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Special Issue

Symbols and Narratives of Ukrainian Resistance
Part I

Guest Editor:
Yuliya Yurchuk

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SYMBOLS AND NARRATIVES OF UKRAINIAN RESISTANCE. PART I

GUEST EDITOR: YULIYA YURCHUK

Understanding Ukrainian Spirit: Symbols and Narratives of Ukrainian Resistance and Resilience

Yuliya Yurchuk

In the first days of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, international commentators most often predicted the fall of Ukraine within a couple of days. The most optimistic of them could imagine Ukraine standing for a couple of weeks in contrast to the Russian President's expectation to capture Kyiv in three days. Contrary to the predictions, Ukrainians continued fighting against all odds. In fact, by the time of invasion on 24 February 2022, Ukraine had been resisting Russia for almost eight years. Russia's aggression against Ukraine which started with the occupation and annexation of Crimea in February 2014 went hardly noticed outside Ukraine. No substantial measures were taken internationally to stop the aggression. As a result, the assault on Ukrainian sovereignty grew and Ukraine faced full-scale invasion without any significant external military aid. Nevertheless, not only did Ukraine stand tall, but by the beginning of April 2022, within two months of the full-fledged war, Ukrainian forces succeeded in liberating large territories that had been newly captured by the invaders. The shock after the discovery of the mass graves and unprecedented violence against civilians inflicted by Russia was immense both in Ukraine and internationally. Only in Bucha, a small town near Kyiv, Russians killed more than 400 people.[1] While Ukrainian and foreign investigators continue collecting evidence of Russian war

1 Strategic Communications, "Marking the Third Anniversary of the Liberation of Bucha, Ukraine," *European Union External Action*, 2 April 2025, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/marking-third-anniversary-liberation-bucha-ukraine_en.

crimes, there are hopes that the shock of the scope of violence will be equated with some degree of justice in the future.

War is accompanied by different emotions. Certainly, fear, shock, anxiety, fatigue are the most obvious emotions of war. What is less expected is the feeling of surprise and astonishment that has accompanied the Russo-Ukrainian war. These feelings were shared both within and outside Ukraine at the beginning of the invasion. First, surprise that Russia did attack—even though there were all the signs of preparations for full-fledged war from Russia's side, it was hard to accept the hard truth that a war of such scale was possible in the midst of Europe. Second, surprise and astonishment at Ukraine's resistance that undermined the perceptions about Ukraine as "a failed state,"[2] the Ukrainian nation as "an unexpected nation,"[3] and Ukrainian society as a sharply divided one.[4] These perceptions had been spread by media and academic discourses throughout the decades that led to the war.[5] For scholars of the region, the 2022 invasion showed that the concepts that were

2 Yurii Shcherbak traces how Ukraine was presented as a "failed state" since the beginning of 2000s by some Russian political scientists; Yurii Shcherbak, "Ukraine as a Failed State: Myths and Reality," *Day*, no. 85, 26 April 2009, https://day.kyiv.ua/node/133797. For discussion on the discourse of Ukraine as a "failed state" and the transition to the notion of a "resilient state," see: Anatoliy Kruglashov, "A Long Way from Ghost of the Failed State to Resistance and Resilience: The Case of Ukraine," in *Resilience and the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood Countries*, eds. G. Rouet, and G. C. Pascariu (Palgrave Macmillan, 2025), 523–47.

3 In 2000 Andrew Wilson published the book *The Ukrainians: Unexpected Nation* (Yale University Press). In 2022 the book was republished in a new (fifth) edition with the title *The Ukrainians: The Story of How a People Became a Nation.*

4 For a critical approach to such claims, see Tatiana Zhurzhenko, "A Divided Nation? Reconsidering the Role of Identity Politics in the Ukraine Crisis," *Die Friedens-Warte* 89, no. 1/2 (2014): 249–67; and Yaroslav Hrytsak, "Rethinking Ukraine," in Andrew Wilson (ed.), *What Does Ukraine Think?* (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2015), 34–43.

5 See Nadiia Koval, Volodymyr Kulyk, Mykola Riabchuk, Kateryna Zarembo, and Marianna Fakhurdinova, "Morphological Analysis of Narratives of the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict in Western Academia and Think-Tank Community," *Problems of Post-Communism* 69, no. 2 (2022): 166–78; and Kateryna Zarembo and Marianna Fakhurdinova, "Russia Crisis 2022: A Truth Moment for Germany," *Russian Analytical Digest* 277 (2022): 9–10.

widely used about Ukraine, and about Russia, failed to explain how the war became possible, how Ukraine could mobilize, and where its strengths came from.

This sheer astonishment at Ukrainian stubbornness and perseverance found its way to the establishment of a new discourse about Ukraine: a country of brave people who have seemingly some extraordinary powers to carry on against all odds. Volodymyr Zelensky's address to the European Parliament on 1 March 2022 where he stated "Nobody is going to break us, we're strong, we're Ukrainians" were cited in hundreds of media[6] and defined how Ukraine was portrayed throughout the years of resistance in the public sphere of most democratic societies. "Resilience" became a buzzword permeating the talks about Ukraine from 2022. It also served as self-fulfilling prophecy, as Poberezhna *et al.* show in their analysis on Ukraine in the first year of invasion.[7] Ukrainian resilience became an example for Western societies, especially when it comes to civil society and combating the growing threats to democracy.[8]

But one needs to have a critical approach to resilience. Ukrainians pay a very high price for the fact that their state stays sovereign.[9] Ukraine's perseverance cannot be taken for granted as it relies on many factors, both external and internal. Resilience is not a given category, and it is not evenly spread through the population. Discursively the term is mainly used to acknowledge

6 Virginia Chamlee, "Zelenskyy Remembers How His Family Woke Him Up to Say a War Had Started," *People*, 28 March 2022, https://people.com/politics/zelenskyys-latest-interview-inside-the-fortress-amid-invasion/.

7 A. Poberezhna, O. Burlyuk, and A. van Heelsum, "A Superhero Army, a Courageous People and an Enchanted Land: Wartime Political Myths and Ontological Security in the 2022 Russian Invasion of Ukraine," *Czech Journal of International Relations* 59, no. 1 (2024): 59–92.

8 Olga Boichak, "Camouflage Aesthetics: Militarisation, Craftivism, and the In/Visibility of Resistance at Scale," in *Contemporary Voices, Unravelling the Threads of War and Conflict* 3, no. 1 (December 2021), https://cvir.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/up/article/view/1561.

9 Yuliya Yurchuk and Kateryna Zarembo, "The Human Face of Ukrainian Resilience," in *A World Order in Transformation?: A Comparative Study of Consequences of the War and Reactions to These Changes in the Region*, ed. Ninna Mörner (Huddinge: Södertörns högskola, 2024), 244–52.

survival under very dramatic conditions. The fact that Ukrainians were forced to become "professional survivors" because of the war does not mean that they have superhuman powers.

On the level of discourse, resistance and resilience are very close, although conceptually they are quite different. The scholarship on wartime experiences has conventionally tended to focus on resistance. Unusual in Ukraine's case is that public and media commentary concentrated not only on resistance, but on resilience in Ukrainian society after the full-scale invasion. Resistance is connected to military and societal mobilization to oppose the enemy. Resilience, on the other hand, stresses the society's ability to heal itself and to renew its forces even under very severe circumstances. It can be argued that the phenomenon of Ukrainian resilience attracted so much attention precisely because of the fact that essentially no one outside Ukraine expected such a high level of mobilization of Ukrainian society at the beginning of the invasion.

The surprise and astonishment at Ukrainian society's ability to persevere found expression in a series of the symbolic gestures outside Ukraine that recognized the power of Ukrainian people. For instance, *Time* magazine nominated Volodymyr Zelensky and the "spirit of Ukraine" as personalities of the year 2022.[10] New technologies, like smart phones and drones, contributed to immediate circulation of images and narratives of resistance and enabled them to go viral.[11] Even if Ukrainians were not surprised at their own resistance, the question of where they took their strength from is still legitimate. While it is very difficult, or even impossible, to analyze the people's spirit, we can approach less metaphysical sources and look for the answers in the material that shows how people see themselves and how they explain Russia's war and

10 "The Spirit of Ukraine," *Time Magazine,* 7 December 2022, https://time.com/spirit-of-ukraine-person-of-the-year-2022/#:~:text=Read%20TIME's%20Person%20of%20the,It%20was%20a%20defning%20one.

11 Magda Long and Daniela Richterova, "What are the Implications of Ukraine's Civilian Resistance Going Viral?," *King's College London*, 10 March 2022, https://www.kcl.ac.uk/what-are-the-implications-of-ukraines-civilian-resistance-going-viral.

Ukraine's resistance. In her study on the roots of Ukrainian resistance, Anastasiia Kudlenko shows on the basis of interviews that Ukrainians find their strength in democratic values and Euro-Atlantic aspirations for the future.[12]

This special issue searches for the deeper roots of Ukrainian resistance as they are expressed in culture and folklore. During the first days of the invasion, one could witness the proliferation of both visual and narrative expressions of people's emotions and feelings.[13] Images, memes, poetry, songs portraying Ukrainians at war came in their hundreds in the very first days of the invasion.[14] The scale of creativity seemed proportional to the scale of the shock and the horror that the war brought.

With more than three years of the full-fledged war passed, we can already observe changes in the circulation of images and narratives of Ukrainian resistance. The first year of the invasion produced the critical mass of the folkloristic visual material. Slowly that production has been diminishing, while the narrative material continues to grow and accumulate. This can be explained by different factors. First, the difference in visual and narrative forms is conditioned by the mode of production. Second, the visual production has moved to a more professional sphere: those professional illustrators and artists continue work on war-related themes. On the other hand, with three years of atrocities, visuality became more focused on the documentary genre. In the beginning, it seemed that everyone who could produce some visual

12 Anastasiia Kudlenko, "Roots of Ukrainian Resilience and the Agency of Ukrainian Society Before and After Russia's Full-scale Invasion," *Contemporary Security Policy* 44, no. 4 (2023): 513–29.

13 Svitlana Kot, Alina Mozolevska, Olha Polishchuk, and Yuliya Stodolinska, "The Discursive Power of Digital Popular Art during the Russo-Ukrainian War: Re/shaping Visual Narratives, *Arts* 13, no. 1 (2024): 38; and Lada Kolomiyets, "Deconstruction of Russia's Newspeak in Ukrainian Humorous Translation and Digital Folklore," *Ideology and Politics Journal* 24, no. 2 (2023): 128–66.

14 Laada Bilaniuk, "Memes as Antibodies: Creativity and Resilience in the Face of Russia's War," in *Dispossession: Anthropological Perspectives on Russia's War Against Ukraine*, ed. Catherine Wanner *(*Routledge, 2023), 143–66.

material, did so to fund-raise, to inform; in this way, the images and the creation of images became a sort of resistance as well.

This special issue proposes to approach resistance from the cultural studies perspective. It brings together scholars from different disciplines who address different aspects of resilience and resistance focusing on gender, humor, literature, visual representations, and memes. The authors approach these widely circulated images and narratives as expressions of deep cultural structures that produce meanings. They are rooted in history, past lived experiences, and societal structures that govern human activities and interactions. These images and narratives signal changes in the self-perception of people and shifts in worldviews shattered by war. Although the material analyzed by the authors is very different, they all come to the main overarching conclusion: Ukrainians at time of war actively renegotiate their identities and recalibrate their understanding of history and the place of Ukraine in the world.

The special issue starts with the article of Daria Antsybor and Michel Bouchard who explore the role of humor and food in the visual representations of resistance and civil life in Ukraine under invasion. Humor often is a resort of the oppressed.[15] After centuries of colonization, Ukrainians are well-trained in all kinds of resistance: silent, non-violent, and violent. At the same time, humor can be an instrument of power and subordination, as Russia also uses humor to humiliate Ukrainians.[16] Antsybor and Bouchard demonstrate that gastronomic humor as a form of resistance is central for coping with the uncertainties and insecurities of war. It also shows how Ukrainians perceive their own identities in wartime.

15 Elizabeth M. Perego, *Humor and Power in Algeria, 1920 to 2021* (Indiana University Press, 2023).

16 Alena Minchenia, Barbara Törnquist-Plewa, and Yuliya Yurchuk, "Humour as a Mode of Hegemonic Control: Comic Representations of Belarusian and Ukrainian Leaders in Official Russian Media," in *Cultural and Political Imaginaries in Putin's Russia*, eds. Niklas Bernsand and Barbara Törnquist-Plewa (Brill, 2018), 211–31.

Yana Prymachenko's article delves into the most potent visual symbol inherited from the Soviet times: the Motherland Monument in Kyiv. Built in 1981, it was supposed to strengthen and reactivate the bond between Ukraine and Russia. Rising over the Dnipro River and picturesque landscape in the center of Kyiv, the statue became a symbol of the Ukrainian capital. Following Russia's invasion Ukrainian society re-calibrated the meaning of the statue, and this Soviet-era monument became a symbol of resistance and protection of Ukrainian sovereignty with strong religious undertones. The article shows the transformation in attitudes to the Soviet past in a country that is renegotiating its history and its identity under the pressure of the present.

Colby Fleming takes a gender approach to the analysis of visual symbols of resistance as they appear and circulate through social media. His focus on masculinity shows an interesting and often overlooked aspect that in the society at war where militarization is an expected response to violence, we can see a much more nuanced approach to gender roles. Fleming shows that Ukrainian cultural identity resists militarized masculinity and at the same time acknowledges the high values of resilience and heroism. In such a way, we can see how gender identities are positioned vis-à-vis national identity and how masculinity is negotiated in a way that transcends traditional militaristic projections.

This volume will be followed a second volume, comprising three additional articles. Olha Voznyuk will show how resilience and resilience are represented in narrative form through literary anthologies published within the first months of the invasion. Kot *et al.* will scrutinize the visual representations of civil resistance circulated in social media, and Krasenko *et al.* will combine gender approach and historical analysis approaching visual and discursive representations of witches in the context of resistance in the ongoing war.

All these studies show how Ukrainian identities are revisited under the conditions of war. We can see that it was not only the international public that came to see Ukrainians in a new light because of their courage and resistance; Ukrainians too started seeing themselves differently. Overall, the special issue contributes to

the discussions on Ukrainian resistance relying on the evidence found in the grassroots local context. The articles collected here shed light on the deeper structures that enable production of images and narratives that we see on the surface. These structures are rooted in history, cultural memory, gender regimes, and politics. These structures too undergo renegotiations, transformation, and recalibration. To a certain extent, the articles not only analyze but also document and archive the cultural products created by Ukrainian society in the first years of the full-fledged invasion. As such, they will be also valuable as historical sources to be used by researchers in the future.