

Unveiling the War and Constructing Identities: Exploring Memes in Ukrainian and Russian Social Media during the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the generation and deployment of visual narratives in Ukrainian and Russian digital participatory cultures, with a specific focus on internet memes in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It analyzes the form, content, and functions of these memes and highlights their similarity in mobilizing and conveying political messages despite variations in their visual components. The study indicates that Ukrainian memes are used not only to promote political agendas but also serve as trauma coping and collective identity construction mechanisms in times of crisis, helping to promote new war narratives that are engaged in the construction of the self and the other.

KEYWORDS

participatory culture, popular culture, social media, memes, multimodal analysis, Russo-Ukrainian War

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INTRODUCTION

Roger Stahl, in his book *War, Media and Popular Culture*, posits that we are currently living in times of interactive wars, where the line between war and entertainment is more than ever “permeable and negotiable, especially in a world saturated with electronic media” (2009: 4). Indeed, the contemporary digital landscape determines not only how the wars are conducted, but also how they are experienced, communicated, and consumed (HOSKINS – SHCHELIN 2023). Today’s Russia’s war against Ukraine is no exception; digital technologies immediately transformed the war into content that is simultaneously processed by millions, enabling us to “see” and “live” the conflict “through a prism of personalized realities” (IBID.). These flows of all kinds of content, which are shared, remixed, liked or commented on, co-construct the digital world of war, creating new war ecologies (BOICHAK – HOSKINS 2022), and providing a productive space for new symbols and stories of living the war to emerge. These flows also help to shape and disseminate new war narratives, framing the way we see both victims and aggressors. On this depends how we make sense of the war, how it will be remembered or forgotten, and how others will see Ukraine and Russia, whom they will support or which side they will ultimately take in the conflict.

Needless to say, in the modern history of conflicts, visuals have been used repeatedly as a part of information strategy or propaganda. Drawings, images, photographs, posters, cartoons, and maps represent a powerful tool of informing, but they can also act as a means for popular mobilization and political consolidation around a common goal. They serve not only to document the historical events, but to provide an ideological interpretation, idealizing the self and demonizing the enemy or shaping a global perspective of the conflict. With the emergence of digital media, new means of informing and shaping opinions appeared, dramatically increasing the amount of visual content coming from areas of conflict (MORTENSEN 2017: 1142). Indeed, the current Russo-Ukrainian War is incredibly visual; it immediately oversaturated the media with visual digital productions, documentary and artistic, which are coming from various sources and feeding the newsfeeds of millions of internet users (HOSKINS – SHCHELIN 2023). Due to the variety of artistic participatory responses of online communities and the creativity in the use of cultural memetic artifacts, the current war is often defined as a “meme war” and Ukrainians are called “a meme nation” (ADAMS 2022).

As Alexandra Brzozowski argues, today memes have become not only the new symbols of Ukrainian resistance and resilience, but also an unlikely source of varied digital activism and funding, as they counter Russian propaganda and support Ukrainian charities (BRZOZOWSKI 2022). Memes, in the form of both static and moving images, because of their ability to go viral and encapsulate political, social, or ideological commentary, are allowed to react rapidly to the changing reality of the wartime, framing the vision of the conflict.

The aim of this paper is to study the visual discursive dimension of the war and to analyze how visual artifacts of popular culture in Ukrainian and Russian social networks participate in the meaning-making and collective identity construction of the networked communities. The comparative perspective of the study allows one not only to see how epistemologies of the war are being created, but also to juxtapose the meaning-production process in the antagonistic cultural landscapes, which can help to reveal the different sets of visual means deployed to conceptualize the main war narratives and provide alternative interpretations of the war developments in Russian and Ukrainian social media. By analyzing the divergence in the meaning-making mechanisms and differences in iconography sources in Russian and Ukrainian participatory environments, the paper contributes to the existing discussions about the competing narratives regarding the common past and shared culture between Russia and Ukraine, which were significantly intensified by the Russian invasion (SHEVEL 2016, MÄLKSOO 2023). Special attention will be devoted to exploring national and international popular cultural references, while investigating their significance in rendering war-related issues visible and comprehensible within Russian and Ukrainian participatory cultures.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Previous research of recent years has shown a growing interest in the analysis of the interrelation between society, popular culture, and social media (BOICHAK 2022; O'DOHERTY 2021; PRESS-BARNATHAN 2017; SCHULZ 2020; WOLFSFELD 2018). As Geert Lovink argues, to some extent, “*social networking becomes identical with the ‘social’ itself*”, reflecting the complexity of modern life and allowing one to analyze its different aspects from construction of solidarity, and social mobilization to polarization or manipulation through the study of ubiquitous

user-generated discourses" (2019: 1). In the contemporary digital world, social media are examined as sites of the expression of power dynamics, where hegemonic struggles, social inequalities and cultural differences are visualized or rendered invisible (ROSE 2012: 23; SHIFMAN 2014: 119). Additionally, they are recognized as spaces for the emergence and construction of collective identities, bottom-up movements, and digital activism through participatory digital practices (GAL ET AL. 2016; JOHANN ET AL. 2023).

The increasing ubiquity of visual images in the digital landscape of social media, stimulates researchers to engage critically with the visual culture and elaborate new approaches to analyzing the ways visual artifacts are being produced, circulated, and perceived (ROSE 2012; SHIFMAN 2014; WIGGINS 2019). In recent studies, the pivotal role of visual culture artifacts is seen not only in their ability to bare political meanings or express ideologies, but also in their ability to possess their own agency in generating new meanings, evoking emotional responses, or establishing shared codes within specific communities (CALLAHAN 2020: 19). The potential of visuals to become a repository and site for collective identity construction represents one of the most studied aspects of the contemporary participatory culture (DECOOK 2018; GAL ET AL. 2016; GIORGI 2021). Following Eisenstadt and Giessen, the collective identity can be understood as a process of constant construction of in-group and out-group boundaries through social, cultural, or other performative practices (1995: 74–75). The core of this process consists in the production of a sense of belonging through the creation of symbolic codes of distinction between the self and the other (IBID.: 76). This ongoing dynamic of exclusion and inclusion enables the recurring production and validation of norms, values, and beliefs through discourse, defining the social, cultural, and political positioning of a community within a wider socio-political context (GAL ET AL. 2016: 1699). Similarly to other forms of cultural construction of difference and sameness, visual popular art, including memes, is considered a powerful identity building device (DECOOK 2018). It stimulates identification, evokes emotions, and gives a shared voice to members of networked communities (MORTENSEN – NEUMAYER 2021: 2369). However, popular culture visual productions can also act as a means of differentiation by sharpening the group boundaries, contributing to the sense of we-ness, and at the same time facilitating the exclusion of the other (GAL 2019).

The concept of meme was originally introduced by Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1976) in an attempt to explain the spread of ideas and cultural phenomena in society. According to Dawkins, the term meme refers to a piece of cultural information that is replicated, initiated, and transmitted from one member of a society to another. With the advent of digital media, the term meme has been revived by Internet users to refer their everyday cultural activities (GAL ET AL. 2016: 1700). Memes, which are now considered fundamental “artifacts of participatory digital culture” (WIGGINS 2019: 40) due to their capacity to be widely shared and remixed by Internet audiences, encapsulate some of the most essential aspects of contemporary digital culture, which makes them “the defining events of the twenty-first century” (SHIFMAN 2014: 4). Being a common practice among internet users, memes are a unique phenomenon that can relate to various socio-political contexts and “blend pop culture, politics, and participation in unexpected ways” (IBID.: 4). According to Wiggins and Bowers, memes can be categorized as a new genre of popular culture. A meme can be defined as “a remixed, iterated message that can be rapidly diffused by members of [a] participatory digital culture for the purpose of satire, parody, critique, or other discursive activity” (2019: 11).

The literature review indicated that internet memes as a part of digital popular art and a practice of social media communication, have generated significant scholarly attention. Some scholars proposed to study the potential of memes as a means of political communication and participation (BASPEHLIVAN 2023; MAHAR – MAHMOOD 2021; BEBIĆ – VOLAREVIC 2018; ROSS – RIVERS 2016) or as effective and affective tools of propaganda (NIEUBUURT 2021; CIUREL 2021; BJOLA 2017). Others focus on the investigation of activism and polarization through the use of memes (BOGERTS – FIELITZ 2019; MAKHORTYKH – AGUILAR 2020). The visual framing of war has also been explored in prior studies, but it is worth noting that despite a significant expansion of the visual representation of conflicts in art and popular culture, a vast body of literature has focused mainly on the exploration of monumental, photographic, and cinematographic artworks (BOGGS – POLLARD 2016; BIRKENSTEIN 2010; HARRIS – OMER-SHERMAN 2013; ADLER ET AL. 2019). Researchers have only recently taken an interest in the potential of memetic digital artworks for visualizing war narratives (MAKHORTYKH 2015; MAKHORTYKH – GONZÁLEZ-AGUILAR 2020; GONZÁLEZ-AGUILAR – MAKHORTYKH 2022; PETERS – ALLAN 2022; HORBYK – ORLOVA 2023; MUNK 2023; YEHOVA ET AL. 2023). A closer examination of the literature on weaponization of memes reveals a lack of consideration of their use prior to the beginning of the

full-scale invasion in 2022. Still, some research was conducted on the use of memes during the initial stages of the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2014 (WIGGINS 2016; BERTAZZOLI 2019; MAKHORYKH – SYDOROVA 2017). After February 2022, however, Ukrainian digital participatory culture as a means of resistance and resilience gained significant media attention (ANTONIUK 2022; MANOR 2022; ROMANO 2022 AND OTHERS).

In academia, both international (GÖRA – MOCZOŁ 2022) and Ukrainian perspectives (CHERNAVSKA 2022; KOVALCHUK – LITKOVIYCH 2022; KHARCHENKO 2023; RAKITYANSKAYA 2023; YEHOVA ET AL. 2023) of the war's mediatization through popular culture, gained particular attention from scholars. Their analysis investigates the functions of memetic imagery of the Russo-Ukrainian war in different national contexts as well as the transformation of the Ukrainian media and political space during the times of war. Additionally, certain authors offer theoretical perspectives on the specific role of popular culture and memetic warfare in the Russo-Ukrainian war, seeing them as an element of geopolitics (LASSIN 2023), a strategy of international diplomacy (BUDNITSKY 2023; HORBYK – ORLOVA 2023) or a form of resistance (MUNK 2023). However, it must be acknowledged that there is a lack of scientific reflection on the comparative perspective of the analysis of the digital memetic space in Ukraine and Russia. Therefore, there is a pressing need to understand how Ukrainian and Russian visual popular culture responds to the Russo-Ukrainian War, and how it reshapes and generates war narratives and constructs the vision of the self and the other. The 24th of February 2022 serves as a focal point which marks the rupture between the life before and the life after. Although the war began in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of Donbass, the scale of the current Russian invasion has directly impacted on the response of participatory culture and altered the means of constructing a new geopolitical and socio-economic reality.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

The dataset used in the analysis comprises 850 visuals obtained from Ukrainian and Russian online communities since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion. As the analysis aimed to compare strategies for using memes in digital communication among pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian groups, the criteria for selection depended on the political

orientation of the group members and administrators of online communities. Several pro-Kremlin and pro-Ukrainian groups on V Kontakte, Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram that regularly post visual content, were included in the analysis. Some of the groups existed prior to February 2022 – for example, the Ukrainian Facebook page *Fayni Memy* or the Russian V Kontakte group *Chto tam u hohlov?* – while the creation of other groups, such as the Russian telegram channel Z-Memes and the Ukrainian Museum of War Humor, was directly triggered by the beginning of the full-scale invasion. The memes were manually collected from the following Ukrainian and Russian groups starting from February 2022: Ukraine – *Fayni Memy*, Euromaidan Art, Museum of War Humor, Ukrainian Memes, and Meme Forces of Ukraine; Russia – *Chto tam u hohlov?*, *Zapadenets news*, *Chto tam u hohlyh?*, Z-Memes, and Digital Satire.¹ The mentioned social media communities have between 7 and 60 thousand followers and the users actively engage in sharing, commenting on, and reacting to group posts containing visual, textual and audiovisual content. It should be noted that new posts are published daily and due the abundance of the material, the author collected visuals at intervals of one week to ten days to obtain varied data triggered by various events of the Russo-Ukrainian War. Initially, the memes published in the main posts were extracted. Then the comments to these posts were also examined to collect other memes posted in response to the initial message. In total, social media networks provided 850 memes, 423 for pro-Ukrainian and 427 for pro-Kremlin groups. It is worth noting that the groups selected for the analysis were created for the given domestic audience, specifically for Ukrainians and Russians, which makes certain memes highly dependent on cultural contexts that are difficult to understand for the larger audience unfamiliar with Ukrainian and/or Russian culture and history. However, the data also comprises a limited number of memes targeted at a wider international audience.

To analyze the discursive power of memes during the Russo-Ukrainian War while taking into consideration their heterogeneous composition (the visual and textual component), the paper used the Multimodal Discourse Analysis approach (O'HALLORAN 2011) combined with a quantitative content analysis, which allowed the author to study the interrelation between the verbal and textual part of the meme, as well as to reveal the potential of the visual imagery of these cultural artifacts. Special attention was given to the semiotic symbolism of the memes, following Kress and

van Leeuwen's approach to semiotic analysis of multimodal communication (2006, 2012). At the first stage, with the help of the coding and content analysis, the memes were classified based on their form (only their visual and verbal form) and type of content (the main narratives and discursive topics). Furthermore, the memes were separated into different subgroups according to their content features. During the second stage, some key discursive topics were identified to complete the classification of the memes – construction of the self, construction of the other, shaping the war reality, shaping global politics, and non-war-related memes. This approach also allowed the author to single out the frequency of the use of specific persons, characters, images and symbols as well as their relations to each other. At the final stage, the main characteristics of the memes in each subgroup were studied.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

At the first stage of our empirical analysis, the form of the Ukrainian and Russian memes was examined. The analysis has revealed that most of the memes have a mixed structure and contain visual and verbal information, while visual memes represent only 10 and 12 percent of the meme content of the Russian and Ukrainian groups, respectively. The presence of the verbal component may be attributed to the possibility to remix and construct diverse ideological messages using the same visual source. Interestingly, some of the visual references are used by both Russian and Ukrainian users to create war-related memes. In this case, the visual basis for the construction of the memes is derived from the global popular culture, and the images are then easily adaptable to various discursive situations. For example, such memes as Peter Parker's Glasses, Trollface, Woman Yelling at a Cat, Distracted Boyfriend, Spider-Man Pointing at Spider-Man, Galaxy Brain and Batman Slapping Robin are productive sources of meme creation for both Ukrainian and Russian participatory culture. Furthermore, various cartoon and movie remixes from world popular culture (mostly American and Soviet cinema and animation) also represent a rich source for meme production in Ukrainian and Russian participatory culture which allows one to shape the messages using easily recognizable symbols.

Other sources of graphic material for memes rely on different historical narratives (for example, graphic materials related to WWII or the Great

Patriotic War for both memetic cultures, the Soviet period for Russia, and the Cossack times for Ukraine), or sometimes the memes are inspired by contemporary geopolitical situations or national and international political leaders (European political leaders, the President of the United States, as well as Volodymyr Zelensky and Vladimir Putin are largely used in the process of meme production). The Russian invasion itself proved to be a rich source for visual content in both the Ukrainian and the Russian participatory culture. In this case, the memes are usually based on significant events of the war, such as, for example, the imprisonment of Medvedchuk, the liberation of Snake Island and the attack on the Crimea Bridge for the Ukrainian participatory culture, and the occupation of Kherson, the annexation of Ukrainian territories and the massive missile attacks and blackouts in autumn 2022 and winter 2022–2023 for the Russian participatory culture. They are typically intended to celebrate victories or deconstruct the image of the enemy, serving as propaganda or counter-propaganda during times of war. In the context of Ukraine, the war-related memes also represent an attempt to cope with the traumatic war reality through humor and remediation of a shared experience. Indeed, humor has already been established as an effective coping and emotion regulation mechanism during a conflict or crisis in previous studies. It has been demonstrated that it is widely used to voice anxiety or frustration, react to the violence and strengthen ingroup connections (GAVRILOVIC ET AL. 2003; GORGULA 2016; KORKUT ET AL. 2022). The war-time Ukrainian humor propagated through memes also served as an element of political communication and a means of resilience, which was analyzed by recent studies (YEHOVA ET AL. 2023). Essentially, the variety of meme content drawn from diverse historical, political, and cultural sources reflects the complex and dynamic nature of participatory cultures in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian War. The data in the table below provides insights into the sources of visual elements used in meme construction, comparing Ukrainian and Russian memes.

TABLE 1: MAIN GRAPHIC ELEMENTS

Main graphic elements	Ukrainian memes	Russian memes
Historical narratives	90	151
Political personalities	77	111
Military personalities (Gerasimov, Zaluzhnyy) and events	102	79
Cartoon remixes	40	22
Movie remixes	64	20
Animalistic remixes	17	26

Others	12	18
Total	423	427

Source: Author.

The most productive categories of the graphic content are historical narratives, contemporary geopolitical contexts, and popular culture, which account for 88 and 90 percent of the Ukrainian and Russian meme datasets respectively. Only 4 and 6 percent of the data is made up of animalistic remixes respectively. In this case, the natural world serves as the inspiration for the creation of memetic content. Animals are frequently utilized as symbolic representations of countries – e.g. the bear as the symbol of the Russian Federation, and smaller animals (cats, racoons, bees) representing Ukraine to illustrate the disparity between the Russian and Ukrainian armies. They are also used to counter some of the Russian propagandistic narratives, like when images of militarized ducks and pigeons are used as a counter-narrative in response to Russia's assertion that the Ukrainian Armed Forces use animals as biological weapons. The memes not fitting into the aforementioned categories constitute only 2.8 and 4.2 percent of the datasets respectively.

Another peculiar aspect of the collected data is the presence of content that cross-fertilizes the memescapes of Russian and Ukrainian internet communities. In this case, certain images which were created by Ukrainian or Russian internet users or cartoonists are used in different national participatory cultures to advance their respective narratives. For instance, the Russian VK community remixed a cartoon by the Ukrainian artist Alensander Nikityuk created in 2022 (Fig. 1) which compares the behavior of Russian and Ukrainian soldiers. The illustration was made after the discovery of the atrocities committed by the Russian army in Bucha and Irpin and it focuses on portraying the Russian soldiers as looters and war criminals. By simply switching the flags on the soldiers' uniforms, Russian internet users managed to represent Ukrainian soldiers in a negative light. Additionally, the remix strives to depict the Ukrainian army as endorsing Nazi movements and being controlled by NATO, which is illustrated by the badge on the soldier's belt and the symbol on the helmet. It is worth noting that Russian remixes utilizing Ukrainian popular culture are infrequent, with only five examples found in the dataset. Similar examples of image appropriation can be also observed within the Ukrainian

dataset. For instance, the Russian *schwainokaras* (pigfish)² meme has been widely utilized by the Russian participatory culture since 2014 as a symbol meant to denigrate Ukrainians, who are often depicted as pigs in Russian pro-Kremlin social media groups, but later, the Ukrainian meme community adopted this meme as a humorous representation of the self, resulting in thousands of variations within Twitter and Facebook communities.

FIGURE 1: LEFT – A CARTOON BY ALEKSANDER NIKITYUK, RIGHT – A REMIX BY A RUSSIAN PC



Source: 1 – <<https://www.facebook.com/faynimemy>>, 2 – <https://vk.com/chto_tam_u>.

Other examples of such borrowings include memes created using screenshots from Russian and Ukrainian news, photographs of official Russian and Ukrainian political meetings, as well as images of Ukrainian stamps and NAFO,³ which are utilized for remixes in both participatory cultures. Typically, such borrowings are employed in two types of scenarios – either to challenge the narrative of the other participatory culture or to use expressive imagery of the other to promote one’s own narratives.

In some cases, Ukrainian and Russian memes draw from similar visual representations of historical events and make use of identical symbolic images of heroes and villains. For example, Figure 2 demonstrates how a single image is employed in both the Russian and the Ukrainian community to actualize the narrative of World War II/the Great Patriotic War and demonize the image of the other. The shared experience of the German invasion in the two countries allows one to easily decode the main message of the meme. In the Russian version of the meme, it draws a parallel between Volodymyr Zelensky’s personality and Adolf Hitler’s image, framing the Special Military Operation as a fight against Nazis in Ukraine. Meanwhile, the Ukrainian version of the meme compares the Russian

aggression to the German invasion, drawing a connection between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Hitler.

FIGURE 2: LEFT – HITLER IN THE REFLECTION, RUSSIAN REMIX, RIGHT – HITLER IN THE REFLECTION, UKRAINIAN REMIX



Source: 1 – <https://vk.com/chto_tam_u>, 2 – <<https://t.me/ukraners>>.

Further we identified the main discursive topics in the Russian and Ukrainian memescape that contribute to the construction of the visual discourse of the war. These themes include the construction of the self, the construction of the other, shaping of the war reality, and shaping of (global) politics. The dataset also contains a small number of non-war-related memes (approximately 4 percent). They are not related to any war events and do not convey any pro- or anti-war messages. Instead, they serve the purpose of facilitating communication within the group or generating comical effects. The contrast in thematic distribution can be demonstrated through the following table:

TABLE 2: MAIN DISCURSIVE TOPICS

Main discursive topics	Ukrainian memes	Russian memes
constructing the self	86	79
construction of the other	126	175
shaping the war reality	115	44
shaping (global) politics	80	110
non-war-related memes	16	20
Total	423	427

Source: Author.

As we can observe, the Ukrainian participatory culture prominently features memes that shape the perception of the enemy and construct a new reality for its people. These two categories reflect key existential issues that Ukrainians have faced since the beginning of the full-scale

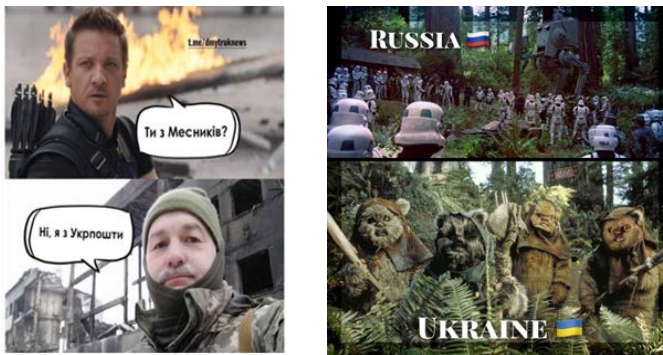
invasion: how to make sense of the war and adjust to the new reality. In the context of Russia, a plethora of memes exist which reflect the geopolitical situation and contribute to the formation of the image of the other.

One of the largest thematic groups of memes, which is extensively shared among Ukrainian and Russian internet communities, consists of memes that re-actualize existing narratives and establish new ones to shape the collective identity. The analysis indicates that Ukrainian memes are largely influenced by global popular culture and the country's cultural or historical context. Many of the memes are connected to significant events in the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War. They remix images from drone footage, frontline photos, and materials published in Russian media. Thus, Ukrainian communities use a range of visual elements from multiple sources to represent the collective self and reflect the complexity of the current war.

Ukrainian internet users are actively incorporating popular Western cultural symbols into their efforts to visually portray the Ukrainian army and demonstrate the resilience and resistance of the Ukrainian civilian population. References to well-known figures such as the Superman, Batman, Spider-Man, Neo from Matrix, and characters from franchises like The Avengers, Commandos, Star Wars, and Lord of the Rings are frequently used to construct a positive image of Ukrainians. In most cases, Ukrainians align themselves with the emblematic representatives of the forces of good, incorporating such positive qualities as bravery, endurance, courage, strength, and fearlessness in the collective vision of the self. Such virtues, predominately associated with stereotyped representations of male heroes (ANDERSON 2008), help to build the generalized heroic image of the Ukrainian army and soldiers based on masculinity traits. However, it should be noted that in numerous instances, depictions of heroes are contextualized through specific situations within the Russo-Ukrainian War to create an immediate connection between the cultural reference employed and the ongoing conflict. As noted by Bigazzi et al. (2023) during their analysis of another geopolitical context, this anchoring to concrete situations of life help to make the heroes less abstract and more real. Moreover, by aligning themselves with universally recognized positive characters from popular culture who lead the battle against a universal evil, often in an unequal fight, Ukrainians can not only co-construct the image of the self,

which is understandable for in-groups of different ages, but also use a universal visual language to convey the message to a wider outgroup audience. This stylistic choice also implicitly constructs the negative image of the other, connecting it to the negative and evil forces that superheroes fight against. It also highlights the valor of Ukrainians, showcasing their ability to successfully resist a more powerful enemy despite the disparity of the military potential of Ukraine and that of Russia. Additionally, this approach not only depicts the conflict as a Ukrainian fight for freedom but frames it as a global issue and a struggle for universal human values. The heroization of the discourse of the self can be illustrated by the following examples:

FIGURE 3: POPULAR CULTURE REMIXES, CONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF, UKRAINE

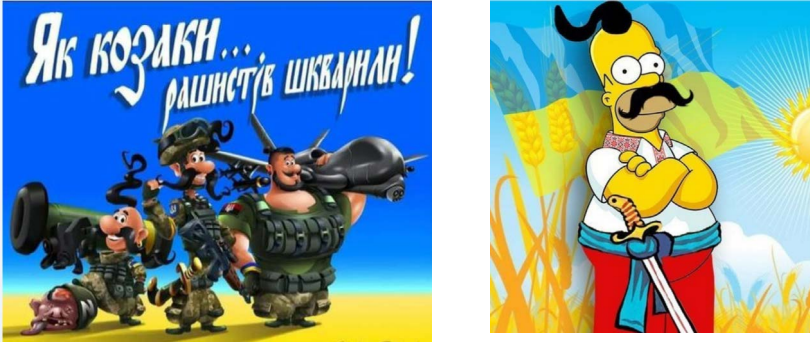


Source: 1, 2 – <<https://www.facebook.com/faynimemy>>.

Another productive source of the construction of the self within the Ukrainian participatory culture is found in the historical narratives of Ukraine's Cossack period. The warriors of Zaporizka Sich, known for their bravery and love for freedom, are often invoked to complete the image of the soldiers in the Ukrainian army. These images, clear and transparent to the majority of the Ukrainian population, establish connections between current events of the war and other periods of the fight for freedom and independence in Ukrainian history. These images help emphasize essential qualities of the warriors such as courage, audacity, love for the motherland and determination. The Cossack memes frequently integrate components of popular culture with war-related material, enabling the creation of a hybridized narrative that blends the past and the present historical events. For example, the image on the left in Figure 4 depicts

the Ukrainian Cossacks, the characters of a popular children's cartoon, as soldiers of the Ukrainian Armed Forces:

FIGURE 4: COSSACK REMIXES, CONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF, UKRAINE



Source: 1, 2 – <<https://t.me/ukrainearmedmemes>>.

In addition, new symbols and visual representations of the self are being created during the developments of the war. The stories of everyday heroism, like the civil protests in Kherson or the resistance of civilians in many other regions, and the legends from the battlefield, such as the story of the Ghost of Kyiv, the heroic defense of Kyiv and Kharkiv in the first days, or the de-occupation of Kherson, have become a part of the collective vision of the self and were reflected in popular culture. Memes serve as a universal language of communication with which to share collective trauma and foster new war narratives. For instance, the visual discourse embraces and reflects the stories of the Ukrainian tractor stealing Russian tanks, the Konotop witches, the Chernobaivka area where Russian forces were attacked numerous times and of the granny who hit a Russian drone with a tomato jar. Again, these remixes often join elements of Western popular culture with the current war context of Ukrainians in order to make the images more recognizable and accessible to wider audiences, and also intensify the symbolic power of the images. In addition, many memes based on war-related events serve to perpetuate a divide between the self and the enemy:

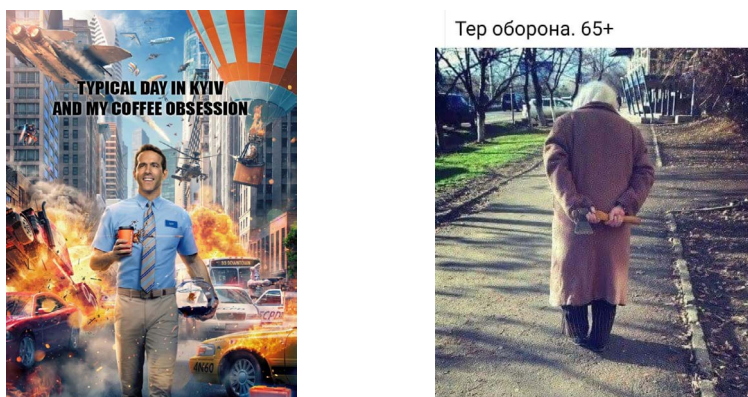
FIGURE 5: WAR-RELATED EVENT REMIXES, CONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF, UKRAINE



Source: 1 – <<https://www.facebook.com/faynimemy>>, 2 – <<https://t.me/ukraners>>.

Another crucial aspect of the self-representation is the visual construction of the everyday reality of Ukrainians during the war. It is noteworthy that the visual discourse not only reflects military advances but also drastic changes in the lives of millions of civilians. While the Russian visual discourse omits the real horrors of the war that the Ukrainian population endures, in Ukrainian digital media the construction of the self is closely tied to the war-time reality of the Russo-Ukrainian War, including countless missile attacks, bombings, and power outages, as evidenced by the Ukrainian memescape. In the early days of the war, efforts were primarily focused on addressing the trauma and shock caused by the war and adjusting to the new reality. As the conflict progressed, however, the attention shifted to promoting resilience, adaptability, and heroism among average Ukrainians.

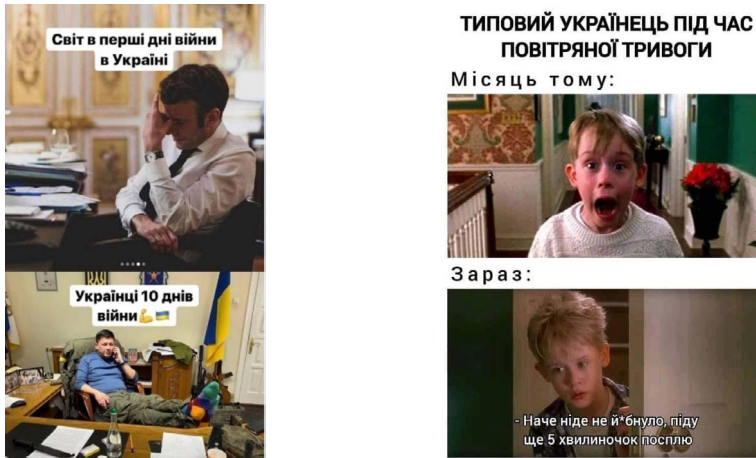
FIGURE 6: SHAPING THE WAR REALITY, CONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF, UKRAINE



Source: 1, 2 – <<https://t.me/ukraners>>.

Humor plays a vital role in the trauma processing mechanisms, as it helps Ukrainians to live through the difficult war-time reality. Many memes use satire, self-irony, post-irony or dark humor to depict the daily life amid the attacks of the Russian army. Often life in Ukraine today is compared to the everyday routine before the invasion or the typical reality in other countries, particularly in the Russian Federation or Western countries. This contrast highlights the peaceful life beyond the borders of Ukraine versus the struggles faced by the local population.

FIGURE 7: SHAPING THE WAR REALITY, CONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF, UKRAINE



Source: 1 – <<https://t.me/ukrainearmedmemes>>, 2 – <<https://t.me/ukraners>>.

The Russian pro-Kremlin visual discourse appears to lack diversity in the selection of visual means for the self-representation. It is strongly focused on the historical framing of the “special military operation”, its narrativization through the lens of World War II and the myth of the Russian victory in the Great Patriotic War. The representation of the self is frequently conceptualized through remixed images of Soviet soldiers combined with a symbol of the Soviet Union or Russia. In this way, the digital media aim to create continuity between the events and personalities of the Great Patriotic War and today’s invasion of Ukraine. It is possible to assume that this type of memetic image is utilized to support and propagate strategic state narratives – these images propagate the claim that by invading Ukraine, Russian soldiers will protect their own lands and ‘liberate’ their neighbor from the Nazi regime and, in this way, repeat the feat of their ancestors. The historical associations are expressed both visually and verbally. For example, in the first image of Figure 8, the text

“The year 45 is in the past but the fire of that war is here” contains a direct allusion to the events of the Great Patriotic War, while the photograph depicts Russia’s current war. Both examples also illustrate how new symbols of the war (e.g. the letter Z) are combined with the heroic symbols of the previous historical period (e.g. the ribbon of St. George) so as to visually relate the events of World War II to Russia’s war against Ukraine.

FIGURE 8: HISTORICAL REMIXES, CONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF, RUSSIA



Source: 1, 2 – <<https://vk.com/zapadeneznews>>.

It is important to note that the analyzed Russian social media communities primarily emphasize the visualization of the image of the Russian soldier as a key hero of the war and the main symbol of the collective self. Along with Soviet symbols of the Great Patriotic War, positive characters from Soviet cartoons, such as Cheburashka, play a significant role in shaping the collective identity in pro-Kremlin communities. Their purpose is to create a sense of detachment from the Western culture of “unfriendly countries” while simultaneously blending the cultural symbols of the Soviet era with those of modern-day Russia. Also, the animalistic self-representation commonly found within the Russian participatory culture associates the image of a bear, a symbol of the Russian Federation, with the soldier. The bear-warrior is usually portrayed as a strong and aggressive animal, a symbol of bravery and fearlessness.

FIGURE 9: CONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF, RUSSIA, LEFT – CARTOON REMIX, RIGHT – ANIMALISTIC REMIX



Source: 1, 2 – <https://vk.com/chto_tam_u>.

In the discursive spaces of Russian and Ukrainian social media, the image of the self is inevitably opposed to the construction of the other as “*the Other only exists relative to the Self, and vice versa*” (STASZAK 2009). This involves not only the juxtaposition of heroes and villains, a key strategy employed in war discourses (LAINESTE – FIADOTAVA 2023), but also the construction of the whole group of others as inferior, amoral, repulsive and unpleasant. While Russian media shape the image of the other, there is a strong tendency on their part to historicize the conflict and present it as a historic fight against fascism, American hegemony, or the collective West – depending on the target audience. This serves to create and strengthen the narrative of Russia’s sacred struggle against a big evil. Using this narrative, Russian social media attempt to rally people against a common enemy and encourage users to support the Special Military Operation more actively. This war narrative is deeply rooted in the myth of the Great Patriotic War, and slogans of the past war are frequently paired with remixed images from present days. The main messages include the phrases “Победа будет за нами” – “Victory will be ours”, “За победу” – “For victory”, or “С нами правда” – “The truth is ours”. These mobilization motifs are also constructed visually with retrospective images of the Great Patriotic War to shape the image of the enemy. There is also a tendency to disseminate homogenized images of the other, namely Ukrainians, based on historical symbols of the collective evil and stereotypical perceptions of the other nation. Ukrainians are often portrayed as an unintelligent and limited nation, as prone to bad habits like alcohol addiction, and as people who lack the ability to think for themselves and are easily manipulated by others. This way of depicting Ukrainians is not a recent development, but rather it became more pronounced after Russia’s annexation of Crimea and military occupation of Donbass in 2014.

Ukrainians are often demonized; they are depicted as puppets of the Western countries seduced by “false” European values or as supporters of Nazism who seek to harm their own country. The historical narrative of the fight against the fascist regime and references to World War II occupy a central role in the construction of the image of the other in the Russian participatory culture:

FIGURE 10: CONSTRUCTION OF THE OTHER, RUSSIA



Source: 1, 2 – <<https://t.me/dfhumor>>.

Furthermore, Ukrainian national symbols, including the trident, the colors blue and yellow, and vyshyvanka, are often fused with the symbols of Nazi Germany to promote the historical narrative of Russia as a country-“liberator” and create a direct link between the fight against Ukraine and the struggle against Nazism. Moreover, this tendency to create a negative image of the other through the Nazi narrative not only encompasses the Ukrainian military and select categories of the Ukrainian population, but also extends towards civilians. The following examples illustrate this statement and show how such vulnerable categories as children or the elderly people can also be portrayed negatively.

FIGURE 11: CONSTRUCTION OF THE OTHER, RUSSIA



Source: 1, 2 – <https://vk.com/chto_tam_u>.

The use of dehumanizing rhetoric and animal imagery on Russian social media platforms intensifies the construction of a generalized negative image of Ukrainians. It reflects common practices of the construction of the enemy that were observed during other historical periods (STEUTER - WILLS 2009). As Dave Grossman explains: *“It is so much easier to kill someone if they look distinctly different than you. If your propaganda machine can convince your soldiers that their opponents are not really human but are ‘inferior forms of life,’ then their natural resistance to killing their own species will be reduced”* (GROSSMAN 1996: 17). In other words, the animal imagery creates the psychological distance between the groups of us and them, resulting in the moral exclusion of the other, who is seen as inferior, evil, or criminal (ОРОТОВ 2005). On Russian social media, the dehumanizing rhetoric is implemented through the depiction of Ukrainians as pigs. Such a visual symbol is not chosen by accident, as the cultural representations of this animal are often derogatory, since it is traditionally linked with dirtiness or greed. Such personification repeatedly promotes the idea of the inferiority of the other. Ukrainians-pigs are created to evoke negative emotions among internet users such as hatred and disgust. In the Russian visual discourse, Ukrainians-pigs are dirty, fat, scruffy, and stupid; they serve only to feed others. This dehumanizes Ukrainians and implies that they exist just to serve others and should be killed for the common good without any remorse. By choosing this visual representation of Ukrainians, the users deprive the other of human traits, and negative emotions dominate the focus of the audience and leave no room for empathy or compassion towards the other, making it easier to justify their destruction.

FIGURE 12: CONSTRUCTION OF THE OTHER, RUSSIA

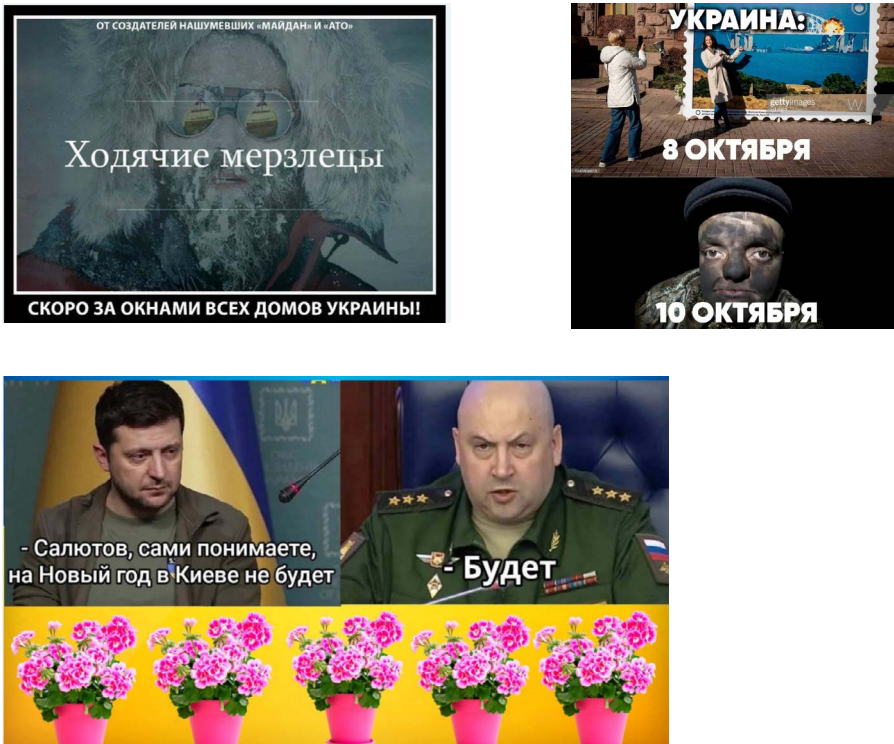


Source: 1 – <https://vk.com/chto_tam_u>, 2 – <https://t.me/Z_memes>.

Generally, Ukrainians are associated with negative cultural and historical aspects to generate the hatred towards them and legitimize the aggressive actions of the Kremlin regime. This way of constructing the other aligns with official Russian propaganda which claims that Ukrainians are not a real nation, and Ukraine is not an independent state and is instead controlled by the USA and NATO, and therefore lacks the right to exist.

Interestingly, the perception of Ukrainians in Russian social media is also shaped through the visualization of their everyday war reality. Memes that mockingly depict how Ukrainians endure the challenges brought about by the war, namely the blackouts and massive missile attacks in late 2022 and early 2023, serve to downplay the suffering of the Ukrainian civilian population, and Ukrainians are portrayed as deserving of punishment and the Russian army's accomplishments are glorified in this way.

FIGURE 13: SHAPING THE WAR REALITY, CONSTRUCTION OF THE OTHER, RUSSIA



Source: 1, 2 – https://vk.com/chto_tam_u, 3 - <https://t.me/dfhumor>.

In the Ukrainian digital media, the construction of the other is closely connected with real-time events of the Russo-Ukrainian War. The failures of the Russian army, such as its retreat from the Kyiv region; the counter-offensive in Kharkiv and the Kherson areas and other successes of the Ukrainian army, are used to challenge the myth of Russia as a great military superpower and highlight the difference between Russia's propaganda and the reality on the battlefield. In this category of memes, Russia is often symbolically represented in an animalistic manner, as a two-headed eagle or a bear is used to represent the state and its army. Additionally, political and military figures such as Putin or Russian generals are productive sources for the remixes for the presentation of the other.

FIGURE 14: CONSTRUCTION OF THE OTHER, UKRAINE



Source: 1 – <<https://www.facebook.com/euromaidanart>>, 2 – <<https://twitter.com/uamemesforces>>.

In the Ukrainian visual discourse, Russian soldiers are presented in two main narratives. The first narrative is focused on the weakness and incompetence of the Russian army, while the second narrative centers on the cruelty and brutality of the soldiers, making visible the cases of crimes and looting committed by the Russian army. Numerous memes are targeted at the deconstruction and dehumanization of the image of the enemy. Often, some individuals are taken as symbolic examples of the failures and incompetence of the Russian army. For instance, in the first weeks of the war, a photograph of an unknown young Russian soldier nicknamed Chmonya was used for many remixes to shape the image of the other. Such depictions bolstered the positive mood of Ukrainians and their faith in victory in the face of a more powerful enemy. Another tendency consists in the dehumanization of the other. Russian soldiers are often represented as monsters, zombies or orcs, as some mythic creatures, but not humans.

It could be interpreted as an attempt to rationalize or find an explanation for the “inhuman”, violent behavior of Russian troops on the Ukrainian territory and create distance between the aggressor and the self.

FIGURE15: CONSTRUCTION OF THE OTHER, UKRAINE



Source: 1 – <<https://t.me/ukraners>>, 2 – <<https://twitter.com/uamemesforces>>.

The fact of looting is also reflected in the visual discourse as one of the ways to mock at Russian soldiers. For example, the following memes illustrate this focus on the negative actions of the Russian army.

FIGURE 16: CONSTRUCTION OF THE OTHER, UKRAINE

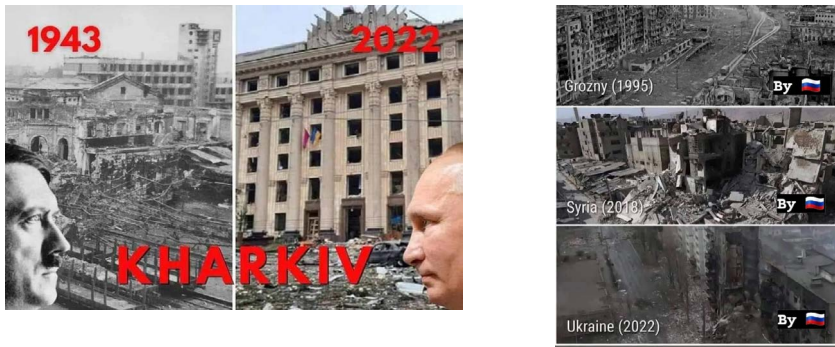


Source: 1, 2 – <<https://t.me/ukraners>>.

In the Ukrainian social media community, a focus on history can also be traced. During the initial stage of the full-scale invasion, there were a number of memes that constructed the other through the lens of the narrative of World War II. In this case, the Russian army is compared to the German Nazi soldiers, and the Russian president Vladimir Putin

to the personality of Adolf Hitler. In this way the image of the Russian Federation is bound to the fight against fascism that is rooted in the collective memory of Ukrainians. In contrast to the Russian visual discourse, Ukrainian memes provide a larger historical perspective on the aggressions committed by Russia against other nations and countries. For example, certain memes establish a link between Russia's war against Ukraine and the wars in Chechnya, Georgia, and Syria.

FIGURE 17: CONSTRUCTION OF THE OTHER



Source: 1 – <<https://www.facebook.com/euromaidanart>>, 2 – <<https://twitter.com/uamemesforces>>.

CONCLUSION

The paper examined the wartime memescape developed by the Ukrainian and Russian participatory digital cultures in response to the Russo-Ukrainian War. The analysis demonstrates that popular culture artifacts triggered by the war play a significant role in forging collective identities of the sides of conflict by contrasting the images of the self and the other and framing the war. In both participatory cultures, the Russo-Ukrainian War is framed as a battle between good and evil, but the sources used for the symbolic construction of the struggle differ. The Ukrainian visual discourse heavily relies on universal and Western popular culture references to construct the self and the other, while the Russian participatory environment tends to contextualize the conflict historically. The social reality of the war is being shaped through remixes of varied types of visual material, such as historical photographs, screenshots from the official news or footage from the battlefield, films, or cartoons.

It is worth noting that within the Ukrainian visual discourse, the narrative of the construction of the new reality is more present, and internet users more frequently repost memes that reflect brutal changes of reality or the everyday resistance of ordinary Ukrainians. In contrast, the Russian visual discourse primarily focuses on visualizing the geopolitical situation and constructing the negative perception of the other. This is probably because the Ukrainian population was directly affected by the destructive consequences of the war. Millions were displaced or lived through losses of friends or family members, whereas the reality of many Russians did not significantly change. Thus, the Ukrainian participatory culture responded to the necessity of processing traumatic experiences of war aggression.

The image of the self is more diverse in Ukrainian popular culture than in the Russian one, as it not only encompasses the creation of heroic figures on the battlefield, but also features multiple depictions of everyday life and the resistance of common Ukrainians. The Ukrainian visual discourse predominantly focuses on illustrating current events of the war by showcasing new heroes and victories of the Ukrainian army. In contrast, the Russian meme discourse typically relates the narrative of the Great Patriotic War to the current invasion of Ukraine, thereby reflecting on the past.

Popular culture remains a significant resource for remixes in Ukrainian and Russian social media. However, Ukrainian internet users more often incorporate emblematic symbols of good and bad using Western cultural references in the construction of the collective self. The Russian social media rely more on references to the popular cultural of the Soviet era or use Western samples as a neutral base for their remixes. The main rhetoric device in Russian social media involves linking Nazism, the symbolic embodiment of absolute evil, to the image of the Ukrainian army and Ukrainian civilians in general. This type of framing of the war helps to simplify the conflict and make it more understandable or clear.

The Russian visual discourse is also characterized by a homogenized approach to constructing visual narratives, which is likely due to the strong control of state authorities, who may filter and delete information that deviates from officially approved narratives. On Russian social media,

the memes distort the reality, generating alternative interpretations of war events and propagating the narratives of the official state propaganda. Meanwhile, on Ukrainian social media, sharing war-related memes also has a certain therapeutic effect, as it enables remediation and normalization of life during wartime.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The links to the analyzed groups are provided at the end of the paper.
- 2 The pigfish meme was initially created by the American internet user @BryceGruber in 2013.
- 3 North Atlantic Fella Organization, more information can be found here <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/NAFO>> (group).

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