popular culture, including cinema, as an endogenous variable; one that is not separate or discreet from, but is a part of politics (STREET 1997: 4; STANCIU 2022).

Most scholars who study the interaction of film and politics, especially the politics of national identity, cite Anderson's seminal work on *Imagined Communities*. Nationalism originated, according to Anderson, with the beginning of print journalism in European countries during the Industrial Revolution. The ability to formulate identity communities among large populations, where it would be virtually impossible for all the members to meet one another, is a powerful adhesive bond. Anderson argues that the collapsing of time and space in a group's imagination was a necessary requisite for the creation of national identity (ANDERSON 1991: 134). Critics have pointed out that forms of national identity probably predated industrial Europe, but that does not negate Anderson's important observation that stories and the sense of shared history are important for the creation and maintenance of national identity (WEBB 2018: 74–78).

In thinking about how cinema and national identity might be interrelated, Altman notes that Anderson is only interested in the origins of nationalism. Altman is more concerned with the role that cinema plays in the maintenance of the stories and, hence, identities: *"Anderson concentrates on the moment when a nation is formed and stops there, failing to acknowledge the ongoing nature of the process he has described"* (ALTMAN 1999: 198; ALSO, WILLIAMS 2002: 4). With this understanding, Altman demonstrates how collective films can create genres that contain similar themes and messages, but these genres are not static. Politics, economics, finances, and changing norms, under certain circumstances, can create a redefinition of the messages that are supposed to be conveyed by films (ALTMAN 1999: 199).

The concept of a shifting and evolving set of practices, ideas, and messages that help to explain the nature of genres can also be applied to the concept of national cinemas. Because the urbanization of late industrialization coincided with the invention of motion pictures, the industry tended to develop in major cities where finances, artists, and entrepreneurs could coalesce. It created a milieu of talent and money, but also themes and messages that evolved into what we might call national cinemas. When sound came to film in the 1930s and local languages began to be used on the screen, in combination with the protectionist trade policies of the time, it had the effect of reinforcing the idea of the *nation* in national cinemas (CELLI 2011: 3–5; WILLIAMS 2002: 2). Higson argues that there are several ways in which one can conceive of a national cinema, most notably in terms of

where a film was produced, the display of national characteristics in it, the intended audience, and/or attempts to display the "higher" culture of a nation. Each designation can provide utility, but they also point to why using national cinema as a conception is probably fraught with difficulties (HIGSON 1989). Nevertheless, films can be used as *"experimental grids or templates through which history can be written and national identity figured"* (SHOHAT – STAM 1994: 366).

The tendency to use national cinemas as a unit of analysis has limitations. As Thompson (1996B: 259) notes, while the definitions look straightforward, such a state-centric approach tends to emphasize forces and trends without reference to external pressure and influences as well as parallel external developments. Nevertheless, during the silent film period there was hope that cinema could become an international artform; that is, since only a few translated intertitles could be spliced into a film, it was easy to make film into an art that could cross linguistic and cultural barriers. But the widespread introduction of sound, and the protectionist policies of the 1930s, helped to create and introduce national culture on a grand scale. Furthermore, sound films in local languages helped national film industries to compete with films from Hollywood (CELLI 2011: 2–3; SZCZEPANIK, 2021: 1–2, 5–7; FALKOWSKA – GIUKIN, 2015: VII–IX). If film helped to preserve the nation of some groups by preserving the language, Lin points out that it can also help migrants to maintain cultural connections with their place of origin (LIN 2019). In certain instances, it can also help preserve cultures and languages that are threatened with extinction (PETERSON 2011; DEGER 2006; WATSON 1996).

In their seminal work on the history of post-World War II cinema in Eastern Europe, originally written in Czech but translated into English for its first edition because of censorship issues, Liehm and Liehm use Lenin's description of film as *"the most important art"* to illustrate how the medium inevitably became political: "The personal union between the Spectator and political power binds the film artist to politics. Every word uttered by the artist unavoidably initiates a political dialogue, every attempt to step out of line leads to a political conflict, every show of nonconformism results in political ostracism, or worse" (LIEHM – LIEHM 1977: 1–2).

Hence, as the analysis of the films of Alexander Dovzhenko indicates, film does not prompt settlements or solutions, but a dialogue. It is not my

intention to cover the entire history of Ukrainian cinema below, but rather to selectively use some examples to illustrate a few main points. The analysis of the two sets of films, namely a set of films by Dovzhenko and a set of films from the diasporic cinema, is meant to highlight two themes: first, the original intent of the filmmakers, and then how these films can inspire and be reinterpreted by artists, the public, and the politically active currently. Because films are not only entertainment, but culturally important documents, they help to shape narratives for a community and therefore become essential incorporations into developing narratives. Of course, such a selective choice invites criticism by leaving important examples out. But the work of Dovzhenko illustrates the complicated nature of identity and serves as a source of inspiration. Likewise, the diasporic cinema of Ukraine demonstrates why it helps to preserve the Ukrainian national identity, but inevitably becomes muddled in the politics and identity of the receiving countries. But prior to that discussion, we turn to the resilience of cinema in terms of preserving history and culture.

COMPLEX UKRAINIAN IDENTITIES: THE FILMS OF ALEXANDER DOVZHENKO

Ukraine is a place of diversity and, in many ways, if one's analysis is premised upon the necessity of a common cultural background as a requisite for a stable state, destined for cultural animosities. Yet, nations are artificial constructions, whether in a constructivist or in an instrumental sense, where imaginations play a role (WILSON 2000: XI). Countries such as Canada and Belgium have faced these challenges and in a multiethnic and/or multireligious society, the maintenance and reimagining of identity is an ongoing process. How Ukraine will manage and address its complex identities will be a task for the future.

Nationalists, regardless of their persuasion, tend to be primordialists and consider their nations as eternal. Ukrainian history is complex, and better covered elsewhere, for example Shilkhar (2020), but despite some important precursors, the modern Ukrainian state only emerged after the 1991 referendum. The predecessors are valid and important, but it is only with the turn of the last century that we see the trappings of statehood in this case (WILSON 2000: XII). Nationalism emerges through cultural and linguistic impulses, but not every single person will adopt this identity. It

is a process and a continuous negotiation. In the Ukrainian case, it will also be difficult to disentangle the relationship between those who are Russophones and the rest of society (IBID.: XIII).

Wilson argues that in the 1990s, Ukrainian national identity was a prominent topic of discussion, and found its way into the country's culture and art. Like many post-colonial societies, he argues, Ukraine has renamed places, and recast ideas and practices in a way that privileges the prominence of the Ukrainian language and inventively reshapes identity. But much of the material and ideas emerged a century before, when the idea of Ukrainian nationalism was taking root, but Ukraine's full independence did not occur until the collapse of the Soviet Union (IBID.: 229–230). During the earlier revolutionary period, ideas about what it meant to be Ukrainian, and the stories and legends from a long ago past were conveyed in the popular culture of the time. Literature, poetry, song, and dance were important in this regard, but it was cinema that helped raise awareness about Ukraine in the early 20th century.

The traumatic history of the country is reflected in its art, especially its cinema, from the formative years of filmmaking. There are few names bigger than Alexander Dovzhenko in Ukrainian cinema, as he is revered for his lyrical filmmaking and theories of film. That the national film studios still bear his name, and his films continue to be studied by students of the art, is evidence of this. Dovzhenko was most prominent during the post-revolutionary period, when his innovative films *Zvenigora* (1928), *Arsenal* (1929), and *Earth* (1930) (a trilogy) were some of the most highly regarded films of the Soviet silent period, and they continue to have this status even today. For the sake of brevity, I will focus on the latter two because they are the most related to the topic. Though he was often overshadowed by his contemporary Sergei Eisenstein, Dovzhenko's films were not as straightforwardly revolutionary and propagandistic. Although in many film histories Dovzhenko merits only a few sentences of praise, and in the West he is sometimes relegated to the status of an important but minor figure of cinematic history, for example David A. Cook (1981: 189–191), Wheeler Winston Dixon and Gwendolyn Audrey Foster (2013: 77), Jack C. Ellis (1985: 110–112), some of this can be attributed to the political trouble the films would eventually cause him. Because of it, he was not able to travel outside the Soviet Union to attend festivals and was relatively unknown in

the West as a result. He was, at once, a Ukrainian nationalist and a committed revolutionary expressing a communist ideology, while at the same time this ideology featured elements of Ukrainian culture and identity (KEPLEY 1986: 3).

In the 1920s, the republics within the Soviet Union had a high degree of cultural autonomy, and Ukraine was a significant producer of films to meet the demands of its local population (NEBESIO 2009). Celli (2011: 119) argues that because of high levels of illiteracy and the linguistic heterogeneity among the peasants in the 1920s, the silent film period became important for the building of Ukrainian national identity. Dovzhenko's films are an example of the dualism of Ukrainian identity.

Arsenal (1929) keenly examines the end of the First World War and how it dovetails into the revolution in Ukraine, and ultimately the Soviet Union. Made in celebration of the tenth anniversary of the events depicted, the film takes a more jaundiced view of war and revolution, which ultimately would prove to be politically risky for Dovzhenko. Nevertheless, it provides a portrait of Ukrainian peasants that resonated by telling their stories and showing their sacrifices during the turbulent period, rather than focusing on the exploits of revolutionary leaders (KEPLEY 1986: 73–74). The storyline is complex, and filled with vagueness and ambiguity. There are several allusions to people and events from more than a century ago that give the film an immediacy but are probably confusing to modern audiences, especially those who are not familiar with the region. The imagery and story remain compelling, nonetheless. The film opens at the end of the First World War, when Ukrainian soldiers abandon their position in what is considered a pointless war. Then there are scenes of the deprivation, destitution, and want experienced by the people while the Czar writes facile entries in his journals about hunting. *Arsenal* captures the callousness and meaninglessness of the Great War, and probably all wars. The circumstances in Ukraine lead to interpersonal violence and cruelty. Searching for answers to the calamities that have befallen the people, the Ukrainian soldiers and population blame the Russians. For example, one intertitle, fifteen minutes into the film, reads: *"You've been torturing us for three hundred years, you cursed Russians."*

Ukrainian nationalism, however, gives way to revolutionary impulses in the film. Soldiers who are returning home after years at the front, are met by wives with newborns in their arms. They are not the fathers, however. Have their wives been unfaithful or, as an early scene suggests, have they been victims of sexual violence? The question posed through the title cards is, *"Who are you?"* Likewise, when the soldiers try to return to their jobs, they are met by the same question from the industrialists and politicians. Meanwhile, as the revolution consumes Kyiv, a portrait of the Ukrainian national poet Taras Shevchenko seemingly *"comes to life and blows out the candle of Ukrainian nationalism"* (CELLI 2011: 121).[2] While ultimately the film is a plea for recognizing the necessity of the identity of workers and peasants for revolutionary and economic reasons, *Arsenal* also appreciates that people are not made up of a single identity. Just as we can be a spouse, a worker, and a citizen simultaneously, Dovzhenko is illustrating that one can be Ukrainian and communist at the same time. Hence, toward the conclusion of the film, a mortally wounded revolutionary soldier requests, after years of fighting, to be buried at his home. His comrades, including horses, rush to accomplish his burial before returning for the climactic battle at the Arsenal.

Dovzhenko's next film, *Earth* (1930), is the film that he is best remembered for, as well as the one that generated the controversy and political trouble. While the first two films in the trilogy focused on turmoil and conflict, *Earth* is a pastoral focusing on agricultural cycles that are endless but infused with new technologies. One of the striking features of *Earth* is the images of nature and food. There is almost a fetishization of food and its production, as it elicits song, dance, and joy among the villagers. The harvest cycle is replicated among the humans, among whom the death and return to the soil of the older generation is but natural.

The plot is rather simple, focusing on the divide in a Ukrainian village over the use of a new technology (a tractor) that would improve the life and harvest yields. This divide, which is both ideological and generational, hides a much more complex and poetical examination of the village, in which collectivization was depicted as the natural order of life, a dialectic interpretation of progress. But the film lingers on the idea and importance of family and tradition among the Ukrainian peasants. *Earth*'s call for a new way was overshadowed by how this transition should occur, seemingly

allowing time for political ideas to develop. Because the transition was viewed as natural, when violence occurs it is considered out of the ordinary. Hence, collectivization should occur through assimilation rather than violence (KEPLEY 1986: 79–84; LEYDA 1983: 275; LIBER 2002: 106–110). This would not be the case shortly after the film's release, when the government resorted to repression and violence to accomplish its plans.

Local Ukrainian authorities were hostile toward *Earth*, but Stalin was fond of Dovzhenko and his work. The dictator persuaded the director to relocate to Moscow and from that point protected the filmmaker. The director was considered a sentimental nationalist not committed to the idea of universal communist ideas by Ukrainian Communist officials. Dovzhenko understood his position, and accordingly would make films about topics that Stalin wanted and approved thereafter (MILLER 2010: 64–66). It was informal censorship, but nevertheless Dovzhenko would continue his allegiance to his Ukrainian heritage. The filmmaker would not make another film in Ukraine but when he died in 1956 friends brought handfuls of Ukrainian soil to cover his casket during his burial in Moscow (LIBER 2002: 2–3).

While Dovzhenko's film ended with revolutionary principles, the narrative is complicated. This ambiguity opened the filmmaker to criticism. What was the viewer to take away from the film? It is reasonable to say that the story's conclusion espouses revolutionary ideals, a single path to Marxist development. But the airing of Ukrainian grievances against Russia probably also reflected the growing nationalism in the country as well. As demonstrated above, regardless of the intention of the artist, the viewer has their own perspective when seeing a film or partaking in other art forms. How one interprets it depends on their background and experiences. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that those who watched *Arsenal* and *Earth* might have thought about communist ideologies, but some might have been more intrigued or persuaded by the messages of Ukrainian nationalism.

FORCED MIGRATION, DESTRUCTION OF CULTURE, AND THE HOLODOMOR: THE ROLE OF UKRAINIAN DIASPORA CINEMA

As tumultuous as the revolutionary period was, the Holodomor would prove to be even more eventful, more difficult, and darker. The process of political upheaval, mass starvation, and emigration would help to shape Ukrainian identity into what we observe today. Popular culture would observe these events, react to them, and be shaped by them as well. The consequences of forced collectivization would not be a topic for Ukrainian cinema for more than half a century after it happened. But it did have an impact on Ukrainian-language cinema and popular culture almost immediately. A small, largely unsuccessful, Ukrainian-language diaspora cinema developed in the United States after the Holodomor, targeting the maintenance of identity and heritage. Simultaneously, a Yiddish language cinema with many stories focusing on Ukraine emerged as well. Diasporic cinema can create bonds, secure a sense of belonging, and strengthen cultural affinity among an ethnic community (LIN 2019: 347). But immigrant communities exist within the context of the politics and culture of the receiving country, and their experiences will differ from those who remained behind.

The precarious existence of humans depends upon access to food and clean water, and the line between "natural" and "man-made" is sometime hard to discern. Yet, there is little doubt the Holodomor (murder by starvation) in the 1930s was the result of policies of the Soviet government under the guise of the collectivization of farming. But forced collectivization, rather than the proposed assimilation in Dovzhenko's *Earth*, created the Ukrainian Holodomor (murder by starvation) of the 1930s, killing millions of people. The famine is usually understood to be Joseph Stalin's attempt to punish farmers for resisting government control of agricultural policies and seeking more autonomy.[3] The Holodomor is a defining moment in Ukraine's national identity and is today commemorated on the fourth Sunday of every November. Faced with the prospect of complete community destruction, many worried about the future of Ukrainian culture, prompting the diaspora community to record music and make films to preserve its language and stories. While most accounts attribute the famine to the communist policies of forced collectivization, some have argued that the strategies employed by migrants more closely resemble a reaction to colonial subjugation and suppression (HRYNEVYCH 2021). The Soviet

attempts at de-Ukrainianization usually prohibited Ukrainian language education and its dissemination in cultural life, including radio, cinema, and theater, all forms of popular culture (SHEVELOV 1987: 155). Regardless, the aftereffects of such a devastating event had profound effects on the psychological wellbeing of the survivors (GORBUNOVA – KLYMCHUCK 2020), and provided a galvanizing event, akin to the Famine in Ireland, that has helped to shape Ukrainian identity since. Holodomor remembrances have become a mainstay of Ukrainian political life (STERN – EBEL 2022).[4]

Substantial emigration from Ukraine to North America occurred after the failed attempt to create an independent state during the 1917–1920 revolutionary period. Hence, a defining characteristic of Ukrainian migrant communities in North America was Ukrainian nationalism and statehood (PLUMMER 2018: 48). Faced with increasing persecution and cultural destruction, the Ukrainian diaspora community, particularly in Canada, led efforts to raise awareness and relief for victims, and were also instrumental in memorializing history through art and culture (DOSTLIEVA – DOSTLIEV 2020; NIKOLKO 2019; DOVHANYCH 2019; CIPKO 2017). The development of cultural events, clubs, and organizations, such as dance troupes, choirs, and clubs, had the dual effect of employing emigre artists while at the same time promoting national identity and solidarity. It also served as an entry point for arriving migrants into American and Canadian communities by providing familiar reminders of home. The soft power cultural outreach meant Ukrainians were perceived as talented, artistic, and therefore more desirable in terms of immigration (KUROPAS 1991: 338–347).[5]

Vasile Auramenko was one of the leading proponents of nationalism among the community and a significant promoter of Ukrainian folk dance in North America during the 1920s and 1930s. Like many others who worked for Ukrainian independence in the years following World War I, Auramenko emigrated to North America, in his case specifically Canada, in 1928. He built schools in migrant communities in the United States and Canada, and dreamed of building a "Ukrainian Hollywood," where films could be produced to entertain émigrés and preserve the Ukrainian language and culture (PLUMMER 2018: 48; NEBESCIO 1991: 22). A chance meeting with maverick film director Edgar G. Ulmer would eventually lead to two Ukrainian-language films being made, *Natalka Poltavka* (*The Girl from Poltavka*, 1937) and *Zaporozhets za Dunayem* (*Cossacks in Exile*, 1939), both

based on operettas. The films were shot in the United States (specifically, New York and New Jersey) and were screened in Canada and Europe as well, helping to raise awareness about the situation in Ukraine as well as preserving a record of Ukrainian art and culture, including language preservation. The films are rather obscure to modern audiences, so much so that one edited volume about Ulmer does not even mention the two films. Yet, the films remain artifacts of heritage and identity. While the films were not financially successful, they did help to create a sense of identity among the diaspora community, and provided a sense of purpose (KUROPAS 1991: 340).

Ulmer, often regarded as probably the best B-filmmaker in the United States, was born in what is today Olomouc, Czechia (then Olmütz in the Austro-Hungarian Empire). Himself a Jewish migrant-refugee who as a child was relocated to Sweden during the First World War by a Jewish aid organization, Ulmer would identify with exiles and displaced people and would collaborate with several groups in the 1930s, earning him the title of *"the director of minorities"* (PLUMMER 2018: 41; KROHN 1983: 62; ISENBERG 2004: 4). In addition to the Ukrainian-language films, Ulmer would direct Yiddish-language films during this period as well, such as *Green Fields* (1937), *The Singing Blacksmith* (1938), and *The Light Ahead* (1939), films featuring an all-black cast, such as *Moon Over Harlem* (1929), Spanish-language films, as well as several documentary shorts that were designed to help migrants and minorities navigate health concerns.

Both of the Ukrainian-language films directed by Ulmer were meant to capture Ukrainian song, dance, and memory. *Natalka Poltavka* is a story of star-crossed lovers, each tempted away by potential partners with substantial material means. The songs and dances offered ample opportunity to employ the numerous people who would have participated in the various cultural organizations within the émigré community. On the other hand, *Zaporozhets za Dunayem* also features music and dance, but incorporates history as well. Based on an 1863 operetta of the same name, the film relates the story of a group of Cossacks who abandon their fort after refusing to join the imperial forces of the Russian Czarina Catherine the Great in the eighteenth century. With some humorous storylines based on mistaken identity and gender relationships, the Cossacks find refuge across the Danube River in the Ottoman Empire before eventually returning to Ukraine. The film was meant to appeal to first- and second-generation

migrants who were expressly interested in their non-Anglophone forms of identity and culture from their Ukrainian heritage. The film relies on a well-known story, rather than developing something new, so that it would be perceived as more authentic (PLUMMER 2018: 44).

While making *Zaporozhets za Dunayem*, Ulmer used the location and sets for a Yiddish-language film, *The Singing Blacksmith*, which he directed the year before. While the recycling of a set, which many low-budget films would have done, saved money, it also links the two migrant groups and languages together with similar stories. Plummer argues that Ulmer is also making the link between the Yiddish cinema and Ukrainian language films (IBID.: 42–43), further illustrating the complex identity of those who lived, and continue to live, in Ukraine. The two groups shared land, villages, and memories. Although the Yiddish cinema would prove more successful financially, it would effectively collapse with the onset of the Second World War. Films from both groups would live on in the memory of their respective communities as mediums through which stories, customs, and languages would be preserved.

Released just months after the beginning of the Second World War in Europe, *Tevya* (1939), starring the legendary actor Maurice Schwartz, was the most successful of the Yiddish-language films produced in the United States, and one of the last. Based on the 1919 play *Tevye der Milkhiker* by Sholem Aleichem and some previous short stories by the same author, it would eventually become the Broadway musical and, eventually, the film *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971). A trade journal review of *Tevya* assured theater managers that it was one of the best Yiddish films yet made and that the film, although made in the small hamlet of Jericho, Long Island, New York, "assuredly" recreates the look and feel of Ukraine (ANONYMOUS 1939; B.R.C. 1939). Sholem Aleichem fled present-day Ukraine, after several pogroms, in 1905. He then toured the United States with a series of lectures, later returning to Ukraine. But another pogrom in Kiev at the onset of the First World War forced his permanent return to New York in 1914. While a respected literary figure with significant support in the Yiddish community, Sholem Aleichem had difficulty finding financial success, even among the émigré community in New York. His lack of success prompted him to label the culture of United States as philistine, and its emphasis on wealth led him to call it "Dollar-Land" (DAUBER 2013: 205–209).[6] Like many migrants, he found

the receiving country not to be the paradise and refuge that he had expected. Consequently, his culture shock, his frustration with his unmet cultural expectations and his resulting anger and resentment (OBERG 1960) were profound. Sholem Aleichem wrote to a potential backer, *"I will never permit myself to give in to American taste and lower the standards of art"*, quoted in Alisa Solomon (2013: 15).

Despite his protestation to the contrary, Aleichem's most famous work would become the basis of one of America's most iconic and successful musicals. While critiqued as an example of the American theatrical and cinematic tendency to brighten and gloss over difficult subjects, and to find a "happy ending," *Fiddler on the Roof* highlights the plight of peasants in Imperial Russia but makes their tribulations more palatable for and accessible to a wider audience (IBID.: 343). Though it is set in 1905, the politics in the film are rather muted. The jokes about the Czar are not specific and could be assigned to any political leader. Among the villagers of Anatevka, their most often expressed desire is to be left alone, and to be allowed to live their lives on their own terms without the interference of the Russian government. Yet, the overwhelming political message of the film is the decline of tradition and the rise of modernity (represented by a sewing machine) and assimilation (romantic love). While there is a celebration of the ideals and markers of the past, survival appears to be premised on adaptation and accommodation. Thus, bluntly, the future of the Jewish community in Ukraine, threatened by Russia, is to adopt the American ideals of modernity and personal liberty. It is an extension of diasporic cinema, but one that has been infused with a good deal of the receiving country's culture. The legacy of the film and Broadway musical highlights how stories and history morph into entertainment, thereby losing context and meaning. In this significant artifact of American popular culture, the plight of Jewish Ukrainian peasants is laid before a large audience on the stage and, later, on screen but it is mediated through American sensibilities and cultural norms. As Wolitz noted, Tevya became *"an American Type: the Old Country immigrant"* (WOLITZ 1988: 533). A common complaint about *Fiddler on the Roof* is that it risks trivializing the persecution of the peasants.

Fiddler on the Roof does highlight Ukrainian and Yiddish history to an international audience. But it does so without making the viewer aware of the inherent violence and persecution the community experienced. The

film paints a picture, but without providing specifics, context, or depth. Its tendency towards sentimentality and superficiality, as well as the emphasis on material wealth that is often present in American mainstream cinema, diminishes the rather difficult and tragic nature of the events that inspired the material, as Sholem Aleichem feared (BRUSTEIN 2014). It is the dilemma of diaspora cinema and popular culture. A diaspora community can provide moral and financial support, especially in terms of remittances. The community abroad can use their influence to make pleas to garner international support in their host countries. Yet, the diaspora is working within a different political context in which it is also seeking its own interests and accommodation on behalf of the migrant community. In short, they are political actors within the receiving country as well (HANEY – VANDERBUSH 1999: 357–358). Furthermore, their views of politics can be distorted by their own experiences, or their nonexperiences, which might vary significantly from those who remained behind. For example, many migrants in the United States were concerned with remunerative activities and they were not directly experiencing the violence brought upon their family and friends who stayed behind. Consequently, the migrant is likely to focus on more immediate and pressing demands than those that are remote and faraway. In the end, films, and other forms of popular culture, from a migrant community will be distinctively different from those produced in the sending country.

DISCUSSION

As a primary form of popular culture, film has helped to represent the contested and complicated nature of Ukrainian national identity, and still continues to do so. As the literature suggests, it is an endogenous variable that both reflects an ever-changing identity and at the same time helps to build it. But a complicating factor is that the message depends on the perspective of the viewer, and the lessons and messages drawn may differ from what the artists intended. As films are produced, they and other forms of popular culture will reflect and help shape the remembrance of the current conflict. War usually involves not just killing but is often an attempt to destroy the culture of an enemy. As such, military conquest often involves the theft and destruction of critical pieces of a community's art. The destruction of culture is an effective strategy for the destruction of identity, the erasing of history, and the demoralization of people.

But popular culture, by definition, is harder to destroy because it is more widespread, and it is hard to collect and destroy all of its examples and artifacts. Films, despite attempts to erase them, are very difficult to wipe out. A country that records its history and national identity on film does so with the expectation that it will survive. Cinema tends to survive. Prominent films become relics through which the past is memorialized.

This article is meant to highlight how film, and popular culture more broadly, has a symbiotic relationship with politics, using Ukraine as an important example. Not only does film help to reflect and shape questions of identity, but it is also a tool to achieve political aims. For filmmakers it can be used to call for change, remember, or reframe. For governments and nationalists, film can be a tool for coalescing and distinguishing communities. Groups can use films, sometimes in subtle ways, to demonstrate their existence and to collect and disseminate stories. The danger that popular culture poses to existing power structures and authoritarians is evident because of the impulse to suppress, censor, and destroy that which is not found acceptable. But popular culture, because it is widely disseminated, is difficult to destroy once it is created. Ukrainian cinema has demonstrated all these tendencies over its history. Dovzhenko's films illustrate the complications of capturing identity, especially in a time of tumult and change. His films advocate both a celebration of national identity and the need to industrialize. On the ground, politicians and revolutionaries were unwilling to embrace both impulses. Similarly, Ulmer's Ukrainian films, and Yiddish-language films more broadly, illustrate the complications in a different way. As Ukrainian migrants moved further away from their homeland, both physically and temporally, the focus of their concerns was more immediate and less about what was happening, or had happened, in Ukraine. Nevertheless, taken together, the popular culture of this time period creates a panorama for us to explore and understand, so long as we do not take these stories literally.

As with many national cinemas, the lessons drawn from Ukrainian films are multifaceted and complex. Viewed collectively, any survey of cinema is mired by selection bias, and probably leans closer to what *should be* than to *what is*. Thus, film is often not an accurate representation of reality. While popular culture, and, in this instance, film, can be a source of

understanding, it should not be viewed as the definitive guide to national identity, nationalism, and/or political culture.[7]

There are also limitations to this approach, as we are only seeing films that are reaching an international audience. Yet, the films that reach the international market do so for a reason. Presumably, they are thought to have some resonance outside of Ukraine. Hence there is an interchange between what a national cinema sends out and what the international market is willing to accept that helps to delineate Ukraine's interaction with the rest of the world. In effect Ukrainian films are a reservoir of how Ukrainians see themselves and how they want to be perceived by outsiders. Furthermore, Ukrainian films can shape the international audience's perception of Ukraine. They humanize Ukrainians, make the country's history tangible, and invite empathy and understanding. The dilemma for the analyst is a nagging question: Are the examples chosen representative or are they exceptional? Because we are dealing with the ever-changing nature of identity, the answer could change depending on when the question is asked, or even from where. When films and actors are celebrated, written about, and screened, it is done for a reason. They have a resonance; there is some kind of effect, even if it is difficult to measure.

Art, culture, and literature are powerful tools. They all help to shape the identity of the given community. In turn, popular culture helps to spread that identity far and wide. From the outset of the current conflict, there has been no doubt a tremendous loss of cultural treasures. Libraries, works of art, and important buildings have been looted, damaged, and destroyed. Sometimes the purpose seemed to be to wash away unpleasant or inconvenient histories, such as those in archives that document Soviet repression (FARAGO ET AL. 2022; GETTLEMAN – MYKOLYSHYN 2023; MARCHE 2022). When a people are denied their stories and heritage, it is an attempt to destroy history. Moreover, the destruction of documents, such as birth, death, and marriage certificates, undercuts the claims of statehood. It will likely not succeed in the long run, but significant damage will be done. But the prospect of recovering and destroying every copy of every Ukrainian film is difficult to imagine, even in the long run. But it is interesting to posit that, as the term implies, popular culture is ubiquitous and widespread, making its eradication very difficult. The declining cost of capturing and distributing images, coupled with humans' propensity to record, through

photographs and films, for legacy and memory, means that it becomes even more difficult to *completely* destroy culture. The power of cinema, especially when it reaches viewers internationally, is significant. As such, political actors, including states, nationalists, and diasporas, seek to immortalize their identity by presenting it through cinema. Films can set the agenda and act as an accessible treasury of memory artifacts, even if not precisely accurate. Films are political and powerful, generating collective memories. As with other art forms, their interpretation, and reinterpretation, is an essential facet of politics in the modern world.

ENDNOTES

1   Okediji (2003: viii) argues that numerical majorities provide a justification in a democratic society about the correctness of depictions and representations in a dualistic vision. Hence, *"so long as the majority is right, the minority is wrong."*

2   The Russian authorities destroyed Shevchenko's house in 2016 (Interfax-Ukraine 2016).

3   The exact number of victims is difficult to ascertain, but the most estimates place the number at a minimum of 3.5 million people (Wolowyna 2021; Radonić 2018).

4   No film about the Holodomor would be made in Ukraine until 1991, when *Golod-33* (*Famine '33*) was shown on television across Ukraine on the eve of the 1991 referendum on independence (Holden 1993; New York Times 1991).

5   One reviewer, Henry Beckett for the *New York Evening Post*, after seeing a performance of the Ukrainian Folk Dance and Ballet, called for unrestricted immigration from Ukraine (Kuropas 1991: 343).

6   See also the documentary film *Laughing in the Darkness* (2011), directed by Joseph Dorman.

7   For a more comprehensive review of Ukrainian cinema, see Shlikhar 2020.

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"Spiritual Armour": Crafting Ukrainian Identity through Vyshyvanka

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ABSTRACT

The brightly coloured and delicately detailed "vyshyvanka", the traditional Ukrainian embroidered shirt, has long been a marker of Ukrainian ethnic and cultural identity. In recent years in particular, the vyshyvanka has become an internationally recognized symbol of "Ukrainianness"; and yet despite its importance in Ukrainian identity-building and independence movements, remarkably little scholarship exists on this topic. This lack of academic engagement stems in part from twin forms of domination – colonial domination and gendered domination. Ukrainian history has often been overshadowed by Russo-centrism, while the significance of handicrafts practices such as embroidery has been dismissed because of their association with femininity and "women's work". Yet the sheer number of digital images of vyshyvanka and the proliferation of vyshyvanka-related designs in light of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, make this a topic worthy of our attention. In this article, I explore how and why the uses of vyshyvanka have evolved over time, charting differences in how the vyshyvanka has been depicted, and used, both by Ukrainians and by those seeking to denigrate or deny the existence of the Ukrainian nation. I focus in particular on the explosion of digital images featuring the vyshyvanka, which have been circulating since the Euromaidan of 2013–2014, and on the history of the creation of World Vyshyvanka Day, now celebrated on the third Thursday of May and serving as a vehicle for mobilizing solidarity with Ukraine from Taiwan to the UK to Israel.

INTRODUCTION

In 2022, Anna Myroniuk, a journalist from Donetsk in eastern Ukraine, marked Independence Day, 24 August, by tweeting a selfie. Dressed in a beautiful *vyshyvanka* – a traditional Ukrainian embroidered shirt adorned with brightly coloured floral motifs, Myroniuk looks solemnly at her audience.

The accompanying post reads: *"About 100 years ago my great-grandma Anna wore an identical vyshyvanka. She lived in Zakarpattia, western Ukraine. She and her husband stood against the Soviet regime and hence were deprived of proper jobs and starved."*

Myroniuk's post brought together family memory, the history of Ukrainian resistance and trauma, and a performance of identity, all united through the symbol of the vyshyvanka. In sharing her grandmother's story, Myroniuk reflects the powerful meanings invested in vyshyvanka as intergenerational and tied to Ukrainian cultural and political identity. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, many Ukrainians took to social media to express their commitment to Ukrainian sovereignty, photographing themselves in their vyshyvanka.

The brightly coloured and delicately detailed "vyshyvanka" had long been a marker of Ukrainian ethnic and cultural identity before the official creation of the Ukrainian state in 1991. In times of national repression under the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, wearers of vyshyvanky were often decried as political dissidents or bourgeois-nationalists.

As embroidery has traditionally been a feminine pastime, the narratives associated with vyshyvanka are also inherently linked to symbolic expectations and lived experiences of women. Especially in times of national suffering, the Ukrainian nation has frequently been visually and rhetorically depicted and imagined as a woman or girl clad in a vyshyvanka. While embroidering vyshyvanka was a daily activity for many rural Ukrainian women and girls, the wearing of vyshyvanka extended to all members of the family. The motifs reflected the geography, materials, wealth, and skill of the individual embroiderer, but also became protective charms for the wearer. Thus, what was once a Ukrainian talisman of family protection

has expanded to become a symbol of all that is Ukrainian and, in times of imperial threat, intrepid anti-Russian sentiment.

Consequently, while no longer associated with talismanic rites, vyshyvanka have now become a symbol of Ukrainian survival against all odds. Indeed, especially in recent years, the vyshyvanka has become an internationally recognised symbol of "Ukrainianness".

This article seeks to not only analyse the vyshyvanka itself, but its evolution as a symbol of Ukrainian identity. A vyshyvanka was once an everyday object that reflected the everyday lives of individuals and their families, including the complex political terrain within which Ukrainian people existed. Whilst no longer a garment, or an object of everyday wear, the vyshyvanka has become a signal to the international community of the everyday suffering of the Ukrainian people under war. It has thus transitioned from an everyday item of Ukraine's past generations (such as that of Myroniuk's great-grandmother) to a symbol at the heart of Ukrainian resistance through self-assertion of Ukrainian identity. It is the vyshyvanka's dual inhabitance of the everyday and extraordinary spheres that facilitates its attachment to the national imagination.

As Hamilton (2021) argues, "everyday artefacts" belong in the study of "world politics", but from February 2022, the daily lives of Ukrainians no longer fall neatly into the category of "everyday". As the Russian invasion brought an onslaught of violence and fear to Ukraine, *"the spectacle of the distinctly noneveryday; violence"*, became the norm (LEFEBVRE 1987: 11; HAMILTON 2021: 2). What better way to make sense of such a blunt new reality than to look to the everyday of previous generations who faced the same enemy? The same "spiritual armour" which protected Myroniuk's great-grandmother, protects her (VORONIUK 2023).

Thus, the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has ironically provided Ukraine with the opportunity to articulate and amplify its unique identity on a global scale. Various characteristics of the vyshyvanka, too, have enabled the Ukrainian diaspora to remain connected to Ukrainian identity and memory, and to play an important role in preserving and fostering the continuity of Ukrainian cultural heritage across the trials of modern Ukrainian history. The practices of wearing

(and in some cases, creating) vyshyvanka serve as a protection of the future of Ukraine through a symbolic articulation of national identity, the preservation of familial heritage and Ukrainian history, and an ardent gesture of defiance and survival.

Despite the centrality of vyshyvanka to Ukrainian identity, remarkably little scholarship exists on this topic. This lack of academic engagement stems in part from twin forms of domination – colonial and gendered. Ukrainian history has often been overshadowed by Russo-centrism, while the significance of handicrafts practices, such as embroidery, has been dismissed because of their association with femininity and "women's work". The sheer number of digital depictions and the international dissemination of vyshyvanka associated designs in light of the Russian 2022 invasion of Ukraine, demonstrate the necessity of such scholarship.

In the same way that the vyshyvanka has been neglected by scholars, so too has Ukraine itself. Traditionally, histories of Soviet ethnicities and nationalism had been discussed in terms of their contribution to the consolidation of Bolshevism. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 prompted an eruption of scholarship addressing the experiences of Ukrainian and other Soviet "nationalities". New works debated the future of the Soviet nationalities, and were supported by the declassification of demographic data. Eventually, scholars such as Francine Hirsch would address the cultural influence the Soviet Union had on its individual nationalities. Hirsch's (2005) work marked a significant milestone in understanding the variety in Soviet experiences by undermining the dominant Russo-centric narrative of the Soviet Union. Following Ukrainian independence in 1991, there was a renewed attempt to clarify the parameters of Ukrainian historical identity. Mark von Hagen's (1995) influential article "Does Ukraine Have a History?" helped shape the discourse around the legitimacy of Ukrainian nationalist heritage. Von Hagen (IBID.) posited Ukraine as an opportunity to explore identity politics in history without being solely dependent on the traditional conception of the nation-state. The contemporary recognition of the difference between civic and cultural nationalism has been consolidated through similar attempts to decolonise Ukrainian history from imperial pasts (PAVLYSHYN 1992; YEKELCHYK 2004: 5–6).

The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 reignited calls to decolonise Ukrainian history. Oleysa Khromeychuk's (2022) keynote address at the 2022 British Association of Slavonic and East European Studies (BASEES) and following article, "Where is Ukraine?", argued that Western conceptions of Ukraine, from its geographic boundaries to the romanticisation of its struggle against Russia, have preserved the Soviet colonial narrative. Her address is the only BASEES keynote to have "gone viral", a demonstration of this topic's significance within contemporary debates.

In recognition of the continued lack of scholarship in this area, this article aims to examine how the uses of vyshyvanky, and the meanings invested in them, have changed over time as a visual expression and agent of Ukrainian identity, alongside the pursuit and defence of state autonomy. I focus in particular on the explosion of digital images featuring the vyshyvanka circulating since the Euromaidan of 2013–2014, charting differences in how vyshyvanka have been depicted and used, both by Ukrainians and, sometimes, by those seeking to denigrate or deny the existence of the Ukrainian nation. To analyse such representations of public sentiment, I have drawn largely on digital images shared by individuals or organisations via social media platforms and news articles which depict vyshyvanka. By assessing values associated with the vyshyvanka, I will demonstrate the significance of the role of gender in representing the nation.

This article begins with an examination of theories that underpin existing research into three conceptual areas key to considerations of vyshyvanka: (invented) traditions and nationhood, the gendered aspect of textiles and textile-making, and the role of symbolism in meaning-making. The article will then explore the practical aspect of this research. I will illustrate, through the history of vyshyvanky, and through the ways in which it has been utilised in contemporary anti-Russian protest, how the traditional vyshyvanka has come to function as an articulation of Ukrainian identity from the declaration of the Ukrainian state in 1991 until the celebration of Vyshyvanka Day on 18 May 2022, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February.

The sources informing this research project demonstrate how attitudes towards vyshyvanka have changed, and further how the meanings

and symbolism behind vyshyvanka have been clarified, altered and reclaimed through periods of national crisis. The primary sources comprise photographs and other visual representations of vyshyvanka. They include examples of vyshyvanka from diaspora collections, including those in the Ukrainian Museum of Australia and The Ukrainian Museum in New York. Additional images of vyshyvanka and their patterns have been accessed from the Ivan Honchar Museum and the Ukrainian Centre for Cultural Studies digital collections as well as sources from the Monash University Ada Booth collection. Many of the primary sources have been accessed via a range of social media platforms and news outlets which depict support for Ukrainian struggles, often through images of women wearing traditional vyshyvanka.

In recognition of these challenges, the article draws on the works of Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright $\overline{(2009:\ 26-31)}$ for an analysis of digital media from blogs and social media outlets. I attempt to deploy their notion of "practices of looking", referring to how media can prompt certain interpretations from the individual viewing the image and how we negotiate these meanings as viewers. To this end, I have also drawn on Schwartz-Shea and Yanow's work concerning interpretivist methodologies which recognise the *"ambiguity and plasticity of meaning-making"* and the significance of contextualisation in analysis of evidence $\overline{(2012:\ 45-46)}$. Contextualisation of images, in particular as vehicles for "meaning-making", is essential to their ability to rapidly transfer information internationally via social media. In this sense, the recognition of the creator of such meaning as an "agent" of their own political and social world is drawn on throughout this article $\overline{(\text{SCHWARTZ-SHEA} - \text{YANOW 2012: 45})}$.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

To understand how the vyshyvanka has come to symbolise "Ukrainianness" in the context of the Russian invasion, it is necessary to first clarify how folk craft can be employed as a tool of nation (re)branding and consolidation of national identity, especially in times of crisis. This intersection of folk craft and nationhood can be both a deliberate political exercise and an expression of cultural identity. The objects that are created as a result of this relationship between folk craft and nationhood, therefore, warrant analysis. To adequately comprehend these crafted items, such as

vyshyvanka, we must consider the process of textile making, and, by extension, its gendered aspects. As such, it is not only the physicality of folk craft that lends itself to the crafting of the national, but also the gendered conception of the peasant woman and the symbolic representations that are carried by her garments.

(INVENTED) TRADITIONS, IDENTITIES, AND (FOLK) CRAFT

Benedict Anderson's (1983) influential work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* argued that nations were fundamentally imagined entities with tangible boundaries, their people united by a shared belief in their common community. Around the same time, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983) analysed the tools that consolidate nationalism, including traditions concerning the use of clothing and national costume. They highlighted that cultural traditions that may seem ancient are often created and employed by nations to claim political legitimacy.

Drawing from this notion of perceived ancientness, Ernest Gellner (1983) addressed the importance of a state's elite in extracting elements of "folk" culture from dominant nations which constitute the state. Gellner argued that, by extracting symbols of folk culture, such as national costume or music, and appropriating them as metaphoric symbols of the state, the state gains legitimacy, while ethnic minorities are more easily assimilated into the elite conception of the state. This process was at its height during the age of romantic nationalism in the 18th century and consolidated in the French Revolution, with new nation-states requiring old symbols to unite the people under the auspices of popular sovereignty and direct representation. In Ukraine, the modern conception of which was divided between the Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires until 1917, this strategy took root in intellectual circles, members of which would don vyshyvanka (PAVLENKO 2020: 245). Motifs of Ukrainian ethnic dress reflected the character of its population, consisting predominantly of peasantry – a class tied to the land due their limited access to means of mobility (WELTERS 2010: 28).

According to Linda Welters (2010: 2–4), ethnic dress and traditions are inherently adaptive because they are tied to people, rather than a time period or political ideology. Whilst ethnicity is defined by identity membership

and relationship to tradition, ethnic dress is *"a set of practices created in the past that are deliberately maintained by the group in the present"* (WELTERS 2010: 29). The motifs, materials and methods inherent in ethnic dress are bound by geographic resources and inspirations, tying them to specific regions. Ethnic dress can then be adapted into national dress through political policy. During the Soviet period the "invented traditions" utilized to unite republics with simplified and manipulated reflections of ethnic dress were implemented through performances of carefully constructed folk dances and proclaimed national dress (SALIKLIS 1999: 216–221; WELTERS 2010: 30). Consequently, the changing symbolism in ethnic dress is an important process of ethnic identification and reclamation in post-Soviet states.

Thus, a garment's transition from folk dress to encapsulating the nation is a common technique to define the parameters of nation and state on the individual and government level. The contemporary usage of vyshyvanka as a form of protest against Russian imperialism links to the works of Natalia Chaban on the "re-branding" of the Ukrainian nation since it achieved independence (CHABAN ET AL. 2019–2020: 5). Attempts at "rebranding" have accelerated since the Euromaidan, given the prevalence of a new generation of Ukrainians who have never lived under the Soviet Union (IBID.). With this new generation, *"new identities emerge – identities without reference to the Soviet past"*, which are fundamental to constructing perceptions of the Ukrainian nation (IBID.). This disparity between intergenerational national identities can be addressed by emphasizing the importance of passing *"cultural and ethnocultural knowledge to future generations"* (IBID.: 16), such as by passing on the significance of vyshyvanka.

Additionally, the influence of the Ukrainian diaspora is a necessary inclusion into the study of vyshyvanka as a symbol of the united Ukrainian nation. As a consequence, the role of the diaspora is linked to anti-imperialism and cultural practices of creating vyshyvanka, which act as a tie to the Ukrainian homeland. According to Klaus Stierstorfer and Janet Wilson (2018: XV), members of diasporas generally *"maintain symbolic ties to the homeland"* and engage with their culture through *"a utopian nationalism associated with the notion of home"*. Within the Ukrainian diaspora, cultural groups, women's associations and religious services acted and continue to act as cultural facilitators for such engagement. Personal cultural affects, or "citational practices", carried with immigrants are significant

examples of the *"expressive configuration of diasporicity"* through their ability to evoke emotion and memory of cultural belonging tied to the homeland (QUAYSON – DASWANI 2013: 8). Vyshyvanka as individual items are exemplary of such expression.

GENDER AND "THE MAKING POINT OF VIEW"

The word "vyshyvanka" generally translates to "embroidery" and is found on numerous kinds of traditional and household Ukrainian items, including ceremonial cloths (*rushnyk*), pillowcases and tapestries (KMIT ET AL. 1978: 5). In common usage, however, "vyshyvanka" ("vyshyvanky", plural) has come to refer to the embroidered shirts originally worn by the Ukrainian peasantry (M. Jarockyj, personal communication, 20. 9. 2022). The work of embroidering vyshyvanky was traditionally the domain of Ukrainian women, who created vyshyvanky for significant life events, such as the birth of children, the death of loved ones, and marriage, for which they embroidered their own and their future husband's vyshyvanka (IBID.: 5–6). The process of embroidering with feminine, motherly love, combined with specific motifs, was believed to protect members of the family from harm (IBID.: 3; PARKER 1984: 5; MELNYK 2019: 109–115). Further, vyshyvanky are unique to their region in terms of patterns and colours and were thus, originally at least, easily distinguishable markers of belonging to a specific geographic region.

In the context of Ukrainian vyshyvanka, the nature of their production and use as an inherently feminine and familial craft has, together with conceptions of the nation, come to symbolise the Ukrainian nation as feminine, guided as it is by Berehynia – the Slavic goddess of the hearth, family, and a female protectress. Thus, vyshyvanky represent a protective craft that safeguards the legacy of Berehynia's family and nation from patriarchal, colonial powers (RUBCHAK 2009: 141–142). The strength of the vyshyvanka as a symbol for "Ukrainianness" derives from this seemingly non-threatening association with femininity. Thus, the unassuming "folk" design is not initially deemed nationalistic on the international stage due to its widespread existence throughout the diaspora and its associations with femininity, domicile duties and motherly care. It is because of this assumption that the craft as a form of activism and a symbol of Ukrainian identity is ever more potent.

Rozsika Parker's (1984) *The Subversive Stitch* remains one of the most influential assessments of how women have utilised traditionally feminine, domestic pursuits such as embroidery to critique and undermine the patriarchy. Parker (IBID.: 1–5) asserts that embroidery has been traditionally used to instruct women in feminine ideals and expectations and that, as such, the act of embroidery is not perceived as art, but as *"the expression of femininity"*. Consequently, the traditional role of women in embroidery and the domestic realm lends itself to discussions of gendered labour divisions.

Parker's volume caused an eruption in feminist and material culture scholarship. Subsequent works such as Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's (2001: 7–8) *The Age of Homespun* presented material culture as a two-tiered epistemic process: that of the individual, and that of her culture. As such, the mother who creates, weaves and embroiders, carries not only her individual expressions, but her culture and meanings imbued within it. Additionally, Judy Attfield's (2000: 6) *Wild Things* argued that the designed objects of material culture differ from other widely studied objects in that they often are not created for commercial use but instead are significant markers of the *"culture of everyday life"*. More recently, Maureen Goggin's (2009) has argued that, above all, elements of material culture, textile and needlecraft have had the largest influence on culture, politics and economics.

The role of female nationalists in embroidering vyshyvanky, expanding knowledge of the craft and creating new patterns has largely been a domestic, and consequently private, albeit widespread, activity (GRUWELL 2022; RURYK 1982: 11). However, as Gruwell's (2022: 73) interpretation of "craftivism" theory suggests, the large-scale wearing of vyshyvanka in times of dissidence is representative of the mobilisation of domestic activity, where it is transformed from an activity of the private, rural sphere into one of the public (and more recently, the international) domain via televised protest, visibility at displays of nationalism (i.e. Eurovision), and online sales of vyshyvanka. In addition, the wearing of vyshyvanka in times of dissidence defines the Ukrainian shared experience as ancient, but also, through its link to pagan deities, untouchable and beyond human understanding (IBID.: 74–75).

Embroidery and other forms of gendered craft have been used elsewhere as protest, vehicles for storytelling, (re)gaining of agency, and

a means of processing complex emotions such as grief. One example is the female embroiderers of Chile, who created *arpilleras* (embroidered pictures made from leftover factory fabrics on burlap flour sacks) as a means to support themselves financially after the disappearances of their male family members under the Pinochet dictatorship from the 1970s (LADUKE 1983: 33–34). Whilst Chilean women have traditionally practiced detailed embroideries, the *arpilleras* are politically motivated, and come from a place of repression through which the act of creating embroidered artworks as both an individual and a community activity provides women with agency and a space in which to protest (IBID.: 40).

Comparatively, it was not until the early 2010s that the making of "things" started to appear in international relations and security studies, with particular focus given to the representative and symbolic potentials of productive processes. The so-called "making point of view" (BUNN 2011) was understood as a way to interact with man-made objects as sites of potential embodied meaning. Through these interpretations, international crises could be examined from the perspectives of individuals and collective civilian groups, and to analyse highly politicised interactions of civilian social groups during war time. These "small happenings" (ATKINSON 2013: 60) of everyday civilian life are part of broader wartime experiences and are explored by Joanna Tidy (2019) in relation to "martial craft labour", or the wartime manufacturing of "stuffs" for defense forces. Tidy examines this in relation to the notion of "martial politics" (HOWELL 2018: 118), the "war-like relations" and violence against social groups deemed "a threat to civil order" in both peace and wartime (TIDY 2019). Through this perspective, Tidy (IBID.: 221–222) argues that the civilian production of crafts for military use in times of conflict and the crafted items themselves carry an emotional value which *"obscure[s] violence, normalize[s] war, [and] abstract[s] the military to a seemingly apolitical cause"*, which can then be used as a tool by political actors to mobilise the civilian population for the war effort.

From here, the production of wartime textile objects can be mobilised in order to clarify both state and community narratives based on lived experiences of trauma (ANDRÄ 2022: 497). Moreover, the process of encapsulating the abstract within the crafted renders made objects to heavy symbolic inscription and political analysis.

SYMBOLS AND MEANING-MAKING

Influentially, Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1989: 7) identified in their *Women-Nation-State* that women are inherently tied to the state through processes of symbolism and reproduction. In traditional patriarchal societies, feminine strength comes from the ability to reproduce and rear children, and as a result, women are inherently vulnerable. The nation must, therefore, be protected at all costs, and one must be willing to die for their nation. An assault on state sovereignty is a defilement of her purity, as the use of sexual violence against women in wartime is a direct affront to the strength and purity of the nation and the dignity of its men (IBID.: 7). The depiction of Ukrainian women in vyshyvanka during an assault on the state's sovereignty is consequently a twofold representation of the Ukrainian state.

The contemporary depictions of Ukrainian women are reminiscent of Cathy Frierson's (1993: 161) distinction between portrayals of the Russian peasant woman, *baba*, in the 19th century as *"virago, eve, or victim"*. The *baba "almost always appeared as a Janus-like figure"*, whose utility was tied to her position within her patriarchal family structure (IBID.: 162). While depictions of the Ukrainian female in her contexts are different from those of her Russian counterparts of the 19th century, the tripartite distinction based on moral worth, role within the patriarchal familial structure, and the extent of agency, is a common theme, as will be explained.

That said, artistic representations of Ukrainian women in vyshyvanka were still used to evoke nationalist sentiments during the Euromaidan. In contemporary Ukraine, these images represent a merging of the old and new perceptions of femininity; they have agency in addition to the traditional past of Ukraine. In doing so, they hold some of the traditional cyclical meanings of vyshyvanka: as a means of preserving Ukrainian lineage and tradition, and as guarding the legacy of Ukraine by protecting its political sovereignty.

The vyshyvanka as a handcrafted garment would seemingly be the perfect candidate for projects of martial craft labour, yet this has not been the case in the recent conflict. Rather than a tool for abstraction of violence, the vyshyvanka has served as a reminder of Ukrainian identity in the face of it. When, in 2014, Ukrainian soldiers were gifted vyshyvanka

by a charity to wear in their fight against Russian forces in Crimea, their images were abstractions to the Ukrainian people, being separated from their traditionally domestic context. Now, the Ukrainian people are caught in the midst of violence at home, where abstraction of the same scale is not possible. As a result, images shared internationally distinguish support for the Ukrainian people, retaining some of the traditional meanings associated with the wearing of vyshyvanka, namely seeing them as talismans of protection, albeit with newer national connotations, and as an articulation of "Ukrainianness".

There are many parallels between Ukrainian and Palestinian embroiderers and their articulations of national identity. As Dedman (2023) explains, Palestinian rural peasant women were visibly identifiable by their region-specific embroidery. Specific embroidered garments, too, formed part of social rituals associated with womanhood, such as marriage, or the birth of a child (IBID.). Significantly, Dedman argues that Palestinian embroidery became entangled in the national imagination of the Palestinian people following the Nakba in 1948. In this instance, Palestinian embroidery became tantamount to the recognition of Palestinian existence and legitimacy in the region, subsequently becoming a symbol of national assertion amongst trauma, death, and displacement. Palestinian (and Ukrainian) embroidery therefore evolved from the individual, familial, and community level to the national and international sphere through the *"politicisation of embroidery"* (HAMILTON 2021; DEDMAN 2023: 103).

Academic scholarship must not only acknowledge Hamilton's assertion of "everyday artefacts" as "sources of knowledge about world politics" in recognition of their aforementioned significance to politics and conflict, but also recognise that the making of such artefacts are in themselves "practices of world politics", and so are essential to understanding the latter. This is especially relevant to Ukrainian embroideries, which not only serve as a material object of symbolic significance but demonstrate the lived experience of an individual responding to their political reality.

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE VYSHYVANKA

Ukrainian embroidery has a rich history as part of a broader Slavic practice of pagan talisman protection. Claims have been made that the

symbolism in vyshyvanka can be traced back to neolithic settlements as part of a larger nationalist discourse (KUTSENKO 1977: 1). Evidence of vyshyvanka, according to Maria Kutsenko (IBID.), dates at least from the fifth century. Claims such as these relate to Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983: 16–17) notion of invented traditions, whereby the process includes three stages: the "rewriting" of historic origins, the "artificial creation" of new ethnic symbols, and finally, the acceptance of new symbols by other regions within the state. Whilst vyshyvanka is not an invented tradition in the sense that embroidery has a long history in Eastern Europe, the dubious nature of Kutsenko's claim that the patterns evident in vyshyvanka are neolithic in origin adheres to Hobsbawm and Ranger's first stage of "rewriting" historic origins. Through claiming cultural heritage to an unnamed neolithic people, vyshyvanka as ethnic dress becomes part invented history of the Ukrainian state.

FIGURE 1: FRONT AND DETAILED VIEWS OF VYSHYVANKA. RIGHT: A VYSHYVANKA FROM THE POLTAVA REGION. COURTESY OF THE UKRAINIAN MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA

FIGURE 2: DETAILS FROM VYSHYVANKA DEMONSTRATING THE REPETITION OF MOTIFS INSPIRED BY NATURE. COURTESY OF THE UKRAINIAN MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA

FIGURE 3: A SELECTION OF VYSHYVANKA FROM THE UKRAINIAN MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA

FIGURE 4: UKRAINIANS DRESSED IN TRADITIONAL DRESS, INCLUDING VYSHVYANKA. COURTESY OF THE UKRAINIAN MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA

Prior to 19th century Ukraine, vyshyvanka were part of the daily attire for many rural men and women. The making of vyshyvanka itself was an evening activity, especially in the wintertime, when the days in the fields were cut short, and the women and their daughters would work a little on their embroidery each evening by candlelight (M. Jarockyj, personal communication, 20. 9. 2022). By the end of the winter, it was expected that a new blouse, shirt, *rushnyk*, or another embroidered item would have been completed.

There were three major developments in modern Ukrainian embroidery. The first was the development of the cross-stitch from Western Europe by the end of the 19th century, which was a simpler form of embroidery

requiring less skill (KUTSENKO 1977: 3). The second major development was the introduction of aniline dyes to embroidery threads in the early 20th century, which enabled brighter and less traditional colours (IBID.: 2; RURYK 1982: 19). Prior to the First World War, Ukrainian embroidery threads relied heavily on vegetable dyes and were consequently dependent on the produce of the geographic region from which they originated (IBID.: 19). As such, each regional type of Ukrainian embroidery, whilst following certain common characteristics, was traditionally unique to its geographic region, differing from other types in pattern, material and colour. At times the patterns of vyshyvanka were so distinguishable that they varied from town to town. Regions with more temperate climates generally demonstrated patterns that were less geometric than the Ukrainian standard, instead favouring floral motifs and stylized examples of fauna. The third major development came with the emergence of machine embroidered vyshyvanka with the advent and dissemination of the Singer sewing machine in the 1850s, which has remained a popular alternative to hand embroidery (CHOMITZKY 2020: 33; SMITH 2010: 45).

From the 19th century, the wearing of vyshyvanka, especially in urban areas of Kharkiv and Kyiv, associated the wearer with the Ukrainian land and, irrevocably, the Ukrainian state. Consequently, in the idealization of the Ukrainian state, peasant folk dress in its various geographical manifestations was the ideal candidate for the 19th century Ukrainian nationalist intelligentsia. Poets such as Taras Shevchenko and Ivan Franko and academics such as Olena Pchilka were strong supporters of the Ukrainian national movement in the 19th century and were frequently seen wearing vyshyvanka as part of their daily attire, thereby utilising vyshyvanka as an identifiable feature of Ukrainian ethnic culture (PAVLENKO 2020: 249–251). These figures have since been remembered as symbols of Ukrainian intellectual life and autonomy, distancing Ukraine from its Russian imperial classification as "Little Russia".

The practices around the production of vyshyvanka can be read as a kind of barometer reflecting the changeable nature of the Soviet nationalities policy. From the beginning of the Soviet Union, and Lenin's *korenizatsiia* (indigenisation) policies, member states of the Soviet Union, or "nationalities", were encouraged to engage in their own ethnic cultures (SUNY 1993: 103). However, by the late 1920s, Stalin's reversal of the indigenization

policies and return to the Russification of the Soviet nationalities had taken its toll on Ukrainian ethnography and also on the production of traditional vyshyvanka. In conjunction with the Russification policies, Stalin's purges of cultural elites also greatly affected institutions of Ukrainian culture; the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences was brought *"almost to a standstill"*, and ethnographic museums were closed (ENCYCLOPEDIA OF UKRAINE 1984: 486). Instead, the Russian Museum's Ethnographic Department now acted as *"a nexus of Soviet cultural production and state-building"* (HIRSCH 2005: 188–190) responsible for smoothing over the ideological pitfalls between the "backward" past of the nationalities and Soviet advancement. The exhibitions presented the difficulties in achieving the Communist goal as the result of those *"living 'survivals' (perezhitki)"* of the tsarist regime (IBID.: 190).

Paradoxically, the Stalinist repressions of the historicization of Ukrainian culture in museums brought about an increase in tightly controlled Ukrainian fashion houses which produced machine-made embroideries. These embroideries were often kitsch imitations of the traditional folk vyshyvanka: in reducing the traditionally rich process of creating vyshyvanka to a manufactured and depersonalized output of labour (KORNIIENKO 2021: 499–500), the folk element of Ukrainian culture was reduced to an expression of tokenistic Soviet realism.

The value of handmade vyshyvanka remained strong amongst members of the Ukrainian community in the countryside, with some attempting to trade their vyshyvanka for food during the 1932–1933 famine (MATTINGLY 2020: 197). Others would sell their vyshyvanka in the immediate post-Second World War period in the hopes of affording safe passage outside of the Soviet Union (CHORKAWYJ N.D.: 1).

Vyshyvanka continued to hold a contested/complex position within nationalist expression throughout the Soviet period. By the 1960s and Khrushchev's cultural thaw, a number of resistance movements employed ethnographic symbols and vyshyvanka to demonstrate their allegiance to an independent Ukrainian state. The most famous of these groups was the "Sixtiers" (*shistdesiatnyky*), who, like the previous generations of Ukrainian nationalists in the 19th century and 1920s, primarily consisted of intellectuals and artists. Motifs which would have traditionally been incorporated into vyshyvanka found their way into their paintings and fashion designs

(LODZYNSKA 2021). Despite their loyalty to their Ukrainian identity, the Sixties differed from their dissident predecessors, as their existence was dependent on policies of perceived openness and cultural self-expression (TROMLY 2009: 610). That is to say, the development of the Sixties was inherently linked to the relaxation of cultural policies under Khrushchev regardless of the full extent to which the authorities in Moscow intended to support national-ist expression. As such, vyshyvanka, as a symbol of Ukrainian identity in a period of performative allowances, carried seemingly paradoxical mes-sages of dissent and homogeneity. Such contradictions were compounded by Khrushchev's own frequent donning of vyshyvanka in an attempt to appeal to Ukrainian Soviets through cultural proximity (BENNICH-BJORKMAN – GRYBAUSKAS 2022: 176). Russia and Ukraine were brothers, after all, and as an ethnic Russian born near the Ukrainian border, Khrushchev was well equipped to co-opt the vyshyvanka as a political tool.

On 24 August, 1991 Ukraine officially declared independence from the Soviet Union. However, the new Ukrainian leadership struggled to ar-ticulate the parameters of a contemporary Ukrainian cultural identity after the large-scale cultural suppression under the Soviet Union. The teaching of traditional meanings associated with vyshyvanka and the practice of embroidering more generally had suffered under the USSR. Vyshyvanka designs remained mass-produced and tokenistic compared to their tradi-tional symbolism. Officially, Ukraine had won its independence, which vy-shyvanka had symbolised the pursuit of, but in practice, Ukraine's post-in-dependence instability would enable Russian influence in its political management, resulting in a series of nation-wide large-scale protests, in-cluding the Orange Revolution in 2004 and the Euromaidan protests from November 2013 to February 2014. Thus, by the time of the Euromaidan protests and the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, the first overt breach of Ukrainian sovereignty since independence, Ukrainians once again looked to their cultural heritage of resistance through vyshyvanka.

Contemporary vyshyvanka remain usually mass-produced or ma-chine-made, and many of the ritualistic aspects have been abandoned (though to some extent these have been undergoing a revival and re-inven-tion during the current war). Despite the shift from traditional modes of production and consumption, however, vyshyvanka in Ukrainian society as symbols of safety and belonging on familial, geographic, and cultural

levels, retain their significance in the understanding of Ukrainian national identity. Additionally, as a cultural object, vyshyvanky has a significant relationship with notions of lineage and legacy. So too, through the developments of Ukrainian national self-determination in the past century, the wearing of the vyshyvanka protects not only lineage, but national legacy.

CONTEMPORARY FORMATION OF THE VYSHYVANKA

As they are now often bought and machine-made, the production of vyshyvanka in the post-Soviet period no longer lies in the domestic sphere. Yet, vyshyvanky are still widely associated with femininity, evident in artistic depictions associated with the role of Berehynia and the manifestation of the Ukrainian nation. As such, the presentation of vyshyvanka is still largely connected with the feminine, yet as conceptions of femininity change, such as through a loss of dependency on the domestic sphere, the values associated with vyshyvanka change also. Additionally, the post-independence increase in rhetoric emphasizing the matriarchal nature of Ukrainian culture has arguably been the result of an attempt at distinguishing between Ukrainian and Russian cultures. One approach has involved defining the Ukrainian nation as spiritually matriarchal and contrasting it to the notion of Russia as *'"more patriarchal"'* and imperial (ZHURZHENKO 2004: 30–31).

In light of the dominant national narratives deployed during the Orange Revolution in 2004, activism carried out by women largely resembled the early forms of the 19th century women's organizations, being dependent on the family as the unit of power in which to exercise resistance against the oppressive state (HRYCAK 2007: 211). This is emblematic of Naples' (1998) theory of "activist mothering", in which female dissidents refrain from actively participating in protests, instead focusing on supporting male activists by providing them with food, clean clothes, and shelter (Ibid.).

By the time of the Euromaidan protests, women were still participating in forms of "activist mothering", adopting maternal domestic roles in the *sich* on the Maidan (KROMEYCHUK 2016: 19). In this way, protest spaces were "regulated" by the male protesters (IBID.: 19–23). This time, however, there were calls by some to allow women the opportunity to actively participate in the protests. As soon as the protests turned violent, however, women

were forced back into domestic roles (IBID.: 13–14). Those who protested the distinction of activism based on gender were seen as subverting the main purpose of the protests and undermining the overall goal (IBID.).

It is in the context of these developments in Ukrainian women's roles in protests that international depictions of vyshyvanka regained their potency in the consolidation of national narratives. As Ukraine "rebrands" itself and demonstrates autonomy from Russia, the vyshyvanka has developed along with the representation of Ukrainian women. The figure of the Berehynia, as the mythological "hearth-mother", is still evident in the 2022 war; this time, however, the Berehynia functions as an active participant.

VYSHYVANKA IN CONTEMPORARY PROTEST

As Ukrainians protested contemporary Russian irredentism, a wave of re-learning of traditional motifs became widespread, along with the creation of new embroidery designs to reflect contemporary Ukrainian cultural and political struggles. Vyshyvanka Day, established in 2010, proved to be ever more celebrated by those in Ukraine and in the diaspora, placing less emphasis on the production of vyshyvanka and instead foregrounding the celebration of wearing a cultural garment as a sartorial expression of contemporary cultural and political values. Whilst the meanings of individual motifs were less well known, the vyshyvanka more broadly continued to demonstrate dedication to Ukrainian cultural and political autonomy. By the start of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Ukrainians worldwide had more clearly defined their cultural independence from Russia, which transferred into the political articulation of Ukrainian autonomy and agency.

Similarly, Russian forces in Crimea in 2014 recognised the significance of symbols associated with cultural identity. Following the annexation, ethnic and national symbols, including vyshyvanka, were banned. Expressions of Ukrainian and Crimean Tartar language, history, and cultural practices were repressed, and displays of the Ukrainian flag were made punishable by arrest and fines (OSCE 2015: 91–92). The extent of cultural repression enabled acts of cultural expression to be some of the most powerful forms of dissidence. One such example was the graduating school children of Lesya Ukrainka Gymnasium No.5 in 2015. Located in

Sevastopol, the Gymnasium was named after the famous nationalist poet Lesya Ukrainka, known also for wearing her handmade vyshyvanka, and was the daughter of the renowned ethnographer Olena Pchilka (BROVARETS 2021: 147). In 2015, the graduating class of the Gymnasium, on their final day, collectively dressed in their own vyshyvanka along with their teachers (EUROMAIDAN PRESS 2014). In doing so, they deployed vyshyvanka as a symbol of dissent against Russian imperialism.

The title of the Gymnasium itself is also significant in that its name was not changed after occupation. At the beginning of the Crimean invasion in 2014, Russian authorities began the systematic renaming and closure of cultural centres (EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT 2016: 23). The Museum of Ukrainian Vyshyvanka was closed in February 2015 and the Ukrainian Academic Music Theatre was renamed, in a fashion reminiscent of Soviet control, to the State Academic Music Theatre (OSCE 2015: 91). As the closure of the embroidery museum demonstrates, Russian authorities were aware of the symbolism inherent in Ukrainian vyshyvanka, and yet, an educational institution named after a national icon escaped their efforts of cultural erasure. This is potentially due to Ukrainka's identity as a woman of the nationalist movement who was often overlooked because of her gender and perceived as non-threatening. As Khromeychuk (2016: 14) demonstrated in her discussion of female roles of dissidence in the Euromaidan, women often hold a transitionary role in large-scale protests, as they are perceived as protectresses and matrons of the revolution rather than as revolutionaries themselves.

Furthermore, the representation of vyshyvanka in physical spaces and digitized formats has erupted in times of threat to national sovereignty. Vyshyvanka, and depictions thereof, incorporate conceptions of Ukraine embodied by a feminine figure clothed in a vyshyvanka under attack from the Russian invasion. Occasionally she is depicted as Berehynia herself, the embodiment of feminine perceptions, qualities and power, and the protectress of the nation. Attacks on the nation state are often depicted as attacks on the feminine, as is evident in art and depictions throughout the Euromaidan. These representations of vyshyvanka differ from those of the 2022 invasion: in the former, the Ukrainian women are depicted occasionally as passive carers of children and the material culture of Ukraine, but also as agents of their own future. In contrast, in

2022, vyshyvanka and weaponry are provided in tandem, such as in the case of the Berehynia with an AK-47 clothed in a vyshyvanka, with child in hand and burning rubble in the background. To use Dedman's phrasing to refer to the Ukrainian experience, new depictions of vyshyvanka *"rendered women's bodies sites of active political agency, on their own terms"* (2023: 98). The vyshyvanka has now become representative of the active lifecycle and defense of the Ukrainian state.

Thus, digital depictions following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine have represented women in vyshyvanka in traditional and innovative ways, demonstrating how, in times of dissidence, symbols and associations of vyshyvanka have been both recycled and reshaped. Through social media platforms, digitized images and photos of women in vyshyvanka from Ukraine have been disseminated internationally, amongst Ukrainians, members of the Ukrainian diaspora, and supporters of Ukraine. The images depicting Ukrainian women can largely be divided into three categories: the girl, the woman or mother, and intergenerational depictions. These images have recurring themes of the female as active "protectress" of the Ukrainian state, "protectress" of life through rebirth, or victim. Occasionally these representations overlap.

In addition, the depictions of women as the active "protectress" in the Russo-Ukrainian war of 2022 demonstrate shifting understandings of female roles within spaces of dissidence. Frequently, in these images, the active "protectress" is a young woman (occasionally a girl) in a traditional vyshyvanka with elements of military garb (EUROMAIDAN ART & GRAPHICS 2022). The military elements are sometimes replacements of traditional dress. For example, one depiction shows a woman in a traditional vyshyvanka, but her *vinok*, the wreath worn by unmarried women, has been substituted by an array of grenades, the ribbons replaced by bandoliers (YAVTUSHENKO 2022). Alternative depictions present her simply in traditional dress, but with weaponry, and the more mythic depictions of Berehynia have her with a sword rather than a gun. The active "protectress" is nearly always represented in a vyshyvanka and a *vinok*. The contemporary protectress is therefore pure and undefiled in the traditional sense and remains tied to traditional family values. The difference in these depictions is her active ability to fight with strength for her family, shifting the symbolic value of

the feminine nation to an active defender and "protectress", rather than a passive victim.

An exception to the traditional unmarried woman as protectress figure is evident in a series of artworks by Natasha Lashchenko, shared via Facebook by the feminist historian Oksana Kis (2022). In Lashchenko's imaginings of the protectress, she depicts Ukrainian women as mothers protecting their children, or on their own, blood splattered and injured, but armed, determined, and unrelenting. In these images traditional vyshyvanka are merged with contemporary dress and other symbols of the Ukrainian state such as the flag and the trident. Above each of the five images is the name of a city under Russian attack at the time: Chornobaivka, Mykolaiv, Mariupol, Konotop, and Kharkiv. These images depict women as non-sexualised representations of the protectress of each city.

In murals around Ukrainian cities, depictions of women tend to be more traditional.

The tree of life has remained an important symbol in the depiction of Ukrainian women as the Ukrainian nation in the 2022 Russian invasion. Customarily a symbol of new life, fertility and protection in Ukrainian embroidery, its contemporary uses have retained their conventional meanings. Whilst most meanings of the individual vyshyvanka symbols are no longer remembered, the tree of life is more easily identifiable. In such artistic representations, the tree of life is often represented by the three-pronged tree or leaf at the stomach of a grown woman or the heart of a girl. Sometimes the woman is identifiably pregnant or holding a child (UACC 2022A); at other times it is her ability to reproduce and foster new life that is more subtly depicted by artists (DAILY ART MAGAZINE 2022). In these depictions the tree of life is absent, but in its place is a stalk, or a pysanka, one of the decorated eggs that are painted at Easter (UACC 2022B). This is a recurrent theme not only in depictions of women, but in the traditional design and function of ethnic dress. The aprons that accompany the vyshyvanka and are occasionally embroidered themselves, traditionally were worn to protect the reproductive region for women in many Slavic cultures (WELTERS 2011: 33). In this way, the symbols associated with vyshyvanka are similar, yet their meanings have adapted with different historic contexts.

Another recurring representation of the feminine during the Russo-Ukrainian War is the faceless woman. She is used in artworks and photographs, and wears traditional dress. Often, she is human, although frequently she is a "motanka", a traditional ragdoll (PIAR 2022; KHRISHOVSKY 2022). It is unclear if this deliberate decision by artists is an attempt to relate the idea of universal suffering to their audience, or if they are presenting the Ukrainian state and nation through the vehicle of the feminine. Through depicting her as faceless, her identifiable features become the vyshyvanka, or rather, her Ukrainianness, and the destruction that she has been subjected to.

VYSHYVANKA DAY

The creation of international Vyshyvanka Day, widely celebrated in Ukraine, acknowledged the importance that the vyshyvanka holds as a symbol of Ukrainian culture and history. Vyshyvanka Day (2022) is celebrated on the third Thursday of May and was first celebrated casually in 2006 by students from Chermivtsi National University but became an international celebration in 2010. By 2015 it was officially acknowledged through the creation of the Ukrainian-based non-profit organization "World Vyshyvanka Day" (EHA 2022).

Vyshyvanka Day is significant in that it celebrates Ukrainian culture internationally, combining past and present narratives of Ukrainian identity through collective experience and memory. As each Vyshyvanka Day is celebrated, memories are consolidated and reformed annually as they are clarified in their contemporary contexts by Ukrainians both within the Ukrainian homeland and in the global diasporic communities. More recently, it has also come to symbolize support for Ukraine in the Russo-Ukrainian war by those of a non-Ukrainian background, and, more broadly, support for states whose national sovereignty is threatened by major international actors.

For example, following the beginning of the Euromaidan protests in November 2013 and the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, Vyshyvanka Day held greater gravity than before. The wearing of vyshyvanka had now become synonymous with the independence of the Ukrainian state from Russian interference. The vyshyvanka had become so significant in its

symbolism of Ukrainian autonomy and agency that in 2015 volunteers donated vyshyvanka to soldiers of the Ukrainian Armed Forces fighting in the Donbas region in time for Vyshyvanka Day (TSN 2014). Members of the 24 battalions that were dressed in vyshyvanka posed with their rifles and children waving Ukrainian flags (IBID.).

After the 2022 Russian invasion, Vyshyvanka Day was used by Ukrainians as a form of protest against the invasion by promoting their cultural and political autonomy. Vyshyvanka Day was adopted by many outside Ukraine, including members of the diaspora, due to its visuality, as wearing of vyshyvanka can be a form of sartorial and visual expression of visual belonging without necessitating a knowledge of the Ukrainian language. Such visual representation enables interaction with culture, heritage, identity, and memory internationally.

Internationally, people demonstrated their support for Ukraine by wearing vyshyvanka as they congregated in Speakers Corner in London and marched through the streets of Tel Aviv, publicizing their support through digital media (KOKCHAROV 2022; HAARETZ.COM 2022). These demonstrations were then shared on social media platforms to reach a greater, global audience. Additionally, Vyshyvanka Day in 2022 was mobilized by the Taiwanese government through social media to draw parallels between the Taiwanese and Ukrainian experience as victims of historical colonial struggles under contemporary geopolitical threats from China and Russia respectively. The Taiwanese government (2022) sought to achieve this by releasing its own vyshyvanka pattern for Taiwanese citizens to wear in the form of stickers at their "Vyshyvanka Picnic" under the official statement "Taiwan Stands with Ukraine". The project also designed its own patterns spelling the names of Ukraine and Taiwan in Ukrainian in addition to traditional vyshyvanka symbols of the eternal fire and guiding star, which are claimed to symbolize bravery, determination and *"aspiration of freedom"* (MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, TAIWAN 2022).

Another significant project directed by World Vyshyvanka Day (2022) is the "Born in Vyshyvanka" initiative. Under the initiative every child born in Ukraine on Vyshyvanka Day would receive a vyshyvanka. In 2022, approximately 500 vyshyvanka were distributed to newborns from the Day's organisers with the help of the Health Ministry of Ukraine

(NEW VOICE OF UKRAINE 2022). The multi-language news outlet *The New Voice of Ukraine* (IBID.), aimed at Ukrainians and members of the Ukrainian diaspora, advertised the distribution via their social media platforms, indicating that preference had been given to Ukrainians born in regions closest to the frontline. In this instance, the vyshyvanka is symbolic of two elements: first, the matriarchal role of the state and subversion of traditional familial roles in vyshyvanka production, and second, the display of "ancient" national symbols in areas under the greatest threat of Russian aggression, as both protective to Ukrainian nationals and an image of national unity and defiance towards the Russian aggressors. In the first role, the state adopted the traditional role of the mother in the production of the vyshyvanka and its gifting to the child. The child, now dressed in the vyshyvanka, is visually and tactilely tied to Ukrainian culture. While vyshyvanky is no longer symbolic of protection in its traditional sense, as part of the second role, vyshyvanky retains its ability to inspire hope from the perceived ancientness and legitimacy of the Ukrainian state.

"Born in Vyshyvanka" is also significant in that it pays homage to Ukrainian lifecycle traditions through a contemporary medium. According to pre-Christian tradition, when a Ukrainian child was born, they would first be cleaned in a *rushnyk*, an embroidered ceremonial towel used for special occasions, and placed at altars (KMIT ET AL. 1978: 10). This process ensured that the child's first physical contact was with embroidered familial and spiritual protection. The child would then grow up wearing vyshyvanka embroidered by their mother until they would embroider them themselves if they were female, or until their marriage if they were male. When they eventually died, they would then be buried in their vyshyvanka, or lowered into the ground by an elongated *rushnyk*, completing the cycle (IBID.). The "Born in Vyshyvanka" project, therefore, pays homage to the initial phase of this cycle on Vyshyvanka Day, ensuring that children born on this day will wear a vyshyvanka in their first hours, and modernizing the process through a standardization of vyshyvanky rather than *rushnyky*.

The process is further made contemporary by the designs included on the vyshyvanka. While some of the vyshyvanka supplied adhered to traditional motifs and colouring such as eight-pointed stars and rhomboids in red-black designs, many diverged from these designs (NEW VOICE OF UKRAINE 2022). Instead, many were blue-yellow in their design to reflect

the contemporary Ukrainian flag (IBID.). Additionally, traditional motifs were commonly replaced by the Ukrainian trident, the official seal of the Ukrainian state. This demonstrates how traditions have been re-developed to suit the contemporary context and reaffirm state sovereignty when it was under threat by adapting alleged ancient tradition to contemporary symbolism.

COMMERCIALISED VYSHYVANKA

The commercialisation of vyshyvanka and innovation in patterns have contributed to the evolution of meanings inherent within them to serve purposes different to those traditionally ascribed. While the commercialisation of vyshyvanka was not new, processes of globalisation and the fall of the Soviet Union expanded opportunities for profit-based exchanges. As people reacted to political instability that directly infringed upon perceptions of their own national and cultural identity, symbols of national allegiance gained popularity. On the commercial level, new generations of the diaspora could more readily participate in their "Ukrainianness" through profit patriotism.

The most pronounced example of contemporary vyshyvanka is the productions of the independently Ukrainian-owned company Etnodim. Established in 2008, Etnodim began its production of contemporary vyshyvanka, eventually marketing them internationally as a way of commercialising culture, but also of teaching an international audience of Ukrainian heritage, specifically addressing the Ukrainian diaspora. By 2020 Etnodim launched the campaign "That is what my Vyshyvanka is about" (GORSKI 2021; ETNODIM N.D.). The campaign's manifesto (IBID.) encouraged Ukrainians to reflect on the meanings behind their vyshyvanka, from individual experiences of "mum and dad" to the collective experiences of Ukrainian history.

These two kinds of experiences are brought together by assumed collective experiences at the individual level. The experience of *"my grandfather [on] the collective farm"* (IBID.) exists on the personal level yet is a common experience of many contemporary Ukrainians. Additionally, mythological and literary stories such as "Vakula and the Devil", "Stus behind bars", and the kobzar, are mixed with natural and tangible objects of the Ukrainian state such as the mountain Hoverla and the river Cheremosh,

grounding manufactured narratives in reality (IBID.). The multifaceted nature of freedom, Ukrainianness, mythology and dissidence, combined in Etnodim's manifesto with the duality of the seriousness of Soviet imprisonment of Ukrainian intellectuals and the light-heartedness of the comparatively mundane *"cheesecakes from the school canteen"* (IBID.), creates a powerful image of diversity within collective experiences and Ukrainian identity.

The vyshyvanka produced as part of Etnodim's campaign combined traditional symbols of vyshyvanka with modernised symbols to reflect Ukrainian cultural change and contemporary political events. Additionally, their vyshyvanky reflect contemporary understanding and memory of Ukrainian history. Etnodim's "Slovo" shirt (IBID.) pays homage to the Slovo building in Kharkiv, where numerous Ukrainian intellectuals lived from the 1920s. Many of these intellectuals were eventually arrested and killed in the 1930s as part of what Lavrinenko (1959) later termed the "Executed Renaissance". The "Slovo" vyshyvanka uses semi-traditional motifs to represent specific individuals (for example, cherries for Ostap Vyshnya) along with stylised crows to represent the Chaika (Etnodim n.d.). Etnodim also released the "Krym" shirt which depicts semi-traditional floral motifs with a silhouette of the Crimean Peninsula placed at its centre (IBID.).

Etnodim's vyshyvanka production may be interpreted as a commodification of historical trauma, but only to a limited extent. Traditional vyshyvanka are inherently linked to cultural memory and legacy, and as the production of vyshyvanka is no longer a domestic activity, their commercialisation simultaneously entails the preservation of tradition. While commercial success weakens any attempt at creating national belonging, Etnodim has attempted to frame their vyshyvanka around "Ukrainianness", fostering the relationship between historic trauma and present commemoration.

On 19 May 2022, the Ukrainian journalist Bohdana Neborak posted an image of herself wearing Etnodim's "Slovo" vyshyvanka on twitter. Neborak (2022) used the thread to articulate the significance of Ukrainian identity through a vyshyvanka in the contemporary context of the Russian invasion. She reflects the sentiment that prior to 2022 she had *"felt we[were] distanced enough not to emphasise the Russian repressive machine.[…]Now I see that it must be emphasised because Russia strives to repeat this history"* (IBID.).

Neborak (IBID.) advertised her perspective through the wearing of a contemporary vyshyvanka, where *"traditional symbols are filled with contemporary narratives"*, and are more iconic than ever given the shelling of the façade of the Slovo building in Kharkiv by Russian soldiers on March 8 (REID 2022).

CONCLUSION

The history of the vyshyvanka and its significance to the Ukrainian people is extensive, and intertwined with experiences of family, memory, and nationhood. This article has attempted to investigate how the meanings associated with vyshyvanka have evolved over time, through periods of national repression and emancipation. Ultimately, I have sought to uncover how something that was once a domestic, feminine pursuit, has developed into an internationally identifiable symbol of "Ukrainianness" in the face of Russian neo-imperialism.

Overall, the wearing of vyshyvanky has maintained its core meaning as an expression of Ukrainian cultural identity and political autonomy, despite its aspersers' attempts to deny Ukrainian existence. The cultural values associated with the wearing and production of vyshyvanka have changed from their pre-Soviet conception of femininity, sexual purity, domesticity, and familial protection. Whilst these values have altered, they have not completely disappeared, having taken on new life, especially in response to Russia's renewed assault on Ukraine in 2022. In contrast, political values remain largely unchanged in their expression of Ukrainian nationalism, agency and anti-imperialism. The cultural values associated with vyshyvanka have been mobilised to act on the political ones in the pursuit and, later, maintenance of political autonomy. The adaptation of cultural and political values has been expressed through changes in the production uses of vyshyvanky. Such values have been maintained by the preservation of artifacts by the diaspora, and the sustained efforts of nationalist dissidence movements. The vyshyvanka has become a symbol of "Ukrainianness"; of strength, autonomy, and survival against all odds.

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NOTE

BIOGRAPHY

Winter Greet completed a BA with Honours in History in the School of Historical and Philosophical Studies at the University of Melbourne in 2022. This article is a revised and condensed version of her thesis, which received first-class honours.

Book Review

Olesya Khromeychuk: The Death of a Soldier Told by His Sister

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Why would an artist and intellectual wish to voluntarily become a soldier? How does a person change when wearing khaki? How does the state benefit from women volunteers defending the country? How can a scholar continue to research war when it enters her everyday life? What is it like to share the private pain and grief through a war play on a theatre stage? And how do feelings towards the enemy evolve? In this important and timely memoir, *The Death of a Soldier Told by His Sister*, history scholar and writer Olesya Khromeychuk elevates uneasy and uncomfortable questions as she tells an intimate and deeply engaging story of her brother's loss of life on the battlefield. She does so by cleverly blending attention to agency and the everyday presence of war, with the broader settings of the gendered structures of the Ukrainian state and war economy, Europe's East-West hierarchies and Ukraine's invisibility in the hegemonic knowledge production. All that, enriched with insights into Ukrainian history and culture, allows the reader to directly learn knowledge about Ukraine and its existential struggle. Through the everyday perspective she employs, Khromeychuk sheds light on the hierarchies and injustices surrounding Ukraine's *'double-coloniality'* in-between the West and Russia (POTAPOVA – O'SULLIVAN 2024; SEE ALSO SONEVYTSKY 2019), which is perhaps the most valuable contribution of her book.

Khromeychuk originally published her book in 2021, four years after her brother's death in the war spurred by Russia's first invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and at a time when the war was nearly forgotten. In the newer edition of her memoir from 2022, the author already briefly reflects on Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Since then, Khromeychuk, as a Western-based historian and the Director of the Ukrainian Institute in London, has become one of the leading voices of Ukraine internationally, and her book has garnered much attention worldwide. While helping the West with *"discovering Ukraine"* (p. 6), she has been challenging the politics of knowledge production which has rendered Ukraine invisible on the *"mental maps"* (KHROMEYCHUK 2022A). Hence, even though this is not an academic book, it makes a vital contribution to the scholarship on epistemic imperialism that highlights the harmful knowledge and misunderstandings permeating the Western debates that get most things wrong about this ten-year war which has lasted for centuries (SEE HENDL ET AL. 2023; OKSAMYTNA 2023; BURLYUK – MUSLIU 2023; SONEVYTSKY 2022; TSYMBALYUK 2022; O'SULLIVAN – KRULIŠOVÁ 2023). In this review, I am approaching

this book not only as a reader but also as an active participant of this academic debate that critiques epistemic imperialism.

Khromeychuk opens her story by revealing that her brother Volodymyr Pavliv, known as Volodya, was killed by a shrapnel on the frontline in eastern Ukraine in 2017 (p. 13). The rest of the book is ordered largely chronologically, as she recalls her personal experience with buying Gore-Tex Pro Combat British Army boots to support her brother, and as she talks about a Ukrainian folk song which resembled her doubts about having a wedding while her brother was at war, and how she learned about his death and travelled to her hometown Lviv for a state-supported military funeral. The army boots eventually come back to her covered in Ukraine's fertile black earth, only to be polished and given away to serve another soldier. The author then narrates how she and her family had been coping with the grief and trauma privately and later publicly through a war play intended to bring attention to the war. As the story unfolds, the reader learns how the presence of war and grief enters the most intimate spaces of her everyday life as a sister, daughter, friend, woman, scholar of war, migrant academic, feminist, theatre performer and playwright, and a Ukrainian.

One of the most powerful aspects of the book is Khromeychuk's ability to portray the war from the everyday human perspective. As a scholar of history and political violence, Khromeychuk has critiqued war theorizing for too often still lacking a human approach (p. 146). The author enables the reader to sense the everyday nuances by bringing in a feminist perspective which she reflects throughout the book when presenting the stories of women volunteers, citing Lesia Ukrainka, referring to her mother as (figuratively) made of iron, and critiquing militarism and those who benefit from it and the socioeconomic realities of war and migration. Khromeychuk demonstrates that these embodied human stories are inseparable from the war battles and high politics, and without them, our understanding of Ukraine and the war will only be partial.

This is apparent when the author touches upon Ukraine's inter-imperiality between the West and Russia (SEE ALSO HENDL ET AL. 2023). On the one hand, Khromeychuk points at the precarious status of Ukrainian immigrants in Western Europe working for a minimum wage. On the other hand, she highlights the political economy of the militarization of the country

due to Russia's imperial ambition, which affects the personal choices and the socioeconomic situation of Ukrainians. The author explains that unlike her, her brother left his *"odd jobs"* in the Netherlands after 11 years and returned home to Lviv, *"where he felt more complete"* (p. 16). She later contrasts his intense relationship with the city of Lviv, to which he always tended to return (pp. 15–16), with her own gendered childhood memories of the city. These memories come up as she mentions collecting the medal for bravery posthumously awarded to her brother in the military commissariat, a building next to her school which she remembers from her school years as a place of conscription with no entry for girls (p. 148). Even now, she still sees the building as *"epitomiz[ing] Sovietness, institutionalism, and patriarchy"* (p. 151). On other occasions, the author portrays her relationship with the city through her militarized perception of the famous Lychakiv Cemetery in Lviv. She raises her concerns about her brother being *"forever militarized"* in the cemetery and her effort to make the uniformed military grave more cosy and civilian, including by discovering how to prolong the life of flowers on the grave (p. 157). During the funeral, it feels like a small blessing for her to see a photo of her brother in civilian clothes as she knew him because she had struggled to recognize him in his khaki uniform in his last years (pp. 14 and 70).

While reading the book, I could not but think of my visit to Lviv in early March 2017 for a feminist workshop, realizing it was just a couple of weeks before Khromeychuk's brother's funeral took place there.[1] I remember the charming city streets busy with the Women's March on International Women's Day and crowds of people in cafés. You could not directly feel the conflict in the city, as one of my Ukrainian respondents returning from the conflict zone later also told me (SEE O'SULLIVAN 2019: 750). But Khromeychuk brilliantly shows that the everyday war realities were still very much present in Lviv although more hidden at that time, as they appeared behind the walls of the church, cemetery or military commissariat.[2] This is why reading her book is so important for *understanding* Ukraine, even for feminist scholars who may be more attentive to epistemic hierarchies when researching wars. It is this everyday embodied knowledge of war which cannot be grasped by outsiders, including myself from my own positionality in a country in-between the East and the West (SEE O'SULLIVAN – KRULIŠOVÁ 2023) that has historical experience of Russian imperialism but is now anchored in the Western security structures via NATO,

and also in a country which has been a recipient of Ukrainian economic migration for a long time.

Throughout the book, Khromeychuk's compelling narratives of everyday militarization evoke the author's being influenced by feminist international relations icon Cynthia Enloe (2013; 1983), whose theoretical tradition continues to inspire many of us who study gender and war, and whom the author acknowledges on the final pages. Khromeychuk's earlier work also bears this feminist tradition. As a feminist scholar of Ukraine, I initially came across her piece on women's role during the 2013–2014 Maidan protests, where she describes how women made a *"revolution within a revolution"* by challenging gender stereotypes and negotiating their presence (KHROMEYCHUK 2018). This publication is connected to her book through the story of her friend Maria Berlinska, whom she calls Masha. Berlinska is well recognised in Ukraine for her army volunteering and successful lobbying for legislative changes that opened the army to women, and her name always comes up in discussions on gender and the war, including my own field research (SEE KHROMEYCHUK 2018; O'SULLIVAN 2019; MARTSENYUK – GRYTSENKO – KVIT 2016). In her book, Khromeychuk acknowledges Masha's determination to improve the status and state protection of women who were fighting in the frontline but were formally registered as 'administrators'. At the same time, however, she remains critical of the military by drawing attention to how the political economy of war operates both formally and informally through volunteers. In her words, the state had left the Ukrainian Army in a dismal state and poorly equipped and trained as of 2014 (p. 19), and by volunteering, women substitute for the role of the state and enable its passivity (p. 87).

It is important to note that Khromeychuk and many other Ukrainian and CEE feminists, have clarified or revised their position toward the military after February 2022,[3] while staying critical toward militarization (SEE, FOR EXAMPLE, FEMINIST INITIATIVE GROUP 2022; POTAPOVA 2023; DUTCHAK 2022; HENDL ET AL. 2023). The personal experiences of Ukrainian feminists with calling for arms have also exposed some limitations of the largely Western-centric and abstract feminist peace and security theorizing, including those of Enloe's work regarding countries like Ukraine, which has no security guarantees while facing the everyday reality of Russia's brutal imperial aggression (O'SULLIVAN – KRULIŠOVÁ 2023). Khromeychuk's book and emphasis

on the everyday war could certainly help to bridge these epistemic divides. This is very much needed as Western responses to Ukraine have tended to ignore or erase Ukrainian perspectives and agency, thus reinforcing the academic culture of epistemic injustice and imperialism, including in feminist debates (HENDL ET AL. 2023; O'SULLIVAN – KRULIŠOVÁ 2023). Khromeychuk (2022A, 2022B, 2023) has actively spoken about the lack of epistemic trust and the continued misunderstanding of Ukraine which has made knowledge a matter of security. She also pays attention to it at the end of her book, where she details how things have changed for her after February 2022 with Ukraine suddenly being placed on the mental maps as the world could watch *"Ukrainian cities and towns being bombed more or less live"* (p. 189). She takes this as *"an opportune moment"* to pursue structural changes that would allow for understanding Ukraine by recognizing and elevating its agency. This will not happen overnight but everyone who reads this book can start thinking about it.

Khromeychuk's book is heartful and deeply moving. Her stories do not answer all the uneasy questions raised but rather create many new ones. The human stories are one of the most powerful aspects of the book and the author brilliantly shows that if such stories are omitted, our understanding of Ukraine and the war will always be incomplete. She offers her own tale full of *"embodied and uncomfortable knowledge"* (TSYMBALYUK 2022), which enables the readers to learn about and, most importantly, better *understand* Ukraine (SEE ALSO KHROMEYUCHUK 2023). Her memoir is now all the more pressing given that the everyday war and grief have taken on yet another dimension with Russia's genocidal aggression since February 2022. In this context, she considers her situation as privileged, recognizing that her brother is buried in a beautiful cemetery and not in a mass grave (p. 184). While her feelings towards the enemy evolve, she emphasizes her strong belief in justice (p. 187). Although we as feminists studying wars know that justice never comes to all, her book can serve as an appeal against these odds and a useful guide for pursuing structural change.

ENDNOTES

1   Khromeyuchuk mentions in one of her posts on social media that her broth-
     er was killed on 24 March 2017. See <https://twitter.com/OKhromeychuk/
     status/1639218885479079942>.

2   On a similar aspect of the everyday presence of the war, namely its everyday presence
     through Café Patriot in Lviv, see Uehling (2020).

3   Khromeychuk has acknowledged this, for instance, during her talk at the NATO panel
     discussion with Irene Fellin, the NATO Secretary General's Special Representative for
     Women, Peace and Security, on 22 September 2023.

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