

“Spiritual Armour”: Crafting Ukrainian Identity through Vyshyvanka

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(SCHWARTZ-SHEA – YANOW 2012: 45).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

GENDER AND “THE MAKING POINT OF VIEW”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

SYMBOLS AND MEANING-MAKING

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE VYSHYVANKA

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

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

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



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



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



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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CONTEMPORARY FORMATION OF THE VYSHYVANKA

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

(ZHURZHENKO 2004: 30–31).

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

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

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

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

VYSHYVANKA IN CONTEMPORARY PROTEST

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

VYSHYVANKA DAY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

COMMERCIALISED VYSHYVANKA

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CONCLUSION

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

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

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BIOGRAPHY

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