

A Solidarity Narrative: The Soft Power of Ukrainian Wartime Poetry

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ABSTRACT

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

KEYWORDS

Ukraine, poetry, war, contemporary, Ukrainian literature

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INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

UKRAINIAN POST-INVASION POETRY: SOCIAL AND LINGUISTIC ASPECTS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(my translation)

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

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

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

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

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

(CABKA 2023B):

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

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

(QTD. IN ПАКТУХ 2022C):

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

(my translation)

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

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

POETRY AS A CULTURAL RESPONSE TO THE WAR

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

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

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

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

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

*...Hereinafter there will be music. Poems will be written.
There will be many poems on impossibility
of poetry after gas chambers, on irrelevancy
of literature in courtrooms.
But hereinafter there will be music and hereinafter there will be literature.
Written by those who survived.*

(СЕРГІЙ ЖАДАН [ОФІЦІЙНА СТОРІНКА], 2023)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

TEMPORALITY AND POSTWAR RECONSTRUCTION IN POST-INVASION POETRY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CONCLUSION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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