

Article

The Discursive Power of Digital Popular Art during the Russo-Ukrainian War: Re/Shaping Visual Narratives

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Abstract: Twenty-first century digital technologies and popular visual art have transformed the ways military conflicts are experienced, narrated, and shared. It demonstrates that digital platforms have become arenas for constructing visual narratives that influence public perception and engagement with the conflict. Through a multimodal and visual analysis of over 950 digital artworks shared on Instagram during the first three months of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, this study investigates how these artworks form specific visual narratives which contribute to portraying the new wartime reality while also constructing images of the self and the other through heroization, victimization, dehumanization, and other strategies. All these visual narratives jointly represent the complexity of the war reality and form an epistemic understanding of the conflict. This study highlights the important function that popular visual art on digital platforms such as Instagram plays in shaping perceptions of the Russo-Ukrainian War, particularly in expressing emotions, conveying traumas, and influencing public opinions.

Keywords: digital technologies; Instagram; militainment; the Russo-Ukrainian War; visual art



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1. Introduction

In recent years, digital technologies have significantly impacted all aspects of the contemporary world, deeply altering lives of individuals and societies, changing the ways people interact, communicate, exercise power and control, influence others, consume, and engage in wars. New technologies and media not only transform how wars are fought but also influence the evolution of the participation in representation, communication, and perception of military conflicts. The digital terrain has become a fertile soil for various interactions and manifestations, “linking people’s everyday practices to war efforts of the states” (Boichak and Hoskins 2022), thus making the war not only more present but also more accessible to everyone and everywhere. Wars of today are conducted not only on the battlefield but become part of the lives of people who are far from the war theater. New contemporary digital practices make everybody participate in the war while “patina of the digital everyday” is minimizing and trivializing the violence of warfare, obscuring its visibility and mitigating its impact” (Kuntsman and Stein 2015). Thus, modern warfare is being constantly shaped through varied personalized and individualized information feeds, which is splintering the perception of and participation in the war (Boichak and Hoskins 2022).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is not an exception. Digital technologies play a crucial role in war developments, shaping the perception of the war, creating new narratives, countering propaganda, or altering the stereotypes and the representation of the self and the other. Besides producing and structuring information flows, they also offer new forms of civilian involvement and participation, connecting and mobilizing different categories of society (Asmolov 2022). After the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion of

Ukraine, traditional and new media were flooded with different kinds of content—from professional reportages and analytics to static and moving images, memes, cartoons, collages, or TikTok videos—which were created, propagated, and widely shared by social media users. Taking part in the participatory co-construction of the warfare, these content-creating practices are aimed at detailed documenting and chronicling the war, showing its destructive consequences, and shaping wartime living experiences. They also offer artistic interpretations of wartime reality, blurring the boundaries between military conflicts and culture. These heterogeneous flows of content targeted at different audiences help to make sense of the war, cope with traumatic experiences, counter Russian propaganda, and offer symbolic and ideational recontextualization of the military events, connecting them to a larger cultural and historical global context. Indeed, this first TikTok war (Friedman 2022) or this First Social Media War (Ciuriak 2022) has many innovative forms of narrating wartime experiences.

While many scholars focus on the war and its multiple consequences for Ukraine and the world, we think it is also necessary to study the responses of popular culture as an important conduit of the way the local and global community makes sense of the recent events in Ukraine. How is the Russo-Ukrainian War reflected in the visual landscape of Ukrainian digital art? What visual narratives and symbols of digital popular culture serve to construct/reflect the new social reality of the country? What cultural and social impact do they have? To answer these questions, our research focuses on the analysis of visual productions, digital art in particular, triggered by the Russo-Ukrainian War since 24 February 2022. Visuals are instrumental in exploring how digital popular culture has dealt, represented, and responded to threats of Russian invasion, as they have always been not only a powerful tool for documenting historical events but also a means of political power consolidation, providing ideological interpretations and shaping the visions of the conflict. Thus, this paper explores the digital visual landscape of the Russo-Ukrainian War and its role, main artifacts, narratives, symbols, and responses of digital participatory culture in Ukraine. Employing multimodal and visual analysis and cultural studies approaches, this paper seeks to analyze the semiotic and intertextual potential of visual productions to reveal their discursive power in society as well as the personal, social, and cultural impact of this cultural practice in times of war. The data set comprises more than 950 digital artworks of Ukrainian artists and digital illustrators (including posters, memetic images, cartoons, etc.) posted and circulated on Instagram during the first three months of the full-scale invasion.

2. Popular Culture and War Mediation in the Era of Digital Media

The impact of popular culture in general, and popular digital art in particular, in military conflicts can vary significantly depending on the social, cultural, and political contexts and can shape the evolvement, development, and/or termination of the conflict in diverse and intricate ways. Previous research has shown a particular interest in the analysis of the interrelation between society, popular culture, and social media and their role in conflict propagation and mediation (Boichak 2021; Press-Barnathan 2017; Sigal 2009; Wolfsfeld 2018; Zeitzoff 2017; and others). Popular culture is considered to be an effective tool in forming public opinion and changing the nonmaterial dimensions of a conflict due to its ability to reach a large number of people and to convey both information and emotions simultaneously (Press-Barnathan 2017). According to Hankey and Tuszynski, the power of popular culture also lies in the potential to represent the different sides of the conflict, brightly underlining the virtues of some and vices of others, thus shaping public support or opposition to a particular conflict or cause (Hankey and Tuszynski 2017). Indeed, mediated popular art can be used for propaganda and the manipulation of public opinion via spreading distorted or biased information, changing perceptions, and undermining established beliefs. On the other hand, popular culture practices can be used for popular and political mobilization in times of crisis (Milkoreit 2019). This can be achieved through poetry, protest songs, artistic installations, repetitive mediation of symbols, or iconic images that

have the potential to inspire resistance and foster solidarity among the affected communities. In addition, popular culture can also take on the role of providing escapism and temporary “shelter” where people can forget the terrible traumatic experience of the present and regain the strength to continue living in the state of conflict. During the post-conflict stages, popular culture can contribute to establishing dialogue, initiating understanding between conflicting parties, and encouraging empathy and reconciliation.

At different times in history, popular culture has made significant contributions to the narration and visualization of conflicts, their management, and their resolution. As Boichak and Hoskins argue, “wars have always been mediated—perceived, experienced, and remembered through a medium whose features shaped wartime realities” (Boichak and Hoskins 2022). Different media such as newspapers, radio, and television are used during different historical periods to narrate the conflicts and shape the perceptions of war. For example, during the Second World War, the Nazis used popular culture to spread propaganda in films, thus promoting their ideology and influencing public opinion (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum). At the same time, the Allied countries employed popular culture to demonize the rival and to mobilize support for the war effort (Fox 2015). Films, music, and TV shows produced during the Vietnam War have approached the war in different ways and introduced narratives that continue to shape the perception of history even many years after the war has ended (Wood 2016). The Vietnam War still “serves as a benchmark in the history of war reporting and in the representation of conflict in popular culture and historical memory” (Good et al. 2014). Mediated popular culture also had a significant impact on the development of the conflict during the Arab Spring. Amani Hassan, acting executive director and program director of the Arab British Centre, points out that social media platforms played a vital role in organizing protests and mobilizing public support (Dawson and Harris 2021). Indeed, today the changing digital ecology of war and conflict transforms the ways people engage in and experience the deep socio-political changes and transformations as well as reshapes the role of popular culture in this process.

Considering the above-mentioned interplay between the war and popular culture, it is not surprising that academia focuses its attention on the study of the evolution of the relationship between war, popular culture, and media, which all together intersect in what scholars call “militainment”. For instance, Roger Stahl, who coined this term in his seminal work *Militainment, Inc.: War, Media, and Popular Culture*, admitting the changing experience of war at the turn of the 21st century, claims that warfare now becomes “a fixture of the entertainment” and “landscape feature of popular culture” (Stahl 2010). According to Stahl, at the end of the 20th century, war was rather seen as a spectacle and used different mechanisms and practices aimed at controlling public opinion by distancing, distracting, and disengaging citizens from the realities of war. At the beginning of the 21st century, however, the hybridization between the military and entertainment spheres gave rise to specific discourses and practices, which became more engaging and interactive. Stahl names this process the transition to interactive war and claims that it “modified the usual narrative filters to promote first-person fantasies of war” (Stahl 2010).

Since Stahl started the discussion about the integration of war experiences with established entertainment genres in 2010, militainment has been attracting considerable interest among scholars. Analyzing militainment, scholars (Capozzi 2013; Davison 2006; Maradin 2013; Mirrlees 2017; Poniewozik and Cagle 2002; Roderick 2014) shed light on the propagandistic functions of militainment that are often aimed at shaping public opinion about a particular military power, selling its positive image, legitimizing wars, framing the debates about the usage of various weapons, and manufacturing consent among consumers. Researchers highlight a shift towards depicting war through such consumable spectacles, which help to gain support for the military campaigns and normalize military actions as legitimate (Capozzi 2013). Several studies provide evidence that militainment serves as a platform for promoting notions of glory, military prowess, and imperialistic ambitions, particularly when it selectively omits the war’s traumatic aspects, such as loss, devastation,

and grief (Gaufman 2023). Researchers admit that militainment engages the audience in a war spectacle as “interactive participants” (Domazet and Vukadinović 2023), thus making militarism more entertaining and participatory (Stahl 2010; Massa 2020).

Beyond any doubt, contemporary militarism is fostered by a digital popular culture that is rapidly disseminated in social media. On the one hand, Alessandra Massa believes that this digital culture enables military forces to create one’s own representations, making it easier for their operations to become accepted and justified. On the other hand, she argues that it results in a more individualized type of militarism that humanizes soldiers and encourages public empathy and a sense of connection (Massa 2020). Merrin and Hoskins claim that “‘Social media’ in the broadest sense, therefore, has become central to wars and conflicts, imploding with the event, to simultaneously capture it, promote it, denounce it, deny it, spread images, videos, bloopers, memes, jokes, graphics, gifs, and comments, help organize it, raise funds, raise awareness, attract recruits, direct combat operations, spread disinformation and propaganda, and rally aid and help for its victims” (Merrin and Hoskins 2020). Indeed, the pursuit of representation, reevaluation, and rethinking has consistently played a crucial role in society’s attempt to comprehend the complexities of war, predominantly facilitated through a diverse array of media and art genres. Some researchers claim that while the line between popular culture and warfare blurs, entertainment imagery is not only influenced by but also has the power to influence the war realities and shape the public imagination of war (Lenoir and Caldwell 2018).

The erasure of the borders between media, art, war, and social reality in the digital realm, which is one of the embodiments of militainment, is directly connected with the drastic transformations and the rapid technological advancement of the last centuries. With the rise of digitalization, the dissemination and mediation of visual art became even more rapid and significant as the newly created popular culture products could reach the intended audience faster than ever before. One of the primary characteristics that emerged concerning works of art was their reproducibility, a concept first elucidated in the seminal essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* by Walter Benjamin (Benjamin 1969). Works of art become less elitist while gaining the ability to reach a much wider audience through mass-produced images. This accessibility of art has led to social and political ramifications which became particularly intensified with the development of digital culture. The reproducibility and availability discussed by Benjamin reach beyond the limits, while anything can be effortlessly and virally disseminated globally via the Internet. Digital media enable wide resonance or immense popularity for any artifact during a short period of time, often also for a short period of time, in order to be quickly substituted by another digital artifact. Art in the digital realm features dematerialization and an ephemeral nature, which is a reversed side of the fast-paced popularity and recognition. Nevertheless, visual representations of war in the form of visual popular art created on social media platforms such as Instagram contribute to constructing, reconstructing, or deconstructing dominant narratives of war “due to their virality and high shareability” (Hutchison and Robertson 2015).

As digital technology has become increasingly integrated into everyone’s daily lives, it is not surprising that digital art has developed into a significant part of popular culture. Today, it is a medium through which popular culture is both reflected and influenced due to the widespread use of digital tools for creative expression, the proliferation of digital platforms for sharing and consuming art, and its increasing accessibility worldwide. Digital art not only draws on the rich imagery and iconography of popular culture but also encompasses contemporary trends and issues, thus transcending traditional art boundaries to reach a global audience.

Overall, the influential power of popular culture, including digital art productions, can be both constructive and harmful in forming attitudes and rallying responses in times of conflict, ranging from fostering global solidarity and awareness to disseminating propaganda, misinformation and provoking violence. Creating a high level of engagement, the contemporary digital environment gives individuals who are affected by conflicts an

opportunity to narrate and share their experiences in various forms of expression with a much wider audience, to raise awareness of the conflict and voice diverse opinions that help not only challenge the dominating narratives portrayed by traditional media outlets but also shape the global vision of the conflict. Diverse approaches to the analysis of digital popular culture manifestations can shed light on overlooked aspects of conflicts and offer deeper understanding mechanisms of co-construction or countering dominant narratives.

3. Cultural Manifestations of the Russo-Ukrainian War: Case and Method

The Russo-Ukrainian War has been described as the most mediated war in modern military history (Boichak and Hoskins 2022). The ubiquity of technological devices that allow documenting the conflict in detail everywhere and anytime makes the war an extremely visual phenomenon. Digital technologies are used not only to mediate information on official media channels and shape war realities but also to transform civilians into real-time eyewitnesses and make them active participants in military developments, allowing them to change the course of battles. Digital devices serve to record, store, create, and share war-related data that are used as an effective mobilizer of audiences on the national and international levels.

Culture was placed in the center of civilizational and political confrontations during the Russo-Ukrainian War from the very first days. Alongside the massive destruction of Ukrainian cities, Russian attempts to annihilate Ukrainian identity and history, erase the Ukrainian language, and destroy cultural heritage in occupied territories transformed the conflict into a true culture war (Farago 2022; French 2022) as well as an existential war for the Ukrainian nation. The tragic events caused by Russian aggression and the significant challenges for millions of Ukrainians in its wake not only mobilized the government and civilian population to resist the aggressor but also boosted the creativity and expressive potential of Ukrainian cultural elites, triggering deep transformations of existing cultural, epistemic, and value paradigms as well as shifts in the perception of the self and the other (Protas and Bulavina 2022). Some researchers even consider that the Russian aggression against Ukraine served as a catalyst for creating a new system of artistic symbols and images, calling it a new mythology of the war (Smorzhevskaya 2022; Vitiuk 2022).

Wartime art, which can serve not only as an expressive mechanism of narrating the war but also as a tool of activism and non-violent resistance, is being created through various means of expression, including music, dance, monumental, and visual arts (Ruble 2022). Visuals, including artistic and documentary photography, illustrations, paintings, collages, street art, and digital art, represented the first immediate reactions to the war. Sometimes they were short-lived and easily forgettable materials, but in other cases they could also provoke profound reactions and reverberations, echoing far beyond the borders of Ukraine. Largely topically related, the responses of digital participatory culture often aimed at circulating sensitive visual content, especially in the first days of the war. Later, they started to offer more nuanced and elaborated interpretations of events, creating and co-creating war narratives. Many artists are involved in producing illustrations for national and international media. In addition, they collaborate in numerous fundraising, informative, and performative art projects¹ and actively share their work on social networks, where it can be circulated, commented on, or receive emotional feedback.

This study analyzes Instagram, one of the most popular platforms in Ukraine that counts more than 15 million users among Ukrainians. During the first months of Russia's invasion, it was actively used to publish and widely share Ukrainian wartime digital art. The choice of this social media as a source for the data for the analysis can be explained by its predominant focus of the dissemination of visual content and general popularity in the world and in Ukraine. Also, Instagram offers easy access to artists' profiles and provides the possibility of tracking the works according to the time of their publication. The artists' profiles were selected according to their popularity on Instagram (number of followers) and their presence on other digital platforms and Ukrainian media in general (e.g., Ukraine War Art collection² and Ukrainian's project "Ukrainian artists against war"³).

The analyzed dataset consists of approximately 950 visual artworks collected from 45 Instagram accounts of Ukrainian digital artists using a method of unselected sampling during the first three months (24 February–30 May 2022) of the full-scale Russian invasion. We chose this time span because the preliminary analysis of Instagram accounts showed that the first weeks/months were the most productive for the majority of artists. At the same time, the ubiquity of visual productions on Instagram makes it highly problematic to analyze qualitatively a larger time frame at this stage, which explains the time limitations of the present study. The peculiarity of the data is that the digital artworks represent a rather heterogeneous corpus, including sketches, collages, and cartoons, which are all included in our analysis. Another peculiarity is that the artworks are highly dependent on events and cultural contexts, which sometimes makes them difficult to be understood by an audience unfamiliar with Ukrainian culture and history. However, the data also include a significant number of artworks aimed at a wider international audience.

We analyzed the dataset qualitatively and quantitatively, taking into account its heterogeneous composition (visual and textual components), applying multimodal discourse analysis (O'Halloran 2011) combined with elements of Rose's approach to visual analysis (Gillian 2012). Multimodal discourse analysis allowed us to study the content and the expressive elements of the artworks as well as the semiotic choices of the artists, which helped to construct the meaning combined with the textual information, while Rose's approach helped us to reveal the social and cultural meaning of the visual artifacts, paying special attention to the images themselves and their sites of production and mediation. This allowed us to study the interrelation between the verbal and nonverbal parts of the artworks circulated on Instagram as well as to reveal the intertextual and semiotic potential of the visual imagery of these digital cultural artifacts. Discourse analysis helped to reveal not only denotative components of the artworks and their direct meaning but also to uncover the connotations and distinguish the larger symbolic cultural, political, and historical narratives that serve to frame the Russo-Ukrainian War in a larger geopolitical and civilizational context. Moreover, we were able to demonstrate how visual cultural discourse was instrumentalized and weaponized to reflect and construct war realities and implement digital activism through artistic practices. We also paid attention to the symbolism of the visuals and employed multimodal analysis (Kress 2012; Kress and van Leeuwen 2006) to shed light on the meaning construction of visual narratives.

In the first stage, coding was used to classify the visuals according to their form (visual only, visual and verbal, verbal only) and type (collage, photo collage, digital image, cartoon, etc.) and to identify main narratives, thematic clusters, and repetitive universal and unique symbols. In the second stage, key discursive themes that aimed at the construction of the self and the other, shaping war reality, etc., were analyzed. In the final stage, the symbolic and meaning-making elements of the artworks were singled out and interpreted to study the main tendencies, characteristics, and functions of the visuals.

4. Visual Landscape of the Russo-Ukrainian War

Our analysis of Ukrainian digital art during the first three months of the war has revealed that the Russian full-scale invasion⁴ has triggered powerful emotional responses among Ukrainian artists in the digital realm. The majority of the selected authors were active on Instagram and posted their works regularly before the war, but after the beginning of the full-fledged invasion, the intensity of the publications grew significantly, especially during the first weeks of the war (from 1 to 5–6 digital artworks per day). Their productions during the analyzed period were exclusively devoted to the topic of Russian aggression. Moreover, the authors tended not to mix war-related images with other types of content and focused only on the dissemination of the works narrating the Russo-Ukrainian War. These immediate responses of the first days can be explained by the efforts of the Ukrainian artistic elite to speak to the world through art. In our opinion, Ukrainian artists used their art not only to express the emotions triggered by the aggression but also to voice the experiences of many Ukrainians, expressed in visual images and symbols. These artists

messages. However, due to the limited length of this paper, we focus only on the texts that are integrated into the illustrations.

In an acute dynamic connection impacted by the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War, the evolution of artistic practices is reflected in the creative visual choices of expression. The common sources of inspiration for artists are prominent dramatic and heroic events, key political and cultural personalities of both sides of the conflict (Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Valerii Zaluzhnyi, Taras Shevchenko, Lesya Ukrainka for Ukraine; Vladimir Putin, Sergey Lavrov, Aleksandr Pushkin for Russian Federation), and the use of patriotic-oriented motives and widely known symbols, both traditional (e.g., trident, vyshyvanka, cossacks, blue–yellow flag for Ukraine; two-headed eagle, bear, blue, red and white colors for Russia) and new (e.g., sunflower, farmer’s tractor, the ghost of Kyiv for Ukraine; the letters Z, V, O, orcs for the Russian Federation). The focus of the visualization is also on the universal concepts of good and evil. In addition, many artworks not only creatively rethink the changing reality of Ukrainians, but they are also based on the reproduction of the factual events of the Russian invasion, tragic or victorious. In this case, digital imagery serves to chronicle and document the developments of the war, making it part of collective digital memory. Among the most abundant sources of inspiration are such events as the starting point of the full-fledged invasion (24 February 2022), the first day of the invasion, the liberation of the Kyiv region and the discovery of the atrocities of Bucha, Irpin, and Hostomel, the resistance of the Ukrainian army at Azovstal in Mariupol, the missile attack at the Kramatorsk train station, the resistance of the soldiers at Snake⁵ Island, and the successful attack on the warship Moskva⁶. The above-mentioned events are simultaneously depicted by different artists and are recurring motifs during the analyzed period united by the usage of similar visual images and symbols. At the same time, some artists prefer to convey more personalized visions of the war, depicting individual emotional responses and experiences (for example, the works of Daria Filippova⁷) or to circulate generalized war narratives without any connection to real events of the war (for example, Yurii Zhuravel⁸ or Andrii Petrenko⁹). These different types of expressively powerful illustrations widely circulated on Instagram are aimed at making sense of the war. At the same time, they help to solidify the image of the self, to intensify the resistance and resilience of Ukrainians, and to shape the understanding of the other.

According to the above-mentioned peculiarities of wartime reality construction through digital art, we singled out several important groups of images for our analysis. The dominant narratives of visual war discourse are the construction of the self, the other, and the new wartime reality. It should be noted that the largest group of illustrations visualize the narrative of the construction of the other (44%), followed by the construction of the self (29%), and the narrative of the new wartime reality is portrayed in 22% of the images. The prevalence of the narrative of the other can be explained by the need to shape the image of the enemy and to express their attitude towards the invasion during the initial stage of the war. It is important to state that some images do not fit into one single category, as they express multiple messages at the same time and/or contain symbols which overlap. In such cases, the artworks were classified by the prevailing narrative or analyzed within several thematic blocks. Moreover, 5% of the images remain unclassified because of the impossibility of defining the main idea of the artwork (often, such works serve to express an emotional state of the artist).

Three main narratives are interconnected, shaping local and global representations of the war and constructing a platform for promoting digital activism. Within the main narratives, it is also possible to define several subnarratives that co-construct the war discourse. For example, the construction of the self is visualized through the heroization and victimization of Ukrainians, the narrative of the other is composed of the dehumanization, demonization of the enemy (other as aggressor) and their devaluation (other as loser), while everyday reality is depicted through the experiences of living within the war, the occupation of Ukrainian territories, and displacement. In the following sections, we analyze in more

detail the construction of the dominant visual narratives in Ukrainian digital popular war art.

5. Constructing the Self: Heroic Narratives

Heroic rhetoric plays an indispensable role in the context of war, serving as one of the most effective discursive tools that legitimize violence and foster politically desirable behaviors among people, especially during times of national territorial struggles or border conflicts. Since the nation-state emerged, heroic tales have taken on a special significance because, in Dawson's view, military heroes' deeds have been employed to defend the nation and enhance its reputation, thus linking heroic tales to the establishment and preservation of national territory (Dawson 2013, p. 1). The prominence of heroism is evident in contemporary popular art, which is readily accessible on platforms such as Instagram. This heroification discourse emphasizes qualities such as courage, resistance, intrepidity, valor, and glory and is conveyed through various images and symbols.

Popular art depicting the Russo-Ukrainian War portrays it as a struggle for national existence, featuring numerous images of resistance that constitute the core of heroification. One recurrent image depicts individuals holding the Ukrainian flag and bravely confronting Russian or Soviet tanks with their bare hands. These depictions not only appeal to the resilience of those in occupied territories who participated in peaceful protests against armed Russian troops but also convey the possibility of averting violence while asserting a sense of self-empowerment. The notion of heroic resistance stands out as a prominent feature within the heroic narrative, presenting the war as the People's War for Ukrainians. This explains why instances of resistance, such as the defiant slogan "Russian worship, go, fuck yourself" uttered by a Ukrainian border guard from Snake Island to the Russian warship Moskva, are quickly memorialized through popular art and quickly go viral (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Reproduced with permission from Yurii Zhuravel (zhurawell_yura); published on Instagram, 2022.¹⁰

These occurrences speak to the audience's desire for symbols and meanings connected to valiant resistance.

Significantly, the portrayal of violence as a legitimate tool of warfare is relatively infrequent within the framework of heroic narratives. Instances of violence typically occur when heroes must confront evil monsters or non-human beings depicted as aggressive entities, yet even in these situations, violence is depicted primarily as a means of resistance (Figure 3).

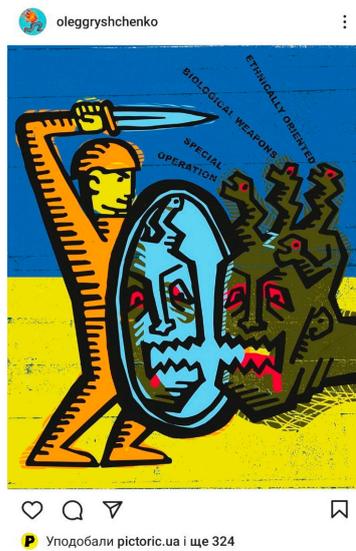


Figure 3. Reproduced with permission from Oleg Gryshchenko (oleggryshchenko); published on Instagram, 2022.¹¹

The themes of anger, aggression, and violence and their connection with heroism are brought about through the visualization of animalistic images and non-human combatants, such as Patron, a detection dog and mascot for the State Emergency Service of Ukraine (awarded the Order for Courage for his work locating and defusing unexploded ordnance), cats as the personification of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, battle birds claimed by propaganda to be biological weapons, and even watermelons as a personification of Kherson and its resistance (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Reproduced with permission from Nataliia Zakharova (natashale777); published on Instagram, 2022.¹²

While self-representation mostly strives to preserve favorable themes, aggressive behaviors, weapons, threats, and violence emphasized in some of the examples mentioned above allow the culture to express the rage and desire for aggressiveness that is otherwise mainly concealed.

Popular culture is a significant repository of heroic archetypes, as seen by its ubiquitous use of iconic superheroes and their traits. A wide range of images, which include both explicit and implicit references to a variety of superhero personae, prominently originating

from franchises such as the Marvel Universe and Star Wars, emerge on platforms such as Instagram (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Reproduced with permission from Anna Serdiuk (maliunok); published on Instagram, 2022.¹³

A careful examination of the symbolism prevalent in this domain reveals a keen responsiveness on the part of popular art to the heroic motifs invoked by those aligned with the Ukrainian cause in the ongoing struggle. Within the canvas of visual narratives depicting the conflict, heroic figures such as Superman, Spiderman, Batman, and even James Bond conspicuously intersect, emerging not only as symbolic representations of superhuman powers and unwavering champions of righteousness but also as actual examples of heroism that fundamentally support the narrative of self-identity.

Political leaders and Ukrainian military personnel frequently appear merged with these well-known superheroes, either decked out in their regalia or subtly given enhanced strength and skills. This fusion materializes in expressions such as “Marvel pales in comparison to the valor of the Ukrainian armed forces, my true superheroes” (Figure 6). For example, a striking illustration shows President Volodymyr Zelenskyy surrounded by a group of superheroes drawn from various comic book universes, an evocative scene in which superheroes come to ask Zelenskyy for help and guidance. Overall, the discourse surrounding the war in Ukraine is tightly interwoven with a tapestry of heroic symbolism drawn from popular culture, effectively reflecting the narrative’s essence through its incorporation of iconic superheroic tropes and their transformation into powerful symbols of boldness and valor.

The political sphere appears to be another important source of heroic iconography. Politicians command a noticeable presence in the media since they serve as both the representatives of their respective countries and the general public. This visibility often enables them to assume heroic attributes. Evidently, prominent figures in Ukraine’s political scene who are entrusted with the country’s management naturally win praise for the fortitude and resolve they must demonstrate in coping with the demands of war. In the world of popular visual art, representations of specific people in positions of authority within the nation are endowed with heroic symbolism or take on distinctly heroic attributes. Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the President of Ukraine, and Valerii Zaluzhnyi, the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, are prominent among them, as are a few other government officials and media figures who have won public support through their imposing media presence. These people play a crucial role in the heroic narratives. The Commander-in-Chief and the Ukrainian President frequently appear in popular culture narratives as superheroes, featuring conventional traits like superhuman abilities and distinctive outfits. However, the popular art on Instagram rarely reinforces this idea. Instead, it frequently

depicts them as commonplace, yet persistent, people chosen from among the community, epitomizing strength and resolute determination.



Figure 6. Reproduced with permission from Studio “AzaNiziMaza” (aza_nizi_maza); published on Instagram, 2022.¹⁴

Concomitant with this theme of determination and resilience is the portrayal of ordinary Ukrainians who exemplify heroic resistance. Significantly outnumbering depictions of hero politicians, these representations on Instagram underline the bravery of ordinary people resisting Russian aggression, which blurs the line between civilians and warriors (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Reproduced with permission from Viktor Grudakov (victor.grudakov); published on Instagram, 2022.¹⁵

Artists on Instagram shift their focus onto a wide range of Ukrainian people, including not just soldiers but also professionals from the medical, firefighting, and agricultural sectors and even stay-at-home mothers. By including people from various ethnic backgrounds, age ranges, and professions, this artistic strategy seeks to highlight the diversity that encompasses racial, ethnic, gender, and socio-economic dimensions. Visual representations of this kind are intentionally created to symbolize the everyday bravery of people, which takes the form of selfless acts of support to each other in times of need, diligent dedication to one's professional duties, and heroic attempts to fight the invaders with one's bare hands or the tools one has at one's disposal, even if it is a simple jar of pickles. The latter is a perfect example of a wartime morale-boosting war anecdote that swiftly grew viral (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Reproduced with permission from Yaroslava Yatsuba (bright_arts); published on Instagram, 2022.¹⁶

This story is based on an incident in which a Ukrainian woman successfully brought down a drone using only a jar of pickles. The images of a jar of pickles accompanied by slogans and captions emphasize themes of indomitable resilience and the ongoing struggle for liberation.

The most prevalent and recurrent origin of Ukrainian heroification lies within the realms of national mythology and historical narratives, which come together to form the foundation of the cultural code. Emerging inside evolving narratives, Ukrainian heritage and folklore imagery significantly contribute to the creation of a cultural palimpsest that revolves around a central theme core characterized by heroic resistance. This fundamental narrative framework includes a wide variety of religious, cultural, and historical figures, such as Saint George, Saint Nicholas (Figure 9), Archangel Michael, Mary, Jesus Christ, celestial entities, folklore characters like Kotyhoroshko, Mavka, historical personalities such as the philosopher Hryhorii Skovoroda, the political activist Stepan Bandera, the military commander Bohdan Khmelnytsky and Ukrainian Cossacks in general, the poet Taras Shevchenko, the folk art painter Maria Prymachenko, the athlete Olha Kharlan, and the monumental emblem of the Mother Ukraine.

In addition to the pantheon of Ukrainian cultural heroes, it is possible to identify allusions to iconographic motifs found in a broader world and European setting. The biblical figure Samson is shown defeating a monster, a personification of Russian forces, with his bare hands. Another biblical tale of David and Goliath symbolizes the struggle to defeat a superior foe in a single combat, which metaphorically compares Ukraine's relatively small scale to an enormous opponent like Russia (Figure 10).



Figure 9. Reproduced with permission from Nataliia Zakharova (natashale777); published on Instagram, 2022.¹⁷



Figure 10. Reproduced with permission from Yurii Zhuravel (zhurawell_yura); published on Instagram, 2022.¹⁸

Among others, we also find an image of Theseus dressed in blue and yellow, thus representing Ukraine, killing the Minotaur, which, according to the inscription under the image, personifies the “aggressor”. All the images mentioned above add to the iconographic heroic tapestry created by artists on Instagram. What is notable is that while biblical figures often imply protection (as for instance the massive image of Saint Nicolas protecting children from the multiple attacks of Russian armed forces), nevertheless, all of them (including angels and the Virgin Mary Oranta) are depicted armed with swords, sabers, machine guns, and bazookas with faces determined to start a confrontation. This martial disposition is equally discernible in depictions of the Mother Ukraine, the famous monument in Kyiv (Figure 11).

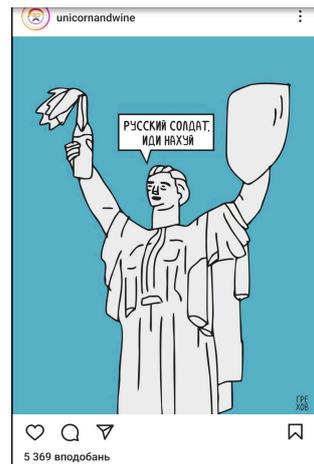


Figure 11. Reproduced with permission from Oleksandr Grekhov (unicornadwine); published on Instagram, 2022.¹⁹

The frequent depiction of a sword and a shield together, an emblematic recurrent motif within the discourse of heroism, highlights the strong link between protection and violence, encapsulating one of the central functions of the heroic topos in culture in general—the validation of violence. Violence, which is otherwise a taboo in human society, becomes sanctified when invoked in the pursuit of defensive repulsion against the aggressive other.

The Cossacks' pivotal role in the narrative of Ukraine's military glory highlights another important aspect of heroic self-representation: martial competence and boldness. Many images poignantly convey the analogy drawn between the Cossacks and the modern Ukrainian armed forces, such as those that show Ukrainian soldiers writing a letter, an evocation of Ilya Repin's "Cossacks are Writing a Letter to the Turkish Sultan" (Figure 12).



Figure 12. Reproduced with permission from Yaroslava Yatsuba (bright_arts); published on Instagram, 2022.²⁰

The allusion implies that the soldiers are trying to come up with profanities and vulgarities to humiliate and insult the opponents but also signifies courage and resilience.

Vulgurities as a tool and practice of resistance became extremely popular in the digital media spaces since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, and Instagram popular art is no exception (Figure 13).



Figure 13. Reproduced with permission from Yurii Zhuravel (zhurawell_yura); published on Instagram, 2022.²¹

Started by an insult from a guard from the Snake Island mentioned above, vulgar language became a widely used rhetorical means frequently used within the heroic discourse aimed at demonstrating the absence of fear in the face of aggression. These direct references to the cultural heroes are aimed at amplifying the key features of heroic topos such as supernatural powers, strength, courage, resilience, fearlessness, and dauntlessness and the paradoxical nobility inherent in sanctioned violence. The semiotics of heroism inherent in these visual representations are deliberately used to meet the need for heroic meanings in the society fighting the war as well as to encourage national heroic self-understanding and self-representation.

The need for heroic representation in times of war manifests itself through the persistent representations of heroic acts and heroic personalities. The war hero as an epitome of war self-representation is consistently sought within cultures that respond to the war experience. Consequently, diverse depictions within popular art on platforms such as Instagram construct images of battlefield heroes from the stories of individuals engaged in the war. Among such representations, the figure known as the “Ghost of Kyiv” holds significant prominence—a mysterious jet pilot who is believed to have shot down multiple Russian aircraft in air-to-air combat (Figure 14).

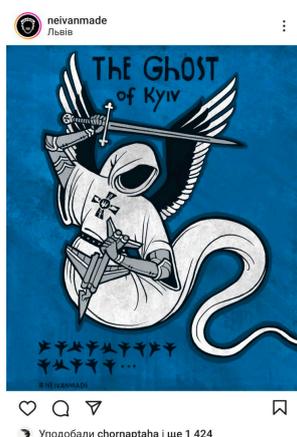


Figure 14. Reproduced with permission from Mykhailo Skop (#NEIVANMADE); published on Instagram, 2022.²²

Originating in three disjointed tweets, not only is this character an urban legend, but it is also a vivid example of digital storytelling creating modern true-to-life simulacrum. Retweeted and then going viral through other digital practices including the popular visual art on Instagram, this mystification gave birth to a new mythological character in Ukrainian war folklore, with the result that various world media platforms speculated about the real existence of this ace pilot. The media offered multiple theories ranging from a fake character of the “grassroots propaganda narrative²³” or some particular Ukrainian pilots engaged in warfare to the “collective spirit of the jet pilots of the Tactical Air Force Brigade” safeguarding the sky above Kyiv. In the broader cultural context, encompassing digital realms and popular visual art on platforms such as Instagram, there is an absence of skepticism regarding the authenticity or truthfulness of these images. Instead, there is a responsiveness to the demand for semantic expressions grappling with the realities of war. As a result, such heroic images are being multiplied and replicated to meet this demand. Therefore, the portrayal of the Ghost of Kyiv as well as depictions of the defenders of the Mariupol Azovstal steel plant—a symbol of resilience and determination—stand as the most recurrent among a plethora of heroic imagery (Figure 15).



Figure 15. Reproduced with permission from Maksym Palenko (maksympalenko); published on Instagram, 2022.²⁴

Moreover, Ukrainian Armed Forces personnel are frequently featured in popular art on Instagram. These representations, however, significantly diverge from heroic implications. The majority of these images center on and consequently emphasize the human experiences of the soldiers embroiled in the war. Through these portrayals, references to the soldiers’ pre-war lives and professions emerge, for instance depicting them carrying out usual jobs such as driving buses or directing films, thus underscoring their ordinariness in civilian roles. The images also highlight the emotional vulnerability of the soldiers fighting in the war as, for example, the image representing the body of a soldier with a void in the place of the soul. The portrayal of emotional fragility and human connection is further emphasized when soldiers are depicted alongside their families, loved ones, children, and pets (Figure 16).



Figure 16. Reproduced with permission from Iryna Sosimovych (marginai_); published on Instagram, 2022.²⁵

Quite often, the focus is directed towards faces and eyes—gentle gazes, warm smiles, and embracing gestures—intending to project the non-violent disposition and benevolence of Ukrainian soldiers. This perspective serves to shift the focus from the violence inherent to the battlefield into a positive and humane portrayal of Ukrainian soldier, which leads to the positive affirmation of militarism and positive self-representation as an otherwise non-violent and peaceful nation that only fights as a means of protection.

The realm of warfare has traditionally been a predominantly masculine sphere. Graham Dawson in his book *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* draws a substantial connection between battlefield, manhood, and heroic discourse. Dawson contends that traits such as aggression, strength, courage, and endurance are not only perceived as natural and inherent attributes of masculinity but are also intrinsically linked to the battlefield experience (Dawson 2013, p. 1). He acknowledges that often martial masculinity was complimented by domestic femininity, which portrayed women as caretakers requiring protection (Dawson 2013, p. 2). Indeed while a soldier consistently embodies and is a “quintessential figure of masculinity” (Dawson 2013), the “gendered imagery of wars often assigned women roles in this heroic narrative as the ones associated with tearful goodbyes and loyal waiting for the men to return from the war as well as anxieties, grief for the lost sons, husbands and fathers” (Dawson 2013, p. 2). However, our analysis of Ukrainian popular art on Instagram demonstrates certain re-genderings of the national heroification discourse affording space for heroines. Modern digital popular culture not only amplifies the visibility of female combatants but also assigns to femininity new meanings and ideologies. In contrast to male combatant figures, which are depicted in a way that can highlight peaceful and nonviolent predispositions, female images featuring heroic rhetoric are depicted more violently, signaling a much stronger determination to fight which is expressed with body language and facial expressions. Women are portrayed in robust stances, raising triumphant hands, and maintaining direct eye contact, all signifying an inclination toward aggression and resolve. There are numerous images of women armed with an array of weapons ranging from knives to machine guns and bazookas (Figure 17).



Figure 17. Reproduced with permission from Nataliia Zakharova (natashale777); published on Instagram, 2022.²⁶

A recurring symbol of women-protectors images is embodied in swords and shields as well as in the images of children and babies that some female characters shield whilst carrying a weapon in their hands. Also, artists often illustrate how women can simultaneously fulfill several important social roles in times of war. For example, Nievanmade depicted a female angel wearing a Ukrainian Armed Forces uniform, holding a sword in one hand and a scale in the other, which is a reference to Saint Michael²⁷ (Figure 18).

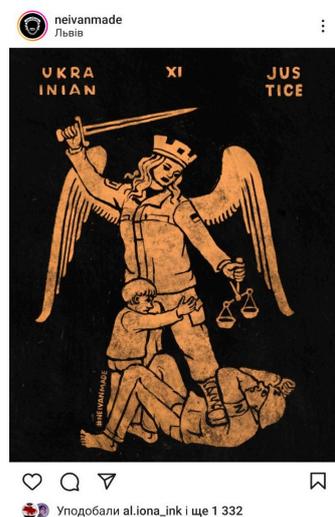


Figure 18. Reproduced with permission from Mykhailo Skop (#NEIVANMADE); published on Instagram, 2022.²⁸

This image combines biblical, social, legal, and civil symbols. This combination reveals, first of all, the inner strength of a woman who is forced to defend her children and family with weapons in her hands.

Women are often depicted as active participants who lead battles side by side with men. In this case, the image of a Ukrainian woman warrior also confronts the enemy and in many illustrations she is endowed with an extraordinary strength, not only internal but also physical. For example, the artist #NEIVANMADE created a number of such posters dedicated to women in war (Figure 19).



Figure 19. Reproduced with permission from Mykhailo Skop (#NEIVANMADE); published on Instagram, 2022.²⁹

Among them, it is worth highlighting a poster of a female soldier bending the turret of a Russian tank with her bare hands. The woman has an infinity sign above her head and is larger than the tank, indicating her spiritual superiority over the enemy as well as the infinity of justice on earth.

Certain images allude to the figure of the Virgin Mary with baby Jesus or a transformed Virgin Mary Oranta—a revered symbol of Ukraine’s defense against adversity. Oranta is also considered to be a protector of Kyiv, as there has been a cultural legend that the city will stand indestructible while the mosaic icon of the Virgin Orante is extending her arms over Kyiv on the “Indestructible Wall” of Saint Sophia Cathedral since 11th century. However, we see that the depiction of Oranta in the new digital and cultural realms is being transformed into more heroic and more active since her arms are now raised higher, symbolizing, instead of a prayer, a heroic triumphant gesture which, together with the weapon in the arm, symbolizes readiness for combat and active protection.

A witch, an image of a woman who defeats the enemy with a spell, a song, a look, etc., is another female cultural hero that can become immensely popular in times of war. Among images of witches, the “Konotop Witch” is the most famous artistic image that emerged during the occupation of Konotop (Sumy Region) by the Russian military forces. The intertextuality of this image dates back to 1837 when the Ukrainian writer Hryhoriy Kvitka-Osnovyanenko published a novel with the same name. The modernized image of a witch in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian War, where a Ukrainian woman can defeat her enemies with the power of words alone, is a recurrent symbol for many illustrators. This image has become a new symbol of resistance to Russian armed aggression. It is so deeply embedded in contemporary Ukrainian culture that, in addition to being visualized in digital art, has found a place in multiple variations in music³⁰ and cinema³¹.

Moreover, there are images of Ukrainian women in traditional national costumes carrying weapons. As an example, in a drawing by anta_arf, a woman’s face is serious and hostile, and she has nine sabers behind her back (Figure 20).



Figure 20. Reproduced with permission from Anastasiia Orobko (anta_arf); published on Instagram, 2022.³²

The intertextuality of the image of sabers refers to the Nine of Swords tarot card. The artist changes the swords to sabers in her work to emphasize Ukrainianness. The author's comment accompanying the artwork refers to the fact that there will be losses not only in Ukrainian society but primarily among the enemies. A similar motif is developed by Marinoss_art depicting a woman in Ukrainian national costume with a pitchfork and homemade incendiary mixtures behind her back. The woman holds a bloody bear's head in her hands, which directly indicates the defeat of the Russian military³³. Ukrainian artists use this symbol very effectively in their representations the Russo-Ukrainian War. One piece shows a young woman with sunflowers behind her back, which have also become a new symbol in this war. The sunflower is one of the traditional floral symbols of Ukraine, which has the meaning of fertility and life. However, with the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the symbolic meaning of this flower has transformed due to the real story of a woman from Henichesk (Kherson region). When Russian troops invaded the town on 24 February 2022, a Ukrainian woman approached an armed Russian soldier and said, "Did you come to our land? Why the fuck did you come? You came to our land. Put seeds in your pockets so that when you are killed, sunflowers will sprout". The video of this incident quickly went viral, and artists began to actively use the sunflower in their work as a symbol of victory and the continuation of life in Ukraine after the defeat of the Russian occupiers. Overall, all the above-mentioned images of female heroes manifest determination, aggression, anger, and strength and facilitate a reconfiguration of the predominantly male-centric heroification discourse. This representation challenges the traditional male-dominated narrative of warfare by empowering female characters to legitimize anger and violence actively.

6. Constructing the Self: Victimhood Narratives

Russia's invasion of Ukraine encouraged not only resistance and resilience among the civilian population and military but also led to physical and mental suffering and multiple cases of violent abuse. Thus, the the extremely violent nature of the war not only evokes the emergence of heroic discourses but also triggers the shaping and propagation of victimhood narratives. Artists immediately respond to the horrors of the war, to the destruction and violence caused by the Russian aggression, and they create timely illustrations to share not only military but also the wartime experiences of civilians. Our analyzed dataset contains multiple images that contribute to the victimhood narrative of the Russo-Ukrainian War. These artworks, representing individual and collective war experiences,

demonstrate the shocking, changing reality of millions of Ukrainians to establish a shared collective understanding of the self and the other and to share emotional experiences of the wartime period.

Ukrainian victimhood narratives are articulated through varied textual and visual means. On the textual level, the images are usually accompanied by the authors' comments or descriptions, which contextualize the artwork, setting it in a particular time frame, space, event, or situation. Also, specific hashtags such as #warcrimes, #aggression, #genocide, and #russiaisterroriststate are used to mark the images that depict war victims. On the visual level, it is possible to identify two groups of victimhood narratives. The drawings in the first group are used to report the events of the Russo-Ukrainian War, to document the war crimes, and to narrate the grief and the losses of the civilian population. These artworks vividly depict reality and reflect the real-time events of the invasion, often referring to specific ones. The second group presents more precise symbolic or allegorical artistic interpretations of the war and constructs the victimhood narratives employing specific national (sunflower, stork, or trident) or universal (dove of peace, child, or woman) symbols of victimhood.

Reflecting the brutal reality of the war, these artworks are focused on both the depiction of the emotional and physical suffering of Ukrainians (individual and collective) and on the destructive transformations of urban, cultural, and natural landscapes. Most of the visual representations of war victimhood in the wake of the invasion were focused on new and shocking experiences—missile attacks on Ukrainian cities, time spent in bomb shelters, displacement of an enormous part of the Ukrainian population, casualties, and victims of the war killed by Russian soldiers. The visual representation of the first weeks was very diverse and depended on the authors' geographical location and their personal experiences. The collective imagery of this period often involves photographic-like depictions of wartime reality as an immediate and acute response to Russian aggression (Figures 21 and 22).

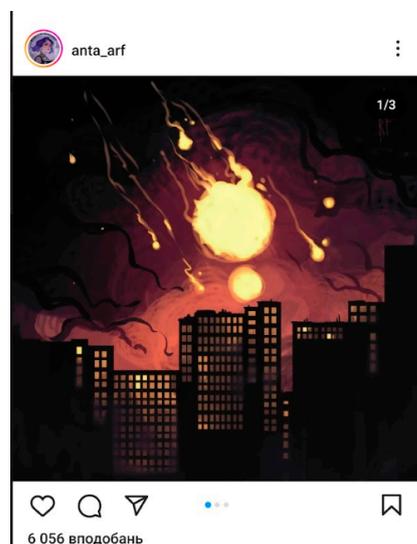


Figure 21. Reproduced with permission from Anastasiia Orobko (anta_arf); published on Instagram, 2022.³⁴

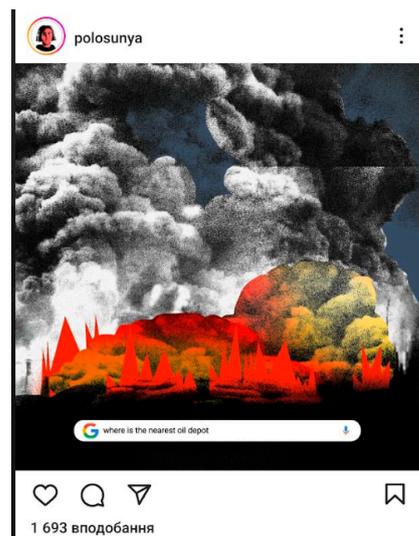


Figure 22. Reproduced with permission from Yevheniia Polosina (polosunya); published on Instagram, 2022.³⁵

As the war continued, some events acquired symbolic significance and were transformed into collective victimhood narratives. For example, the atrocities in the Kyiv region (massive killings in Bucha, Irpin, and Hostomel) and the siege and further occupation of Mariupol dominated in the collective artistic representations of war victims during the first three months of the invasion. The visual articulation of these highly mediatized events helped the artists not only to conceptualize the image of the aggressor and share painful collective experiences of the war but also fostered the promotion of digital activism, as such images were often combined with anti-war slogans and hashtags in Ukrainian and English aimed at a domestic and international audience. The emotional power of such artistic interpretations of the events of the war lies in the combination of the war's real-time dimension and universal symbolic representations of violence and aggression. These include, for example, images of abused innocent children and young women, the symbolic use of colors (red and black), images of corpses, and other allegorical representations of the universal battle between good and evil (animalistic, biblical, or literary allegories) (Figures 23 and 24).



Figure 23. Reproduced with permission from Oleg Bilyi (olkwhite); published on Instagram, 2022.³⁶



Figure 24. Reproduced with permission from Anna Serdiuk (maliunok); published on Instagram, 2022.³⁷

Visceral images of violence and aggression reveal to viewers the cruelty and brutality of the invasion. While constructing the victimhood narrative, artists repetitively use the images of dead or wounded bodies of civilians (imagined or inspired by real war events), visualize the scenes of the execution or torture of civilians, and illustrate the attacks on the civil infrastructure of Ukrainian cities. Chaos and disorder are inherent to many illustrations devoted to the articulation of the consequences of the Russian aggression, which might reflect the general disorientation and confusion of many Ukrainians at the beginning of the war. It should be noted that while constructing the victimhood discourse, the majority of digital artists focus exclusively on the visual representations of the victim and not on the perpetrator. The image of the other is metaphorically portrayed through the use of weapons such as rockets and missiles (Figure 25).



Figure 25. Reproduced with permission from Natali Kulish (Kozeko) (nataliko_illustrations); published on Instagram, 2022.³⁸

The personification of the enemy is only present in a limited number of analyzed artworks depicting a visualization of sexual violence. In addition, some artists use easily recognizable Z symbols to semiotically mark the aggressor (Figure 26).



Figure 26. Reproduced with permission from Yelyzaveta Mykhailus (yablonska.mykhailus); published on Instagram, 2022.³⁹

In our opinion, this can be explained by the desire to focus the audience's attention on the vulnerable image of the victim and evoke compassion and sympathy. Moreover, this also allows the viewer to concentrate on the consequences of the aggression and not on the act itself or on the source of the aggression, which is known to everybody.

The recurring semiotics of violence and victimhood is visualized through the detailed depiction of civilian victims of the war. In the majority of artistic interpretations, the role of the victim is attributed to the children and women. Indeed, women and children are the most vulnerable category of society in times of crisis, and even more so in times of armed conflict. Digital art responded quickly to this issue and visualized all the consequences by the Russian invasion of Ukrainian cities and villages. While women are depicted as victims of sexual violence, children represent innocent and naïve victims unable to protect themselves who have the potential to evoke compassion and sympathy. In our opinion, the predominance of such representations is explained by the need to shape the image of an ideal victim, non-aggressive and innocent, which can appeal to diverse audiences. Children are essentially portrayed either alone or together with their mothers under attack of Russian missiles or displaced from their homes because of the war. The integrity of children's and women's bodies is often violated; their bodies are abused and distorted, and they are presented as agency-devoid victims of war unable to alter the violence-provoking situation (Figure 27).

Some interpretations show civilians with bounded hands or eyes to underline their helplessness on the one hand and depict the consequences of torture and brutality on the other (Figure 28).



Figure 27. Reproduced with permission from Anna Serdiuk (maliunok); published on Instagram, 2022.⁴⁰

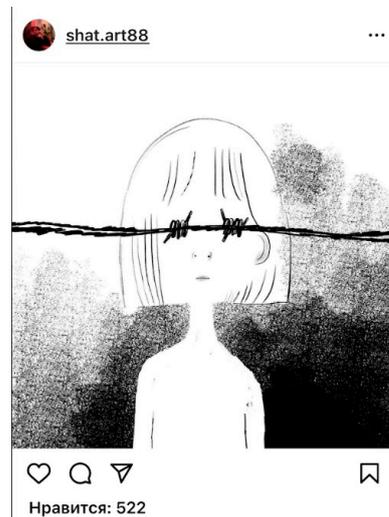


Figure 28. Reproduced with permission from Oleksandr Shatokhin (shat.art88); published on Instagram, 2022.⁴¹

The symbolism of female and child victimhood is further contextualized with the use of Ukrainian national symbols (trident, national flag, sunflower) or the traditional national colors of Ukraine (blue and yellow). The connection between images of suffering, stereotypical victim portrayals, and the emblematic Ukrainian national representations helps to build the links between Ukrainian war experiences and the larger cultural and media space. Interestingly, in the analyzed dataset, there are no visualizations of Ukrainian soldiers as victims of Russian aggression, which indicates a certain way of framing war experiences by legitimizing one form of suffering while silencing others.

The brutality of violence and sexual abuse during the war is often expressed through the depiction of fragile young women's bodies combined with such symbols of violence as black and red colors. The act of sexual abuse of women and girls is perhaps the most painful narrative of the Russo-Ukrainian War that artists reflect upon. The pain of Ukrainian women and girls suffering from such violence is visualized in digital art through the depiction of nudity and the defenselessness of the victim, and this is combined with the expression of a wide palette of negative emotions from apathy to rage (Figure 29).

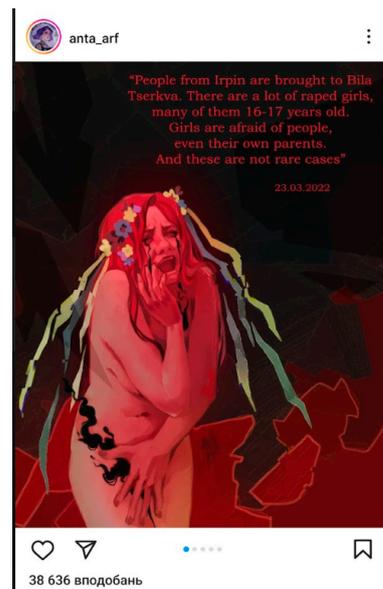


Figure 29. Reproduced with permission from Anastasiia Orobko (anta_arf); published on Instagram, 2022.⁴²

Digital illustrations are often based on real war crimes of the Russian-Ukrainian war. For example, Marta Koshulinska depicted the tragedy that occurred at the Kramatorsk railway station on April 8, 2022. Thousands of Ukrainians were waiting for evacuation trains at the station that day when Russian forces attacked the city with rockets. The attack left 61 people dead and hundreds injured. (Figure 30).



Figure 30. Reproduced with permission from Marta Koshulinska (marta_koshulinska); published on Instagram, 2022.⁴³

In some artworks, the images of women and children are fused and express the collective suffering of civilians during wartime. The image of the mother caring for and protecting their children affected by the war is central to the imagery of Ukrainian art productions, and such imaginary has gradually acquired a symbolic, almost sacred, meaning. During the first months of the war, several images of wounded or psychologically devastated young mothers breastfeeding their babies in bomb shelters or the subway went viral. Naturally, artists were inspired by those powerful images. For example, Anta_arf

drew upon the traditional image of a mother and depicted her as the Madonna with a halo around her head (Figure 31).



Figure 31. Reproduced with permission from Anastasiia Orobko (anta_arf); published on Instagram, 2022.⁴⁴

This biblical motif elevates the Ukrainian mother to the rank of saint. For example, Marinoss_art uses the image of a mother in her works, combining a real-life person and biblical imagery. A halo with a subway map adds modernity to this biblical image of a mother (Figure 32).



Figure 32. Reproduced with permission from Maryna Solomennykova (marinoss_art); published on Instagram, 2022.⁴⁵

Another central topic of victimhood discourse is the visual expression of the loss and grief of Ukrainians during the war. Many images of separated families, orphaned children, mothers mourning their children, or the souls of the dead visiting their families are motifs that represent the feeling of loss of millions of people. Moreover, these images symbolize the loss of lives and the fact that the dead cannot be brought back. The image of a burning candle as a symbol of mourning is often incorporated into the digital canvas of the artworks as an element of textual expression (replacement of the Ukrainian letter “i” with a candle) or as an element of visual imagery.

The spatial dimension of war is also employed to illustrate the drastic transformations of the lives of Ukrainians and their feelings of loss and disorientation. The material destruction of Ukrainian cities and villages during the war is reflected in the digital works of many artists. The transformed landscapes of Kyiv, the regions around Kharkiv, and generalized images of wartime urban spaces reflect the complexity of the conflict's impact on the city spaces and also show the close connection between spaces and the individuals who inhabit them. Images of destroyed buildings populated by peaceful civilians before the war represent the sufferings of all Ukrainians by contrasting life before and after the war. Repeatedly, Ukrainian artists use poignant images of destroyed homes to illustrate the feelings of ordinary Ukrainians who have experienced such loss or who have had to abandon their homes because of Russian aggression (Figures 33 and 34).



Figure 33. Reproduced with permission from Mykhailo Skop (#NEIVANMADE); published on Instagram, 2022.⁴⁶



Figure 34. Reproduced with permission from Olena Zahorodnyk (alekon_zahorodnyk); published on Instagram, 2022.⁴⁷

The recurring semiotic representation of home combined with the colors of the national flag or national symbols was widely used by digital artists to express collective feelings of loss and nostalgic longing for the past. Reflecting the emotions of millions, the image of home also symbolizes life before the Russian aggression (Figures 35 and 36).



Figure 35. Reproduced with permission from Anna Khomych (chornaptaha); published on Instagram, 2022.⁴⁸

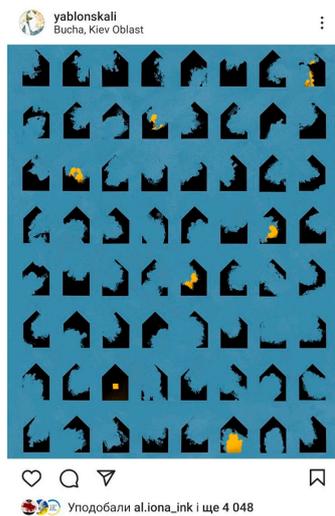


Figure 36. Reproduced with permission from Yelyzaveta Mykhailus (yablonska.mykhailus); published on Instagram, 2022.⁴⁹

Some artists frequently represent the motif of longing for the lost home or the lost homeland. Many women and children had to leave Ukraine and seek shelter in other countries because of the war. For example, Yelyzaveta Mykhailus illustrated nostalgic longing by showing the inseparable connection of Ukrainians with their country (Figure 37).

Thus, the victimhood discourse helps to make sense of the violence caused by the war, to share collective emotions, and also to mobilize national and international audiences. The diversity of wartime experiences is visualized through a variety of visual and textual means that collectively construct the victimhood narrative.



Figure 37. Reproduced with permission from Yelyzaveta Mykhailus (yablonska.mykhailus); published on Instagram, 2022.⁵⁰

7. Constructing the ‘Other’: Shaping the Image of the Enemy

The depiction of the enemy—“the other”—as the central antagonist is consistent with typical patterns observed in depictions of warfare. These depictions serve multifaceted functions within the context of a country being at war. Principally, they operate as mechanisms of demonization and dehumanization of the enemy, simultaneously employing satire through a diverse array of caricatures as well as using symbolism and allegory to cast the image of the foe in an unfavorable light, thereby subjecting them to humiliation and ignominy through these visual narratives.

Among the plethora of visual representations of “the other” on Instagram are various monstrous images that serve to imbue the foe with demonizing attributes. The most recurrent motif is the skeletal figure symbolizing both death, which foreign invaders brought to Ukrainian soil, and the hope those invaders will themselves die, a Ukrainian sentiment encapsulated in this image (Figure 38).



Figure 38. Reproduced with permission from Oleksandr Shatokhin (shat.art88); published on Instagram, 2022.⁵¹

In addition, Russians are very often represented as vampires sucking blood, an allegorical reference to the bloody conflict started by the invaders.

Furthermore, multiple representations of demons within these visual narratives explicitly enact the mechanism of demonization. Monsters, demons, imps, malevolent clowns, zombies, and vampires, in conjunction with the depiction of hell and curses to burn in hell, function as a vivid borderline that radically and clearly demarcates what is good from what is evil and separating the good “us” from the bad “them” (Figures 39 and 40).



Figure 39. Reproduced with permission from Studio “AzaNiziMaza” (aza_nizi_maza); published on Instagram, 2022.⁵²



Figure 40. Reproduced with permission from Maksym Palenko (maksympalenko); published on Instagram, 2022.⁵³

Among the animalistic images, the most obvious and recurrent personifications of Russia as the aggressor are embodied in the figures of the Russian bear and the double-headed Russian eagle. In these representations, both images come across as belligerent, malevolent, and unintelligent, ultimately succumbing to defeat or annihilation which aligns with the main strategies of depicting the foes (Figure 41).



Figure 41. Reproduced with permission from Yurii Zhuravel (zhurawell_yura); published on Instagram, 2022.⁵⁴

Not surprisingly, one of the most common negative images personifying the war is that of the Russian President Vladimir Putin. As a central figure within the overarching thematic construct of the enemy, Putin assumes various representations that invoke all the primary mechanisms inherent to the depiction of the enemy. On the one hand, he can be portrayed as a bloodthirsty demon, cannibalistic in nature, and/or monstrous in form associated with specters of death, destruction, and a nuclear menace to Ukraine. Portrayals of President Putin frequently accentuate the motifs of threatening the most vulnerable—children—or sending Russians to die. All of the above manifest both the demonization and dehumanization strategies. While Russian propaganda builds up the narratives of this war by evoking Soviet victory in the Great Patriotic War, Ukrainian artists invert them by drawing parallels between Russians and Nazis, Vladimir Putin and Adolf Hitler. Artists frequently depict Putin as Hitler, thus using a symbolic capital of this iconic image of a bloody dictator in Western culture (Figure 42).

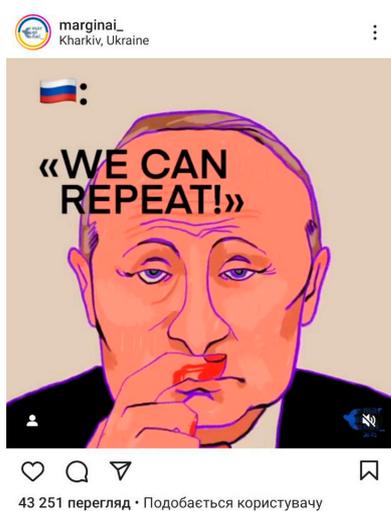


Figure 42. Reproduced with permission from Iryna Sosimovych (marginai_); published on Instagram, 2022.⁵⁵

The letter Z used by Russian troops as the symbol of this war campaign easily evokes reminiscence of a swastika. Ukrainian artists appropriated this symbol to imbue Russian actions in the war with the history of Nazism and German aggression during the Second World War.

The symbolism of blood and the color red is difficult to overestimate, as not only does it appear prominently in the majority of pictures representing the enemy, but it is a predominant imagery of the war in general. Putin is portrayed with hands immersed in blood, or legs in blood (which in one case is also an allusion to the Russian flag with its red stripe), swimming or drowning in blood, or depicted in the act of drinking blood (Figure 43).



Figure 43. Reproduced with permission from Andriy Petrenko (petrenkoandryi); published on Instagram, 2022.⁵⁶

A recurrent motive in the depiction of Putin is his physical annihilation. He is often portrayed as defeated, shattered, disintegrated, lifeless, or in a state of utter destruction. The recurrent motif of Putin's death is a potent reference to everything Putin personifies: Russia, Russian troops, and the horrific consequences of the war, malevolent elements, and warfare cases in Ukraine. In addition, some images employ humiliating satire in order to represent the Russian President in a diminutive form and ruthlessly ridicule him (Figure 44).



Figure 44. Reproduced with permission from Yurii Zhuravel (zhurawell_yura); published on Instagram, 2022.⁵⁷

Such depictions are manifested in various forms, including the portrayal of Putin as an ugly dwarf (implicitly alluding to Putin's relatively short stature), a scarecrow, a frightened boy, or a trembling bully. The act of ridiculing Putin's naked body, notably his genitalia or bottom, is not only aimed at building on the idea of feebleness, weakness, and impotence but also targets his masculinity as the symbol of military prowess and victory.

Similar symbolism is applied to other Russian and even non-Russian, political, military, and religious leaders and propagandists. When featuring non-Russian politicians, such images, however, take the form of political cartoons that use satire to ridicule particular events or politicians. For example, Oleg Bilyi depicts the Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko, who is seen as a Russian ally in the war, in an extremely derogatory and humiliating manner (Figure 45).



Figure 45. Reproduced with permission from Oleg Bilyi (olkwhite); published on Instagram, 2022.⁵⁸

The same strategies of demonization, dehumanization, and ridicule are employed when depicting Russian soldiers. Predominantly characterized by ugly looks, monstrous features, and crude faces, these depictions consistently dehumanize and demean Russian soldiers. While the explicit use of blood as the symbol of war is a little less frequent in the depiction of soldiers, various symbolic attributes of death, such as corpses, coffins, and skeletons, are used to promote the idea of the invader's ultimate annihilation.

Furthermore, the inclusion of the exposed lower part of the body alludes to the allegations of sexual crimes by soldiers, while the presence of weapons and bloodied hands signify acts of violence and warfare atrocities (Figure 46).



Figure 46. Reproduced with permission from Anna Sarvira (anna.sarvira); published on Instagram, 2022.⁵⁹

Notably, a recurrent motif in such depictions involves the juxtaposition of a Russian soldier and a Ukrainian child, which builds upon the perpetrator–victim dichotomy. The most widely circulated representation of a Russian soldier is that of a looter, depicted in the act of burglarizing houses and stealing household items, including electric appliances, in order to bring them home to their Russian families. In some instances, this portrayal

of looting involves depictions of children's toys covered by blood to add more poignancy (Figure 47).



Figure 47. Reproduced with permission from Yurii Zhuravel (zhurawell_yura); published on Instagram, 2022.⁶⁰

The allegorical depiction of everything Russian as various disgusting things also serves as a mechanism of dehumanising the enemy. Such portrayals including refuse, vomit, waste, excrement, open wounds, and parts of the human body such as the brains or intestines as well as various rotting substances, all of which are identified as clearly Russian in order to evoke a profound sense of disgust (Figure 48).

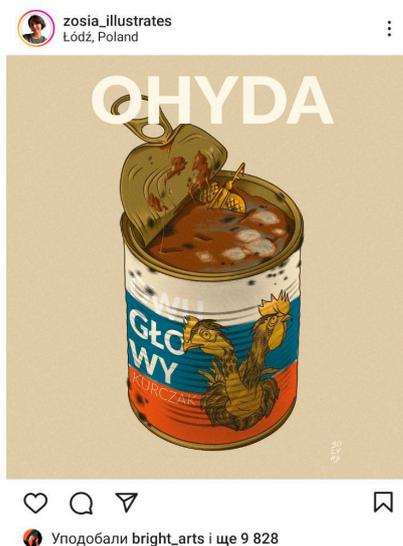


Figure 48. Reproduced with permission from Sophiia Sulii (zosia_illustrates); published on Instagram, 2022.⁶¹

The elicitation of disgust appears to be one of the most effective tools of propaganda representing the antagonistic “other”. Another powerful idea presented by Ukrainian artists on Instagram is total destruction. By legitimizing violence on the battlefield, warfare also legitimizes the depiction of violence and animosity in the public discourse surrounding the conflict. Consequently, there are various depictions of extermination and death, including burned limbless corpses marked by the letter ‘Z’, decapitated heads, and remnants of Russian soldiers serving as fertilizer that flowers and crops grow through (Figure 49).



Figure 49. Reproduced with permission from Yelyzaveta Mykhailus (yablonska.mykhailus); published on Instagram, 2022.⁶²

It is noteworthy that dead soldiers are mainly depicted in caricatures, a deliberate choice aimed at eliminating the human element, further contributing to dehumanizing the enemy. In addition, there is hardly ever a depiction of direct confrontation or killings between Ukrainian and Russian military personnel. This illustrates how popular art, and more broadly militainment, diminish the reality of death in war. Instead, the idea of extermination and destruction is very frequently applied to figures such as Putin and the Kremlin, thus metonymically symbolizing the Russian Federation.

Profanity and obscenity have gained immense popularity since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, which proves the great discursive power of this tool in times of conflict. One strategy employed to symbolically humiliate the enemy involves satirical depiction or naming of the lower part of the body, buttocks, genitals, and related bodily functions like defecating and urinating. In this context, profane and vulgar language serves a dual purpose: to demonstrate resilience and simultaneously to insult and, thereby, belittle the foe (Figure 50).



Figure 50. Reproduced with permission from Yaroslava Yatsuba (bright_arts); published on Instagram, 2022.⁶³

When visual artists on Instagram portray Russia and Russians, they frequently employ one of the two approaches. Firstly, they draw upon, use as reference, and invert the Russian narratives about the USSR and WWII. Secondly, they appeal to a political rhetoric adopted by some segments of the Russian population to disclaim their support for the war and distance themselves from it. Conversely, they depict the Russian population as fooled by propaganda into supporting the war (Figure 51).

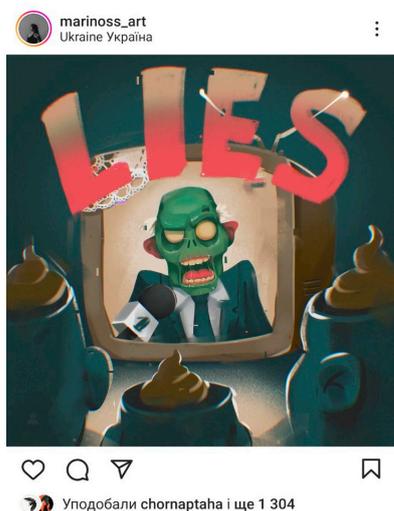


Figure 51. Reproduced with permission from Maryna Solomennykova (marinoss_art); published on Instagram, 2022.⁶⁴

Clearly in both cases, the visual discourse of war assigns blame to the Russian population for their perceived failure to oppose the current war (Figure 52).

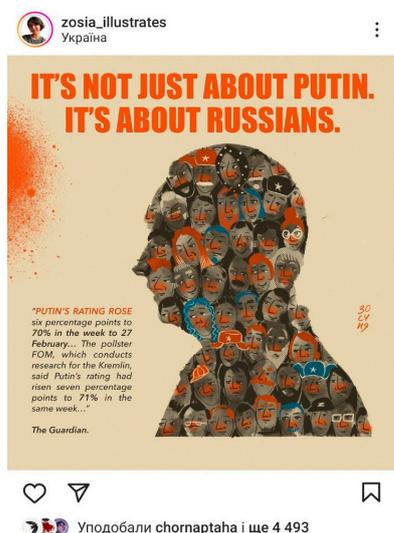


Figure 52. Reproduced with permission from Sophiia Sulii (zosia_illustrates); published on Instagram, 2022.⁶⁵

Moreover, visual artists extend this blame to Russian culture itself, symbolically depicting prominent Russian cultural icons, including writers, singers, or even cartoon characters, with the attributes of the war such as weapons, missiles, or blood. For example, in the collage posted by Maksym Palenko, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Alexander Pushkin, Mikhail Lermontov, Vladimir Vysotskiy, and other famous Russian artists are depicted as a military unit against a bloody red background (Figure 53).



Figure 53. Reproduced with permission from Maksym Palenko (maksympalenko); published on Instagram, 2022.⁶⁶

These symbolic representations underline the perspective that Russian culture is seen as a weapon used to advance Russia's hegemony in other spheres. While Putin denies Ukrainian culture and identity and proclaims one of the main objectives of the war to be the assertion of cultural dominance, it is noteworthy that cultural battles have transcended the realm of symbolism and metamorphosed into an extended battleground of the Russo-Ukrainian War.

8. Constructing Time and Space: Representation of Wartime Reality

The corpus of digital art works we analyzed includes an essential thematic dimension relating to the construction and representation of wartime reality. As an overarching topic, wartime reality encompasses the impact of the war on individuals, communities, and societies. It involves a complex interplay of physical, psychological, economic, social, and political factors that shape the experiences, circumstances, surroundings, and challenges faced during a period of armed conflict. War turns everyday life that everyone is used to into a wartime reality that is full of danger, destruction, losses, which are often met with resilience, hope, and inventiveness. We focus on the representation of wartime reality (time, everyday life, displacement, the call for support among others) with the goal of delineating its distinctive features.

Time is one of the most significant themes in the representation of wartime reality. This includes the documenting of current events, temporal suspension, and the correlation of present and future. Documenting the current state of affairs at a certain point in time is predominantly aimed at drawing the world's attention to what is happening in Ukraine. Notably, at the beginning of the full-scale invasion, artists created images capturing the aftermath of the aggression, vividly depicting numerous attacks, explosions, destructions. This artistic response, largely initiated on 24 February or a few days later, captures the horrors and the devastation of the first days as well as the first emotions and reactions. In these artworks, certain images portray Ukrainians abruptly awakened by explosions visible from their windows (Figure 54), while others incorporate visual motifs featuring alarm clocks or watches with the time of the first bombings, suggesting the immediacy of the unfolding events and the first moments that will never be forgotten.



Figure 54. Reproduced with permission from Daria Filippova (flppvdd); published on Instagram, 2022.⁶⁷

Artists constantly return to the topic of the impact of the initial days of the full-scale invasion, emphasizing the suspension and disruption of time perception experienced by many Ukrainians due to the war's enormous impact on their lives. To convey this experience, artists used images of a calendar in different variations: some featured the date "24 February 2022" on a mostly blank sheet of paper, while others replaced all other dates with the number 24. Another set of images represented the war's duration by counting the days on a calendar instead of showing the usual dates.

Even when spring arrived, artists continued to produce images that portrayed winter or the month of February. Frequently, a verbal component accompanied these images, explaining that during wartime, spring felt like winter for Ukrainians—a time when they could not fully experience and enjoy the usual rejuvenation of nature. Thus, for many, time seemed to freeze on the day when the full-scale invasion began and their lives turned into a never-ending February where each new day resembled the one before it (Figure 55).

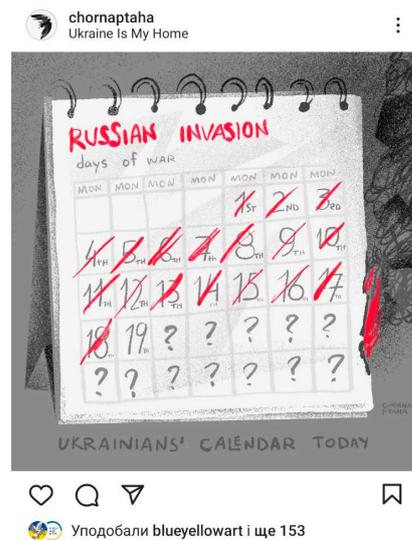


Figure 55. Reproduced with permission from Anna Khomych (chornaptaha); published on Instagram, 2022.⁶⁸

Although many images represent harsh wartime experiences of the present, there is also space for envisioning a more positive future. A significant number of the analyzed artworks express the idea of rebuilding Ukraine and returning to the peaceful everyday

life that people are used to. Such visuals often include verbal components enumerating the activities that individuals anticipate accomplishing once the war is over (for example, reuniting with family, enjoying a concert with friends, etc.) and/or the nonverbal components which illustrate these actions. The distinct verbal features of present/future representation are the usage of the future tense to list the activities that Ukrainians are looking forward to and the usage of the word victory (*peremoga*) and its variations. An important nonverbal feature involves a noticeable difference in the color palette between depictions of the present and the future. Darker colors, primarily shades of gray and black, tend to dominate in the representations of the present, whereas brighter and more vivid colors are used for images of the future.

The artistic representation of everyday life during wartime may be divided into two groups: the portrayal of destruction resulting from armed conflict and the depiction of routine activities and rituals. Despite the somber reality of witnessing the wreckage and the consequences of the awful attacks in daily life, it is important to capture these moments in digital art to serve as a record of war crimes and to disseminate information about the true state of affairs in Ukraine. In the analyzed artworks depicting everyday life, the most common are images of destroyed buildings, missiles targeted at houses and multi-storied buildings, big holes in houses, ceilings, buildings on fire, and cracks in windows. These artworks often contain only nonverbal components because images express the whole horror of the situation better than words. Employing a color palette consisting of black, grey, and red effectively conveys the extent of devastation, while blue and yellow signify the Ukrainian context. Additionally, certain artists incorporate silhouettes of individuals within their artworks to symbolize civilian casualties.

Many everyday activities shift significantly during wartime, deviating from the usual norms. As an example, the newly acquired habit of not switching on the lights in order not to be a target for the enemy becomes a symbol of solidarity, mutual support, and care. The image below created by Anna Khomych depicts dark houses with yellow lights in the shape of hearts inside (Figure 56), symbolizing the light that the people bring to each other's lives.

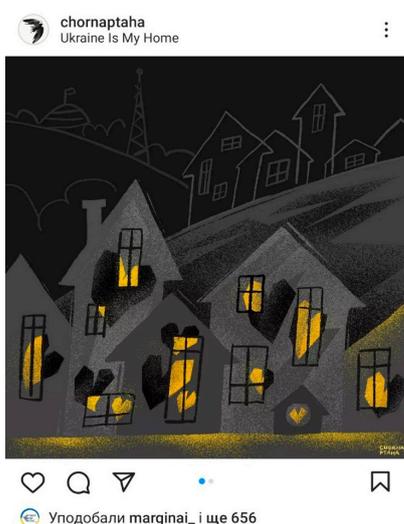


Figure 56. Reproduced with permission from Anna Khomych (chornaptaha); published on Instagram, 2022.⁶⁹

Engaging in activities such as studying in a dimly lit room using a flashlight (Figure 57), doing something in candlelight, or cooking meals outside on a fire are no longer solely associated with notions of excitement or romance. Instead, they have become essential actions, which are necessary for accomplishing routine tasks in the absence of electricity.



Figure 57. Reproduced with permission from Mariia Kinovych (marikino0); published on Instagram, 2022.⁷⁰

Another activity depicted in the digital art of Yevheniia Polosina is a practice that became a daily ritual for many Ukrainians—reading the news. During war, most Ukrainians often start their day by reading the news on their mobile devices and subsequently check the news throughout the day to keep up with unfolding events (Figure 58).



Figure 58. Reproduced with permission from Yevheniia Polosina (polosunya); published on Instagram, 2022.⁷¹

Despite the transformation of everyday reality into a distressing wartime existence, where survival often prevails over living life (as depicted in the artwork of Natali Kozeko (Figures 59 and 60), Ukrainians' resilience and desire to live and move forward remains unyielding.



Figure 59. Reproduced with permission from Natali Kulish (Kozeko) (nataliko_illustrations); published on Instagram, 2022.⁷²



Figure 60. Reproduced with permission from Natali Kulish (Kozeko) (nataliko_illustrations); published on Instagram, 2022.⁷³

The celebration of the holidays as part of everyday life during wartime has gained a completely new and unusual meaning. Taking into consideration that the time span of the analyzed digital art is the first three months of the full-scale invasion, the holidays that are mentioned include International Women’s Day (8th of March), T. H. Shevchenko’s Birthday (9th of March), Willow Sunday (Verbna Nedilia), Easter, and Victory in Europe Day—Day of Remembrance (8th of May). Other holidays that are also depicted, but less often, are Mother’s Day, Vyshyvanka Day⁷⁴, and the Day of Kyiv. Although the holidays’ names might not be explicitly mentioned in the artworks, inferences can be drawn from publication dates and nonverbal elements. For example, Taras Shevchenko’s birthday is marked by a picture of the renowned Ukrainian poet or several lines from his famous literary works. For Easter, the artists depict pysanky—dye eggs with Ukrainian ornaments—which in the artwork usually include a combination of Ukrainian and military ornament. On the 8th and 9th of May, many artists posted artworks that remind viewers of World War II. On 8 May, they incorporated the image of a poppy, which is a symbol of remembrance and hope for a peaceful future. Many artworks published on 9 May question the phrase “Never again” (Figure 61), which is associated with the lessons of the Holocaust and other genocides. With

a note of sarcasm, the enemy is depicted bearing the words “we can repeat”, indicating that Russians are repeating the awful events that took place less than a century ago.



Figure 61. Reproduced with permission from Yaroslava Yatsuba (bright_arts); published on Instagram, 2022.⁷⁵

Therefore, the portrayal of everyday life in the analyzed digital artwork is characterized by the prevalence of nonverbal components, among which the most-often-used images are flashlights as a source of light, loudspeakers that symbolize air raids, cell phones—a medium of communication and source of news—and symbols of different holidays. The verbal components, if present, mainly contain only a few words and are supplemented by nonverbal components.

Another significant aspect of the wartime reality narrative is the topic of displacement. With the start of the full-scale invasion, a considerable number of Ukrainians became refugees, and they were compelled to seek safety for their families and, above all, their children. The digital art that is part of this group contains images of families who leave their war-torn country with only one backpack or a small suitcase. The artwork of Anna Khomych (Figure 62) accurately depicts the feelings of many Ukrainians who were forced to leave with only one emergency backpack and had to fit into it the things that meant the most for them—things that remind them of their homes, their lives before the war.



Figure 62. Reproduced with permission from Anna Khomych (chornaptaha); published on Instagram, 2022.⁷⁶

Although some of the artworks portray people walking toward safety or driving their cars, most of the images show evacuation trains that rescue people and take them away from danger (Figure 63).



Figure 63. Reproduced with permission from Marta Koshulinska (marta_koshulinska); published on Instagram, 2022.⁷⁷

The color palette of the digital art in this thematic group mainly consists of blue, yellow, and white colors (signifying the path to safety), and some also contain shades of gray and black (suggesting the threats that people are running away from). A characteristic feature is the depiction of pets (cats and dogs) in many artworks in this group. This is one of the most poignant aspects of the experience of Ukrainian refugees, many of whom took their pets with them instead of leaving them behind.

One of the aims of the wartime reality narratives in the analyzed digital art is to attract the attention of the world and motivate others to support Ukraine. With the start of the full-scale invasion, many artists posted digital art that explained to viewers how they can stand with and support Ukraine (financial donations, helping refugees abroad). Later on, the artworks drew attention to the necessity to close the sky over Ukraine in order to protect Ukrainians from daily aerial attacks. Some of the images depict different ways of helping the Ukrainian army, which include donating blood, making camouflage nets, raising money, and collecting things necessary for the army. The artists also touch upon the topic of social media, including banning messages of Ukrainians because they disclosed the appalling reality of the war. Many posts were hidden by Instagram's moderation algorithms due to complaints about sensitive content; nevertheless, the artists found new ways to make their artworks visible to the world.

Overall, the wartime reality narrative encompasses a rather numerous group of artworks in the digital art that appeared within the initial three months of the full-scale invasion. The artists did their best to provoke global awareness of the events unfolding in Ukraine, seeking support and promoting options to help the country and its people. Moreover, these artists intended for their work to emphasize the enduring resilience of Ukrainians who persist in their daily lives and endeavors despite the great adversities they faced, all in pursuit of Ukraine's victory.

9. Conclusions

The results of our research serve as a significant contribution to the scholarly understanding of the transformation of military conflict representations in the digital age and the role of popular culture in this context. This paper constitutes the first comprehensive analysis of visual narratives in popular digital art during the Russo-Ukrainian War using a large body of material obtained from the Instagram platform. Our findings revealed the profound impact of digital technologies on how individual and collective experiences are reflected in digital art during the Russo-Ukrainian War. Another important contribution of this study is the identification of digital art's high responsiveness to external events, especially to developments during the current war, which indicates its relevance to the dynamic reality of the conflict.

The role of art in wartime is hard to underestimate. Together with other tools of informing and narrating, it serves to share the emotional experiences of the war, convey war traumas, reconstruct/deconstruct war narratives, promote digital activism, and frame public opinion about the sides of the conflict. Art created for, shared on, and disseminated virally via Instagram during the Russo-Ukrainian War serves as a poignant reflection of how popular culture responds to and incorporates the complex realities of armed conflicts, encompassing diverse experiences, clear and intuitive concepts, and deep emotions. As the analysis has shown, Ukrainian digital artists who have been experiencing the Russo-Ukrainian War first-hand not only convey their personal impressions, emotions, and perceptions of the new war reality by recreating the confusion of the initial stage of the invasion but also use their art to promote important anti-war and pro-Ukrainian messages, to frame the war as an existential battle for Ukrainian nation, and to shape the image of the enemy. The sharp dichotomy between before and after, the heroes and the enemies, and the self and the other are inherently present in the visual artworks of the first three months of the Russian full-scale invasion. The artworks vividly visualize the defragmented and ruined landscapes of Ukraine and black-and-white portrayals of the sides of the conflict and show how the social reality of Ukrainians was transformed by the invasion.

The analysis of the visual discourse of the Russo-Ukrainian War proves that both embodied individual and collective experiences are reflected in Ukrainian digital art. The initial moment of shock at the beginning of Russia's full-fledged invasion served as the focal point for the analyzed artworks. The artists shared their emotional responses to the beginning of the war as well as reacted to ongoing political and military events. Individual experiences are encapsulated in the work, reflecting the devastating collapse of temporal and spatial parameters of reality, their emotional perception of the invasion, and their personal stories of living the trauma of war. The expression of collective experiences in Ukrainian digital visual art turned out to be highly responsive to both external events and ongoing wartime developments, incorporating not only collective emotions but vividly reflecting a changing reality, serving to narrate and frame the war for viewers. This immediacy between the events of the war and the process of creating artworks means that the results were topical and short-lived, which raises questions about the longevity of such art.

The platform-mediated narratives of war that shape the inclusive image of the self, the generalized image of the other, and experience of the wartime reality represent to some extent grassroots storytelling. They help to make sense of the war, channel collective emotions, and engage audiences in symbolic warfare. Our study revealed three dominant narratives in the visual discourse of the war (the construction of the self, the construction of the other, and the construction of a new wartime reality) which jointly represent the complexity of the reality of the war and form an epistemic understanding of the conflict. The narrative constructing the other conceptualizes the image of the enemy as dehumanized and demonized, devoid of any human traits. The discourse constructing the self is primarily associated with the heroization of different representatives of Ukrainian society: military, civilians, politicians, men and women, heroes, and ordinary citizens. This imagery emphasizes their daily courage that the Ukrainian people exhibited while fostering the

consolidation and mobilization of the society in the face of existential threats. Another important element of the construction of the self is the narrative of victimization which conveys the trauma and horrors of the war but also mobilizes Ukrainian and international communities and attracts broader attention to war crimes committed by the Russian army. The contrast between homogenized “other” and diversified “self” serves to construct the black-and-white vision of the war and saturate social media with affective interpretations of the evolving war reality. The representation of wartime reality brings to the surface everyday war experiences, their physical, psychological, and socio-economic aspects, making others “live” and “feel” the war.

The symbolic power of digital art relies on the repetitive use of both traditional and novel symbols of the nation, war, violence, and resistance interwoven with narratives of the war. Combined with the active use of commenting, hashtagging, and incorporating anti-war slogans into the canvas of the artworks, digital art transforms artists into active agents in the war. Indeed, the ways in which Instagram art connects artistic representation of the brutal reality of the invasion with digital activism makes it possible for digital war art to function as a new war strategy. Ukrainian visual art can be perceived not only as a form of artistic reflection on a changing reality, but more as a form of artistic participation in the military conflict, which modifies the relationship between art and war, blurring the boundaries between creative practice, the chronicling of war events, and direct participation in the war. Ukrainian artists, by constantly reproducing participatory patterns and using their artworks as a tool of non-violent resistance, engage the audience in new forms of warfare, shaping and altering the visions of everyday war experiences, the material and nonmaterial impacts of aggression, and the affective interpretations of identity, nation, and violence. Overall, our research has enhanced comprehension of the influence of digital art on the perception of military conflicts, paving the way for more extensive exploration in the fields of cultural studies, media studies, and sociology in the context of a contemporary war.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, methodology, validation, formal analysis, investigation, resources, data curation, writing—original draft preparation, review and editing, visualization, supervision, S.K., A.M., O.P., Y.S.; analysis of heroic and enemy narrative, S.K.; analysis of female images in heroic and victimhood narratives, O.P.; analysis of victimhood narrative, A.M.; analysis of everyday reality construction, Y.S.; project administration and correspondence, A.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Appendix A

**KEY EVENTS OF
RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR
FEBRUARY–MAY 2022**

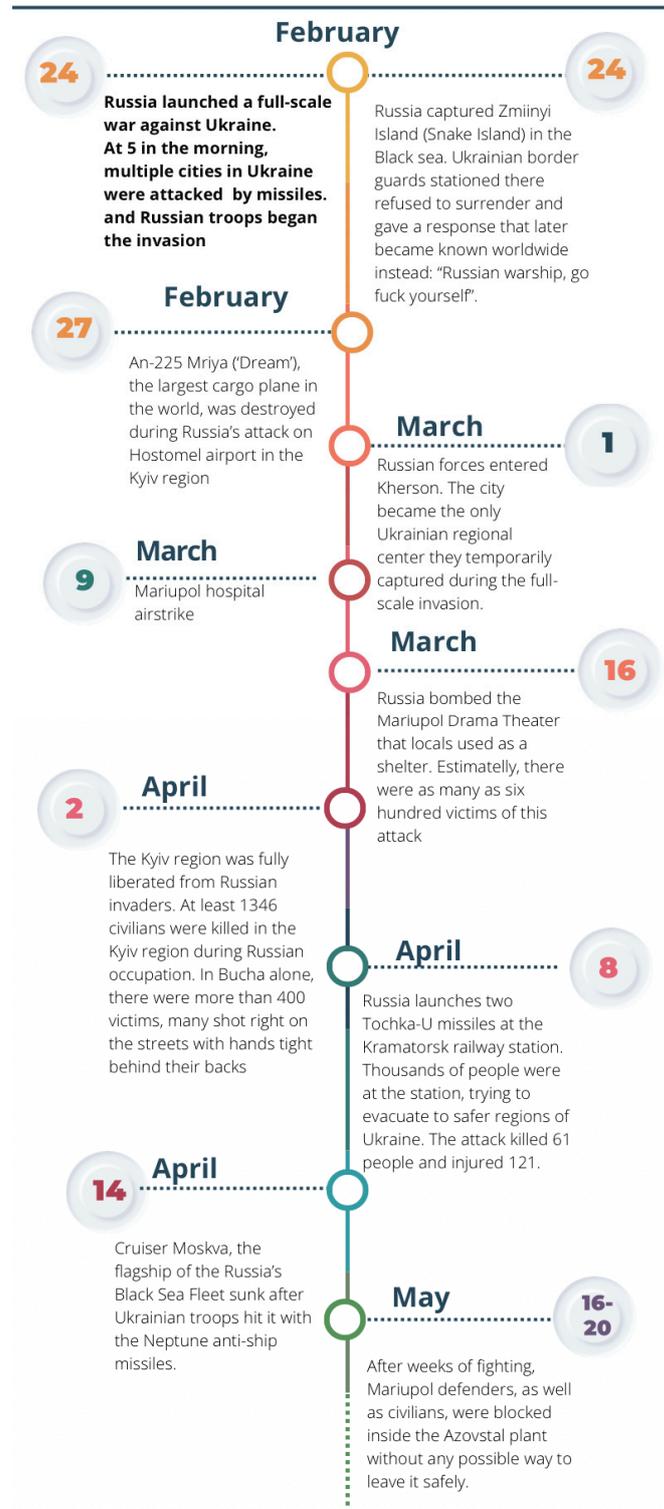


Figure A1. Timeline of the Key Events of the Russo-Ukrainian War (February–May 2022).

Notes

- ¹ For example, only the Ukraine War Art collection platform (<https://war-art.mkip.gov.ua/> accessed on 30 May 2023) lists about 400 projects of war art including performances, exhibitions, festivals, flashmobs, installations, and war documentation events, but there exist many others.
- ² See note 1 above (accessed on 5 July 2023).
- ³ <https://ukrainer.net/illustrators-about-war/> (accessed on 14 August 2023).
- ⁴ It is important to highlight that while the Russo-Ukrainian War started in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Russian forces into Donbas, it never evoked such a strong public response since it was not seen as a full-scale war by the general public in Ukraine and abroad. There is a distinction between the start of the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2014 and the escalation to a full-scale invasion in 2022. The annexation of Crimea and the conflict in the Donbas region marked the beginning of hostilities, but it was the events of 24 February 2022 that brought a dramatic increase in the scale and intensity of the conflict, catching the attention of the global community. Therefore, it is crucial to emphasize that, although the full-scale invasion triggered wide and multifaceted reactions and emotions of people, February 24th cannot be called the beginning of the war, but the beginning of the full-scale war.
- ⁵ Also known as Zmiinyi Island.
- ⁶ See Appendix A.
- ⁷ <https://www.instagram.com/flppvdd/> (accessed on 31 August 2023).
- ⁸ https://www.instagram.com/zhurawell_yura/ (accessed on 19 July 2023).
- ⁹ <https://www.instagram.com/petrenkoandryi/> (accessed on 21 August 2023).
- ¹⁰ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaoUW9vNn13/> (accessed on 19 July 2023).
- ¹¹ https://www.instagram.com/p/Ca7s_Jztl3e/ (accessed on 22 June 2023).
- ¹² https://www.instagram.com/p/ClyCqIssBKf/?img_index=1 (accessed on 13 July 2023).
- ¹³ https://www.instagram.com/p/CaxjP2ytOp-/?img_index=1 (accessed on 17 July 2023).
- ¹⁴ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CbVJL-iNNic/> (accessed on 7 June 2023).
- ¹⁵ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CbKIONRNsp9/> (accessed on 31 July 2023).
- ¹⁶ <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ca2JBtjAlCi/> (accessed on 19 July 2023).
- ¹⁷ https://www.instagram.com/p/CmBtho-M7yG/?img_index=1 (accessed on 13 July 2023).
- ¹⁸ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcSAkg6twu8/> (accessed on 19 July 2023).
- ¹⁹ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CamUeKwNa77/> (accessed on 11 August 2023).
- ²⁰ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CbQbgTMtbfj/> (accessed on 19 July 2023).
- ²¹ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CbFX4mlt1Rh/> (accessed on 19 July 2023).
- ²² <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaiJjgN7cY/> (accessed on 5 June 2023).
- ²³ The platform-mediated narratives of wartime reality represent grassroots propaganda. In contrast to deliberate top-down propaganda, which, according to Espinoza and Piña-García, is methodologically designed to shape perception, manipulate beliefs, and direct the behavior for the benefit of propagandists (Espinoza and Piña-García 2023), grassroots narratives are created at the community level and spread through social media. They facilitate the audience's participation in symbolic combat, assist in making sense of the conflict, and channel societal emotions.
- ²⁴ https://www.instagram.com/p/Cdh5Tt0tQ_v/ (accessed on 10 June 2023).
- ²⁵ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CbAc0pzDvhX/> (accessed on 9 June 2023).
- ²⁶ https://www.instagram.com/p/CcBO9A_s_dJ/?img_index=1 (accessed on 13 July 2023).
- ²⁷ Saint Michael the Archangel is a protector and the leader of the army of God against the forces of evil. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, he is the Supreme Commander of the Heavenly Hosts. In Ukraine, Saint Michael is also recognized as the defender of Kyiv and the patron of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.
- ²⁸ https://www.instagram.com/p/CbXwu6_NOGi/ (accessed on 5 June 2023).
- ²⁹ <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ca5gVMptQXN/> (accessed on 5 June 2023).
- ³⁰ For example https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cdEEffF7_rU (accessed on 13 August 2023), <https://youtu.be/BTJBX3QekDM>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i8HQED3nP8U> (accessed on 13 August 2023).
- ³¹ In 2023, the Ukrainian horror film Konotop Witch, based on the real story of a woman from the city of Konotop, began filming; <https://www.unian.ua/lite/kino/konotopska-vidma-z-yavivsvya-tizer-ukrajinskogo-filmu-zhahiv-pro-viynu-z-rf-video-12305496.html> (accessed on 13 August 2023).
- ³² <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaWpYfys5vQ/> (accessed on 1 August 2023).
- ³³ The bear is one of the animal symbols of the Russian Federation.

- 34 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaZTN4RsXSQ/> (accessed on 1 August 2023).
- 35 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CbqGPP-tcAn/> (accessed on 16 June 2023).
- 36 <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cb7nrkJt3yM/> (accessed on 13 July 2023).
- 37 <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cb8n22aIE0T/> (accessed on 17 July 2023).
- 38 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CbhJUcZNAFs/> (accessed on 15 July 2023).
- 39 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcOjjQZNk-1/> (accessed on 30 May 2023).
- 40 https://www.instagram.com/p/CbYHIE-NsR9/?img_index=1 (accessed on 17 July 2023).
- 41 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcXYBa6NwnB/> (accessed on 10 June 2023).
- 42 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CbfT61NMAJ-/> (accessed on 1 August 2023).
- 43 https://www.instagram.com/p/CcGZhs_NAx9/ (accessed on 14 August 2023).
- 44 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CbU4CwBMWxO/> (accessed on 1 August 2023).
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- 61 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CdG0BUWthhg/> (accessed on 15 August 2023).
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- 67 https://www.instagram.com/p/CbVv11yIwwx/?img_index=1 (accessed on 31 August 2023).
- 68 https://www.instagram.com/p/CbF1eF_N58O/ (accessed on 5 August 2023).
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- 70 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CbhRwe8NnnV/> (accessed on 7 June 2023).
- 71 https://www.instagram.com/p/CbXFl3-NwpQ/?img_index=1 (accessed on 16 June 2023).
- 72 https://www.instagram.com/p/CcgT35JNrWC/?img_index=1 (accessed on 15 July 2023).
- 73 https://www.instagram.com/p/CcgT35JNrWC/?img_index=2 (accessed on 15 July 2023).
- 74 An international holiday aimed at preserving the famous Ukrainian embroidered shirt (better known as “vyshyvanka”) as a symbol of the material and spiritual heritage of Ukrainians.
- 75 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CdSVQrzN5jP/> (accessed on 19 July 2023).
- 76 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CbZ6mqjN3wO/> (accessed on 5 August 2023).
- 77 https://www.instagram.com/p/Ca-A7SUNA_i/ (accessed on 14 August 2023).

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