

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

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ABSTRACT

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

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KEYWORDS

Ukraine, Russia, popular geopolitics, war, memes, strategic narratives

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## INTRODUCTION

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

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



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

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

FIGURE 2: UMF MEME LINKING THE COLOURS OF THE UKRAINIAN FLAG WITH ITS GEOGRAPHY, WHILE ALSO LINKING THE COUNTRY'S DEFENCE TO THAT OF THE UK DURING WORLD WAR II



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## THE PCWP BATTLESPACE: A SELECTIVE AND IDIOSYNCRATIC HISTORY

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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



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

realm of international engagement, there is a vibrant shared marketplace of ideas that allow state, parastate, and non-state actors alike to engage in various forms of everyday IR production and consumption (cf. SAUNDERS

2014, BJÖRKDAHL – HALL – SVENSSON 2019, GAUFMAN 2021).

## STRATEGIC NARRATIVES IN THE ERA OF MEMES

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

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

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

TABLE 1: A TENTATIVE TYPOLOGY OF UMF TWEETS

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

## WAR REPORTING

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

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

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

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

## POST-SOCIALIST/POST-SOVIET DIVERGENCE FROM RUSSIA

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

## UKRAINE QUA THE MODEL OF POSTCOLONIAL INDEPENDENCE

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

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

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



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



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

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



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

### “Global” Popular-Political Culture

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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



## CONCLUSION

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

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

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Responding to questions about the potentially inflammatory “Aryanising” of the Jewish leader’s brown irises qua the public digital square (i.e. reddit), and given the tortuous discourse of Nazism that has characterised the conflict since 2014, Time’s competitor Newsweek’s director of photography Lauren Joseph stated that “the images around Zelensky appeared to be reflecting in his eyes which is another nod to the Ukrainian flag” (qtd. in Cole 2022).
- 2 Here I use the historical, imperially-inflected term *Mitteleuropa* rather than the more contemporary and comparatively neutral term *Zentraleuropa* to highlight geopolitical hierarchies of power vis-à-vis the nations between the German-speaking domain and tsarist Russia. Specifically, the former refers to the Habsburg lands following the conclusion of the ‘German Question’, later becoming a discursive element of the plan for a German-dominated eastern Europe following the Brest-Litovsk Treaty (1918), in which an independent Ukraine featured prominently (see Kann 1980).
- 3 With regard to the gendered nature of popular cultural representations of the conflict, the above vignette is emblematic of one of many framing techniques employed across the PCWP battlespace, wherein a proud, resilient, and humanised female form stands in opposition to a comparatively anonymous (often faceless) male agent of the Russian “empire.” However, as my case study demonstrates, other framings of the conflict are predominantly masculinist in their depictions of Ukrainian resistance, often employing emasculating tropes to frame enemies of the country.
- 4 Drawing on military definitions of the battlespace (as opposed to the older term of the ‘battlefield’) and aiming to further reify Takacs’ notion of popular culture qua a battlespace of international politics, I define the PCWP battlespace as an assemblage of environments, factors, and conditions whereby the weapons of war (in this case, news broadcasts, social media content, films, television series, cartoons, songs, fashion, symbols, fads, jokes, etc.) are brought to bear on a given conflict to successfully 1) protect the force; 2) achieve political, strategic, tactical, and operational goals; and 3) maintain morale on the home front and deplete the will and capacity of the enemy to continue the fight.
- 5 Importantly, we should distinguish between the world-formation (*Weltbildungen*) and the world-view (*Weltanschauung*), with the former being a more passive inheritance based on various inputs received over time and the latter being a more active modelling of the world based on preconceived, often religious or ideological orientations (see Naugle 2002).
- 6 The intervention in the 2016 US presidential election represents a critical milestone in such efforts; however, when examined from a neutral perspective, Russian attempts to sway the American voting public in favour of a preferred candidate is simply a latter-day, social media-abetted retort to the 1996 election campaign, when three American political operatives assisted Boris Yeltsin’s campaign for re-election with the connivance of then-President Bill Clinton (see Kramer 1996).
- 7 Almost immediately after being fired from his position at Fox News, Carlson received a job offer from RT, underscoring his utility in reaching key segments of the American electorate.
- 8 In 2023, Zelenskyy lent his artistic talents to American country music-star Brad Paisley’s single “Same Here,” which highlights commonalities between the US and Ukraine, including freedom, community, familial values, and a love of country.
- 9 As part of an industry initiative entitled “Brewing for Ukraine,” a number of craft breweries launched special beers in support of Kyiv and/or donated proceeds to assisting Ukrainians impacted by the conflict, with the most famous beer of this sort being Russian River’s *Putin Huylo* (“Putin is a dickhead”); see Borenstein 2022 on the history of the phallogocentric epithet.
- 10 In 2022, the comic industry veteran Scott Dunbier crowd-funded a project entitled *Comics for Ukraine: Sunflower Seeds*, which teased contributions from such luminaries as Alex Ross (*Amazing Spider-Man, Kingdom Come, and Justice*) and Bill Sienkiewicz (*New Mutants, Elektra, and Moon Knight*).
- 11 As Riabchuk discusses, this is simply a continuation of an invented “*dramaturgical framework*” that Moscow constructed to destabilise the pro-European administration that swept to power in the Orange Revolution (2016: 81).

- 12 A number of scholars have already begun examining how war-themed memes are being disseminated, amplified, and negotiated as part of the conflict (cf. Kreps – Lushenko – Carter 2023; Toymentsev 2023; Volkovskaia 2023). Recognising that memes are more than play, a group of western academics quickly established the Saving Ukrainian Culture Heritage Online (SUCHO) project to archive the meme content produced, thus preserving an “important and fragile element of internet communication that manifested itself abundantly since the beginning of the war” (Rakityanskaya 2023: 1).
- 13 The Russophone epithet, which has been turned into a badge of honour for the purpose of self-identification, carries both agricultural and physiognomic connotations. Given Ukraine’s role as the breadbasket of Europe, it reflects an association with grain cultivation and the peasants who did the work. However, the term also signifies the characteristic (male) Ukrainian Cossack hairstyle of a single tuft of hair on an otherwise-shaved head (also known as *oseledets* or *chub*), which has long served as a semiotic marker of Ukrainian nationalism.
- 14 (Central) Eastern Europe is seen as Middle-earth, as CEE is itself an interesting PCWP feedback loop, as reflected in the X feed Middle-earth of Eastern Europe (@Me\_of\_EE), as well as Tolkien’s geopolitically-inflected representations of space which manifest in his magnum opus.
- 15 Winnie the Pooh is a popular stand-in for President Xi, resulting in Chinese censors banning the character’s likeness.

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