

# Warrior of the Light

## Female Personifications of Ukraine on Mass Media during the Russo-Ukrainian War

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### 1. Introduction

The war in Ukraine which started in February 2022 is a visualized war, and it inevitably causes a visual response. The imagery created in wartime depends greatly on ideology and becomes a vehicle for important messages. In her seminal work *On Photography* (1990), American philosopher Susan Sontag stressed the role of images as instruments of knowledge production that shape the people's perception of the events and to construct and reconstruct our understanding of the world (Sontag 1990: 3). Communications scholar D.K. Thussu also underlined the fact that visual images produce documentary evidence to support the commonsensical claims of ideology, and in turn to use the very appearance of seemingly factual representations to subtly camouflage the constructed, historical, and social roots of ideology (Thussu 2007: 220). At the same time, according to Nathan Roger, in the modern digital world people face the »weaponization of images« (Roger 2013) when both conflicting sides use images to achieve their ideological aims, and although some audiences will get the meanings encoded in the wars and images of war, others will not or might even refuse the encoded meaning (Perlmutter 2001: 33).

Images have turned into a powerful means of shaping public perception of the Russo-Ukrainian war as well. In the digital age, the most effective way to spread visual information is the Internet, especially social media and messenger services. From the first days of the war in Ukraine, the crucial role of social media in its perception and representation became obvious. American journalist Peter Suciú aptly characterized this war as »the first social media war«, emphasizing the fact that it is the most internet accessible war in human history (Suciú 2022). According to the research carried out by the company Gradus Research, the number of Ukrainians using social media and messenger services as a source of information has been growing rapidly in Ukraine since the beginning of the war (January 2023). Social media with their orientation to visual impact offer a perfect territory for the visual cover-

age of the events. Easy accessibility of social media platforms and their interactivity makes them a convenient space for publishing live updates, photos and videos thus helping in documenting the events. Simultaneously, social media is an effective vehicle for sharing personal war experiences and emotional responses to the traumatic events connected with war.

The war in Ukraine has changed the lives of many people throughout the world, but most of all, quite understandably, it touched the lives of Ukrainians. About 10 million people, mostly women and children, had to leave their homes in search of safety. According to the OECD report (May, 2023), the share of women among adult Ukrainian refugees is around 70 percent, and in some countries (Italy, Greece) the percentage is even higher, 80 percent. This is really different from other refugee flows, for example, women lodged only about 30 percent of all asylum applications during the 2015-17 refugee crisis in Europe (OECD 2023). This makes the Ukrainian crisis very »female« and vividly shows the importance of women in it.

At the same time the women who choose to stay in Ukraine play a vital role in Ukrainian society. The Ukrainian Ministry of Defense reports that at the beginning of October, 2022, 40,000 women served in Ukrainian military formations, and among these women, 5,000 were directly at the front line protecting their country with weapons in hands (Krechetova 2022). Besides that, there are also many women volunteering, including medical professionals and supportive staff doing their best to ensure the army gets everything it needs to fight effectively. What is more, in spite of all hardships connected with war, women continue to work in all spheres of social life demonstrating a lot of moral strength and courage.

The reactions to the war may take different forms, and one of them is the creation of art works. A bright example of such a response is the emergence of multiple artistic representations of Ukraine as a Warrior Woman which flooded the Ukrainian segment of social media since the beginning of the war. These images quite often go viral due to their constant reposting, and in most cases it is quite problematic to trace their original sources and find their real authors.

Current personifications of Ukraine as a Woman put to active use mythological imagery and return to the roots of the country's national identity. Besides that, as the personification is a main technique used by the allegory, they are highly symbolic and contain multiple possible interpretations, thus presenting interesting research material and charting new territories for investigation. In this article, I adopt the method of critical visual analysis to explore and problematize representations of Ukraine as a Warrior Woman posted on social media after February 24, 2022. My main focus is on the dominating tendencies these images represent and their relationships with Ukrainian traditional culture. My research material consists of 120 images created by Ukrainian artists after the beginning of the war and collected through the social network Pinterest, which I chose because this popular social net-

work (it belongs to the list of 10 most visited social networks in the world) was developed specially for collecting and storing images.

## 2. The Sources of Female Warrior Imagery in Ukraine

Personifications of a state as a human being became really popular in European countries at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the rise of national movements. The connection between the land and the woman is archetypical, and is present in most cultures since prehistoric times (the land as a Mother Goddess), so generally states were personified in a female body (Höpflinger 2015: 55).

The tendency to personify Ukraine as woman also dates back to 19<sup>th</sup>-century nationalist beginnings. At the same time, this image was really popular among Russian painters of the 19<sup>th</sup> century who loved to depict Ukrainian girls in traditional clothes, such as Ilja Jefimowitsch Repin, or Nikolai Efimovich Rachkov. Vladimir Makovskiy's «Ukrainian Girl» (1879, fig. 1) serves as an example: the girl in this portrait looks extremely vulnerable and feminine, evoking in the viewers a desire to protect her, thus translating the dominating narrative of the Russian Empire when Ukraine was seen as the territory in need of help and protection by its »older sister«/»mother« Russia, or »Rossiia-Matushka«, one of the most famous Russian symbols both in Russia and abroad (Riabov 2007: 27).

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ukrainian nationalists actively exploited the image of Ukraine as a suffering woman, as seen for instance in the postcard »Ukraine's Golgotha« printed in 1921 in Austria, which depicts Ukraine as a young woman dressed in traditional clothes tied to the cross with a burning village in the background and two small children clutching to her. The woman's untied hair, torn skirt and scratched hands hint at the possibility of a sexual assault she has recently suffered. There are four crows over her head symbolizing the powers fighting on the territory of Ukraine in 1917–1921 (Germany and Austria-Hungary, the White Russian Volunteer Army, the Red Army, the Ukrainian anarchists, and the Second Polish Republic Force) and »raping« Ukraine by killing its people and destroying its cities and villages.

The transition from personifying Ukraine as a submissive or suffering woman to visualizing it as a Warrior started less than 10 years ago, during the events on the Maidan in Kyiv (also known under the name of Euromaidan) in 2014. One of the key moments marking this existential shift was the speech given on January 29, 2014 by famous activist and military volunteer Maria Berlinska during the protests. Addressing the audience from the Maidan scene she passionately declared that fighting for Ukraine and its freedom was not an exclusively male right, and women had it as well. She opposed the desire of some men to protect women during Euromaidan and reduce their role to performing exceptionally supporting functions: »Don't »pro-

tect« someone by taking away their freedom of movement [...] You can't force your protection on someone. If an adult, rights-bearing person consciously decides to go to the center of the action to fight for her people – that is her holy, sacred right» (quoted in Phillips 2014: 420). These words were sincerely supported by the women present at the Maidan and led to real actions when women fought alongside with men at the barricades). Out of this dissatisfaction with women's partial exclusion from the Maidan grew an all-women self-defense brigade, the »Woman's Squad« Olha Kobylanska Zhinocha Sotnia (Rubchak 2001: 315), which initiated the complicated process of changing the attitude to fighting women in the Ukrainian society.



*Fig. 1: Vladimir Makovskiy, A Ukrainian Girl, 1879. Oil on canvas. Kyiv, Museum of Russian Art (Tereshchenko Museum). Public Domain.*

The events on the Maidan provided the ground for a unique situation when Romantic ideals of Ukrainian national heroes (which had been actively fostered after the crash of the Soviet ideology) became relevant and manifest in the present moment. Ukrainian society had been brought up on heroic, male-centered narratives of defending the motherland, and as a result, had considerable difficulty accepting that women also had the right to take an active part in the Maidan protests. Men and

women participated in the Maidan protest in near equal numbers: sociological polls showed that 41–47 percent of Maidan participants were women (Onuch 2014). Still, when the Maidan provided the opportunity to try on attractive roles of heroic fighters for the freedom of Ukraine in the real world, men found themselves in a much better situation. While male protesters actively represented themselves as direct descendants of the Cossacks and OUN/UPA (Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists) fighters, women were offered only supportive traditional roles connected with cooking, cleaning, and some administrative functions (Bolin 2016: 4). In spite of the considerable role of women during the protests, on the discursive level (and in the media), women's protest participation was interpreted largely in the vein of »mothers of the nation« and »inspiration for the male protesters« (Phillips 2014: 425).

One of the main reasons for such a situation was a total lack of female heroic models in the national discourse which could be explained by the masculine nature of the two dominant sources of potential heroic stereotypes in Ukrainian culture. The first one is the military community of the Cossacks which thrived from 15<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century in Zaporizhian district of Ukraine and played an important role in Ukrainian history (Wilson 1996). The cult idealizing Cossack society started yet at the beginning of the Ukrainian nationalist movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was closely connected with the very origin of the Ukrainian national idea (Saltovs'kyi 2002). During the Soviet period, the Cossacks received much less attention, but after the end of the Soviet era in the 1990s, Ukrainian nationalist movement made this military community one of the central symbols of the national revival. References to the Cossacks as an embodiment of Ukrainian national heroism first appeared in the Ukrainian cultural discourse after the fall of the USSR when there was an urgent need to replace Soviet cultural heroes with the ones representing Ukrainian national ideals. Ukrainian Cossacks were a perfect match for this need, and quickly became an essential part of the Ukrainian national myth in an process of nation branding, i.e. the practice of governments, PR consultants, media organizations and corporate business to promote a specific image of a particular nation-state and foster soft power and public diplomacy (Bolin/Ståhlberg 2015). The Cossacks entered almost every sphere of cultural life starting with the national symbols (for instance, the collar and mace used by the Cossacks' leaders, Hetmans, now represent the power of the President) to advertisements of all kinds (Bureychak/Petrenko 2015). It is only logical that images connected with the heroic Cossack past became extremely popular during the period of the Maidan. In his article devoted to the Euromaidan, journalist Arkady Babchenko made this heroic parallel most vivid: »The Maidan is the Sich. The same Zaporozhye Sich [the Cossacks' fortified outpost in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries where they lived and trained between military expeditions, Kolesnyk]. The same semi-marching-semi-military-semi-civilian way of life, which everyone associates with the Cossacks. [...] The Maidan is the territory of freedom« (Babchenko 2013). Still, the Cossacks were a typically masculine military

community which glorified predominantly male values such as courage, physical strength, military brotherhood, and where women performed mostly symbolic and marginalized roles (Kryvoshyy 1998). As a result, this vivid symbol of heroic masculinity actively promoted patriarchal discourse, excluded women, and supported the derogatory attitude towards them.



Fig. 2: Igor Pereklita's «I am a Banderivka» (2007)<sup>1</sup>

A similar situation exists with the second most important source of Ukrainian heroic imagery – the history of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) founded in 1929 and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (known under the Ukrainian abbreviation UPA) created by the representatives of OUN in 1942. According to T.

<sup>1</sup> Available at swiatowidz.pl at <http://swiatowidz.pl/2013/11/dresy-i-karki-ksiezna-diana-handlujaca-na-bazarze-banderowka-z-pepesza-ukraina-sztuka-silna/igor-pereklita/>. Accessed on 24.08.2023.

Bureychak and O. Petrenko, OUN/UPA members turned into the images of undefeatable and unvanquished fighters for Ukraine's freedom and attained discursive privileges widely used both in commemorative practices when honoring members of the Ukrainian nationalist underground, as well as in the mass media, and in the nation's historiography (Bureychak/Petrenko 2015: 5). But despite historiographers' attempts to include women into the OUN/UPA heroic narrative, their roles were limited to traditional ones of mothers or loyal wife/lover-helpers serving as couriers, guides and nurses to their heroic men (Khromeychuk 2016; Gavryshko 2017). In certain tragic situations, women could replace their husbands/men in performing heroic missions, but these stories involved a lot of self-sacrifice bordered on martyrdom and had very little in common with the masculine heroism of the narratives about male OUN/UPA fighters (Zariczniak 2015: 68).

The representation of the Cossacks and UPA/OUN fighters as national heroes and the tendency to consider contemporary Ukrainians their descendants reinforces an androcentric model of the Ukrainian nation, implies its homogeneous nature and factually marginalizes women. The events at Euromaidan succeeded only in reestablishing the same stable forms of gender order in the heroic narratives. At the same time, they provoked an active feminist response to this patriarchal discourse.

It is quite emblematic that one of the first artistic images of a Warrior Woman which became widely popular during Euromaidan also referenced the OUN/UPA movement. The painting »I am a Banderivka (OUN/UPA supporter), I am a Ukrainian« (fig. 2) created by Ukrainian painter Igor Perekhlita back in 2007 gained popularity after its copies were distributed during the Maidan protests. This color painting imitates propaganda posters of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, and its Maidan black and white cheap copies only enhanced this likeness. The painting features an extremely pretty young girl in a richly embroidered national costume and an OUN military cap on her head with a black machine gun. It is quite remarkable that the artist gave a lot of attention to the girl's long loose hair. Women's hair is an extremely important symbol in all cultures, and Ukraine is no exception. Women's hair is closely associated with wealth and female sexuality, especially long and untied (Cooper 1971: 67). There is still a popular Ukrainian wedding tradition when the hair of a girl is publicly unbraided to be put in a married woman's manner and covered with a headscarf. Besides that, it is worth mentioning that the girl's thick curly hair is golden. Blond hair is not typical for Ukrainian women, but being widely used in popular culture as an essential component of female beauty it emphasizes a woman's grace and tenderness. Though the machine gun is present in the picture, the girl does not hold it in her hands, instead it is hanging »in the air« in front of her. Still, the blonde's hands are not empty: in one hand she holds a grenade and in the other a cluster of guelder rose berries. The latter is an important cultural symbol in Ukraine. On the one hand, it is closely connected with blood (guelder rose berries recall drops of blood) and through it with the concepts of life, love and death. On the

other hand, this plant symbolizes Ukrainian family values and the nation as a whole (one cluster – one family, a guelder rose bush – Ukraine with its people) (Formanova 1999: 146). Under the girl's feet are two more symbolic objects: a hedgehog with ripe apples, creating connotations with the harvest season (most likely the harvest of Death in this particular situation), and at the same time a strong symbol of self-protection, and a skull. The line next to the skull »Death to Moscow occupants« makes it quite clear whose skull it is. The girl is painted against the landscape with the domination of black and red colors which were the colors of the UPA's flag. This picture quite vividly demonstrates an attempt to construct a new female hero image through connecting it to the heroic past of Ukraine and its male models thus giving it validity. Ironically, instead of presenting a new model of a Woman-Warrior, it mostly succeeds in reestablishing existing stereotypes of women as passive and weak sexual creatures incapable of real fighting. It is difficult to take seriously a nicely dressed blonde with carefully arranged curls wearing a pair of model shoes even if she has a grenade and a machine gun. The girl in the painting looks more like a desired prize for a courageous male warrior than like a warrior herself.

### 3. Ukraine as a Violent Woman

When the Russo-Ukrainian war started, social media got flooded with female personifications of Ukraine. Very likely V. Putin himself gave an extra push to the topic when, speaking about the Minsk agreements on February 8, 2022, right before the Russian invasion, he made a clear reference to Ukraine as a Woman by saying: »Like it or not, my Beauty, you have to put up with it« («Нравится- не нравится, терпи, моя красавица»).<sup>2</sup> It is necessary to add that in Russian, this phrase has a clear reference to a sexual assault when a woman has no choice but to wait till the end of the sexual act, trying not to cry of pain. This absolutely horrible sexist phrase metaphorized Ukraine as a submissive desired female, and, as a result, triggered a completely new discourse which took different forms. No wonder that visual images became an essential part of the response being related to the very nature of contemporary culture with the domination of visual imagery.

One representative pair of images created by Ukrainian painter Andrii Yermolenko uses the contrast between Ukraine in the years 2014 and 2022 (fig. 3). In

2 The speech is available on youtube under the title »Putin: Like it or not, you have to put up with it, my beauty.« [https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=%D0%BF%D1%83%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BD+%D0%BD%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%82%D1%81%D1%8F+%D0%BD%D0%B5+%D0%BD%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%82%D1%81%D1%8F+%D0%B2%D0%B8%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%BE](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=%D0%BF%D1%83%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BD+%D0%BD%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%82%D1%81%D1%8F+%D0%BD%D0%B5+%D0%BD%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%82%D1%81%D1%8F+%D0%B2%D0%B8%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%BE). Accessed on 24.08.2023.

the first picture, Ukraine is depicted as a helpless teenage girl in a traditional blue and yellow flower wreath and untied hair (an ancient symbol of virginity), who is rudely threatened with a gun in her mouth by an unidentified male hand. The words above her head belong to Putin and refer to the Minsk agreements: »You have to negotiate«. In a reversal to this, the 2022 picture shows Ukraine as a young beautiful woman in a sexually appealing outfit with the same blue and yellow flower wreath on her head holding a gun in the mouth of a kneeling man who looks very much like Putin. Her aggressive body language demonstrates that she knows how to use this weapon, and she is truly capable of protecting her freedom and dignity with it. The phrase in the background says: »I am not your ›Beauty‹«. The dominating colors of the pictures – red-black and yellow-blue – symbolize the flags of UPA and of Ukraine creating a reference to the heroic Ukrainian past.



Fig. 3: Andrii Yermolenko on Twitter, »You have to negotiate« »I am not your ›beauty‹« (2022)<sup>3</sup>

Another popular picture created in response to Putin's metaphor of Ukraine as »Beauty«, also plays on the contrasts. This time the contrast is between the serenity of the background painted in soft colors and featuring an orthodox church, a very attractive young woman in a traditional intricately embroidered white blouse with a red necklace and a folding dark skirt, and a huge modern sniper rifle she holds in her hands. The tender beauty wears sunglasses and holds the gun in a highly professional manner which emphasizes her ability to fight back. The inscription »A beauty

3 Twitter: »I am not your Beauty«, Ukraine World [@UkraineWorld], »if you get the context. »I am not you ›beauty‹. -- great image by Ukrainian painter Andrii Yermolenko«. Twitter, 11.02.2022. [https://twitter.com/ukraine\\_world/status/1492270793367199750](https://twitter.com/ukraine_world/status/1492270793367199750).

will not put up!» gives an answer to Putin showing the readiness of Ukraine to protect its freedom with weapons.

Being different in their artistic manner, both images belong to the first days of the invasion and vividly manifest the main tendencies which became crucial for personifying Ukraine on social media. First of all, they show Ukraine as a young attractive woman. Besides that, they include folklore elements and traditional symbolism, and they depict Ukraine wielding weapons on the level of an experienced professional soldier, and thus capable of protecting herself effectively.

#### 4. Warrior Ukraine as Berehynia and Morana

Although the personifications of Ukraine on social media vary greatly, they can be divided into two big groups according to the traditional cultural images they make reference to. The first group is related to Berehynia, one of the most popular gender stereotypes in contemporary Ukraine. This extremely controversial image demonstrates a bright example of the situation when under the influence of national ideology historical facts are misinterpreted, totally ignored or replaced with officially approved fakes. In Ukraine the image of Berehynia is widely used to represent Woman as Wife, Hostess and Mother as well as Keeper of the traditional family values and Preserver of the collective memory, and therefore is turned into an ideal vehicle for promoting stereotypes characteristic of the patriarchal society.

The first misinterpretation connected with Berehynia is hidden in the name itself. Most Ukrainians sincerely believe that »Berehynia« comes from the word »berehty« meaning »keep safe, protect«. But a thorough research demonstrates that it is far from being so: in this particular case the name comes from a different word »berek« meaning »a river bank«. As the proof of this explanation serves the fact that, in Old Slavic mythology, people called dangerous mermaid-like female creatures living on the banks of rivers and lakes »berehynia« (Buys'kykh 2018).

Quite amazingly, the transformation of an evil mermaid into a loving goddess protecting Home and Family did not take place many centuries ago but dates back to late 1980s – early 1990s, the time when the Soviet Union collapsed. According to O. Kis, the potential need for new Ukrainian mythology arose during the Perestroika period, when communist ideology lost its monopoly and, as a result, the canon of femininity formed by it – the Soviet superwoman – was finally discredited. In the context of Ukraine's newly won independence and a new national ideology formation, the authorities tried to revive Ukrainian spirituality, ethnic identity and cultural values by updating numerous historical myths in a neo-romantic manner (Kis 2019: 12). As Nina Yuval-Davis explains, nationalism is a maternalist discourse associating women with symbolic and biological reproduction of the nation, when women's bodies are seen in service to the nation (Yuval-Davis 1997). Ukrainian na-

tionalists also see motherhood as the highest social mission of women. The head of the Svoboda Student Organization which promotes the ideas of nationalism in Ukraine, Oleksandr Siudak proudly stated in one of his speeches: »[...] it is mothers who give birth to the future warriors and protectors of the nation... To raise a patriot of the Motherland is a great and sacred matter« (Bureychak/Petrenko 2015: 16). In accord with this principle, Ukrainian state leaders turned to the symbols of femininity and motherhood (Orlova 2010: 207) and made the matriarchy myth an integral part of the Ukrainian national mythology, moving the image of Berehynia to the spheres of politics and social life. This phenomenon of creating a new mythology answering the needs of the state was aptly called »fakelore« by American folklorist Richard Dorson (Dorson 1977: 4), and later got the name of invented tradition (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983). It is also worth mentioning that contemporary representation of Ukraine as a traditionally matriarchal country is firmly connected with the desire of Ukrainian nationalists to distance themselves from Russia. As Kis explains, this was a way to demonstrate that Ukrainians have always been an independent nation with its own customs and traditions different from Russia, thus validating the Ukrainian right to have an independent state. The idea of matriarchy was a very bright and convenient example proving the existence of these differences in contrast to the traditional Russian patriarchal way of life (Kis 2006: 15).

There is nothing surprising in the fact that the symbol of Ukrainian home matriarchy, Berehynia, was created by a man: Ukrainian journalist and writer Vasyl Skurativskyi in 1987 wrote a novella called »Berehynia« where he literary »invented« this new goddess for Ukraine. What is more, knowing the truth about Berehynia and other creations of new Ukrainian mythology, most professional historians, folklorists, and ethnographers supported this purely political venture by keeping silence about its real sources and aims. Only few researchers raised their voices to oppose this artificial construct. For instance, the famous Ukrainian literary critic and feminist S. Pavlychko stressed the potential danger of spreading and supporting the Berehynia myth, pointing out that though this image fit ideally into the torrent of magical thinking developed by Ukrainians, in fact it expressed disdain to women reducing their lives to supportive and reproductive functions (Pavlychko 2002).

The war has reinforced patriarchal values in Ukrainian society and the binary gender roles have become much more prominent in it. In this system men are the ones who build the state, and their primary duty is to protect their native land and kill the enemies. In contrast, women serve merely as symbols of the nation and their privilege is to bless men's noble fight and patiently wait for their return protecting peace, preserving normal life style and caring for the children. After the end of the war, men should have a cozy home they can return to and the best women waiting for them, ready to become prizes for the courageous heroes. A lot of the images where Ukraine is personified as Woman glorify this perception of the female fate and mourn women's pitiful lot during the wartime. However, as Olesya Khromeychuk

correctly noted, by viewing women as victims of the enemy or performing auxiliary roles, we deny women's agency (Khromeychuk 2016: 2). Subsequently, many images represent Ukraine as an actor, demonstrating female refusal to obey such passive gender roles and claiming their right to fight for the freedom of the Motherland together with men.

A considerable number of images inspired by the Berehynia myth depict Ukraine in a much more violent way. In one picture, «Welcome to us on Fire», created by Sveta Gryb (March, 2022), for instance, Ukraine is represented as a young hostess receiving the guests.<sup>4</sup> According to an old Ukrainian tradition, the woman of the house should meet the guests with a loaf of freshly baked bread with salt on an embroidered towel. But in this picture, the bread is replaced with a bunch of burning bottles with Molotov cocktail on a snow-white embroidered towel. The girl's stern gaze and unruly loose hair makes it clear what welcome unwanted Russian quests will receive in Ukraine.

One of the main reasons why the Berehynia myth became a part of Ukrainian cultural discourse so quickly lies in a long tradition of veneration of the Virgin Mary as The Mother of God in Ukrainian culture. The Cossacks considered the Virgin Mary their Holy Patron and worshiped her, and the UPA leaders chose the religious holiday of the Theotokos (Pokrova, October 14) connected with the cult of the Virgin Mary as the day of their organization's founding. The Ukrainian government continued this tradition by making this day the Day of Ukraine's Defenders and a national holiday. The image of Berehynia symbolizing Motherhood got mixed with the image of the Virgin Mary and the result has found its reflection in the popular war imagery.

The idealization of the image of the Mother is a common practice in contemporary society where a highly romanticized vision of motherhood often serves as an effective means of social control. The phenomenon of «new momism» is a vivid proof of such a tendency (Douglas & Michaels 2004). With the beginning of the war this discourse became more important for Ukraine. Images of suffering women and children belong to the most productive ones in the process of framing the war, due to the emotional response of the potential audience, so world mass media keeps publishing them. This tendency led to the creation of new Ukrainian «Madonnas» based on the photos of real Ukrainian mothers and their war experiences. Artist Marina Solomenikova based her «Madonna of Kyiv» on the photo of a mother breastfeeding her newborn baby during a Russian air raid in Kyiv Metro and subsequently the picture was turned into an icon and placed in the Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Mugnano di Napoli.

Multiple images represent Ukraine as a suffering Mother with a child in her hands in need of protection and help, and as a result, employ martyr discourse in

4 Available at Sveta Gryb/Sunseed Art. Source: UGC Read. <https://www.behance.net/svetagryb>. Accessed on 25.08.2023.

relation to it. However, there are authors who refuse to follow this model and while preserving all features of the Berehynia myth, present Ukraine as an active defender of her children and home rather than a helpless mother grieving over their doleful fates (fig. 4).



Fig. 4: Visual art of Ukraine; left: Ukraine as fighting mother/Motanka figure; right: Andrii Yermolenko's Motanka image.<sup>5</sup>

In one of these images created by Andrii Yermolenko, Ukraine is shown as a young pretty mother dressed in traditional clothes with an elaborated flower wreath on her head skillfully holding a gun in her gloved hands. Though the gun is decorated with blue and yellow flowers, it still looks threatening. The woman carries her child dressed in modern clothes in a sling behind her back. This position is very convenient because on the one hand it keeps a child maximally protected, but on the other enables the mother to move freely when it is necessary to fight. The dominating colors

5 Left: »You thought I would wash my face with tears? I would kneel before you? The heir of the pitiful horde, I am too tough for you, I am Ukraine!!!! I am a nation, a people, I am the light which can never be extinguished! I am the true love which cannot die!« Twitter, 11.10.2022. <https://twitter.com/Irina61032137/status/1579906589464854529>. Right: Euro-  
maiden Press. »Motanka – an ancient Ukrainian talisman, a symbol linking the past to the present. [...]«. Twitter, 08.01.2023. <https://twitter.com/EuromaidanPress/status/161197752382406657>.

of the picture are red and black (the clothes of both the child and the mother) as reference to the heroic UPA, and yellow and blue of the national flag (the flowers on the gun and the background).

There is also a popular tendency of presenting Ukraine through a female image split in two halves – one of them belongs to the times of peace, and the other one is at war. These images symbolize the painful division which exists in the minds and souls of all Ukrainians: life before the war and during the war. A good example of such a division demonstrates an image of a split motanka doll, created by Andrii Yermolenko. First of all, a motanka doll is an ancient Ukrainian talisman of protection made by mothers for their children, and now firmly associated with Berehynia. The doll in this picture is dressed in national embroidered clothes in which dominates the combination of white and red (light and life (red is blood and therefore symbolizes life/death according to Ukrainian traditions) and wears a beautiful red necklace, also typical for Ukrainian traditional outfits. Her head is decorated with a flower wreath with brightly visible national colors, her hair is loose and she holds a baby doll in her left hand. The left side of the picture depicting peaceful Ukraine features dark blue sky with bright stars and high green grass, but the right is being consumed by fire. The right side of the doll is burnt, instead of a flower wreath there is a wreath of thorns on her head, her hair is gray, her necklace is made of cartridge-cases, and she holds a machine gun in her right hand. It is important to mention that she holds the baby and the machine gun in exactly the same equally natural way. The protective female force of motanka is redefined and gets a new meaning under the circumstances of the war.

The double perception of Ukraine as the Mother and the Warrior is vividly presented in »The New Orants« (2022) created by artist Dana Vitkovska (fig.5). This image combines two traditional positions of the Virgin Mary in iconography most popular in Ukrainian Orthodox Church: The Tenderness (the child is nursed and covered) and The Virgin Orants (the depiction of the Virgin Mary in prayer with extended arms) making reference to the double nature of Ukrainian femininity during the war time. As the basis for this work, the artist chose the most famous Virgin Orants in Ukraine, the 6-meter-high mosaic located in Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv, highly venerated by Ukrainians. Instead of the Virgin Mary's cloak, the Warrior has a masking net which covers the mother and the baby, protecting them. Though the Warrior in the picture does not hold an actual gun, her full ammunition proves that she has one and uses it regularly.



Fig. 5:: Dana Vitkovska, *The New Orants*<sup>6</sup>

After Ukraine was given a new type of weapon called Javelin, and import from the US, some artists half seriously half-jokingly started to create images of so called St Javelin. These images are rather controversial because they present a woman dressed in The Virgin Mary's clothes holding weapons in her hands. The reactions to St Javelins images were quite different, while part of Ukrainian society liked them and actively reposted on social media, others disregarded and criticized such pictures. The story of the St Javelin mural created by the Kailas-V group in May 2022 in Kyiv is quite remarkable in this respect.

The mural portrays the »Saint Javelin« meme with an Orthodox Madonna clad in green and cradling a Javelin anti-tank missile instead of the baby Crist in her hands (Vidar 2022). This mural caused a strong negative reaction of the Church authorities who considered it disrespectful to the religious people's feelings (Gorpenchuk 2022). As a result, the nimb around St Javelin's head was made invisible with one more coat of paint to reduce the likeness with the Virgin Mary. Nevertheless, this mural still looks impressive and brightly conveys the idea of the women's ability to protect what is dear to them in the most violent way.

6 Vitkovska, Dana. »#ukraine.« Facebook, 21 April, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/vitkovskadana/photos/a.1527885040840206/2742668836028481/>. Accessed on 31.08.2023.



*Fig. 6: The Kailas-V group with their St Javelin mural (Vidar 2022).*

There are also cases when the image of Berehynia is mixed with other cultural icons to reach a peculiar result. The image called »Berehynia« (2022) by Larysa Shostko portrays Ukraine as a young girl sitting in the middle of the shelter where sleeping children and women are hiding from Russian missiles. The most remarkable thing about the girl is her pose which copies the pose of Cossack Mamay, a popular folk painting character. This desperately courageous warrior connected with the Cossack heroic past is considered a male personification of the national character and depicted in a standard pose with a number of fixed details (his weapon, horse and bandura) (Laska 2007). Though in this case the artist does not follow the tradition in everything, the image is still recognizable. This reference to the Cossack tradition actively implies the idea of a woman as a worthy descendant of the Ukrainian warriors of the past. The girl in the picture is dressed in a combination of traditional clothes and a military uniform, and is additionally draped in the national yellow and blue flag. She wears a very beautiful wreath which contains not only flowers but also wheat ears which imitate the crown of light rays and create a halo around her head. The effect is enhanced by the actual ray of light from above. In one hand the girl holds a machine gun and her other hand covers a red cat sleeping on her laps in a protective gesture. The only other non-sleeping creature in the

picture is a German shepherd dog. In the background there is a hanging piece of red fabric which falls on the floor under the girl's bare feet and becomes a rivulet of blood when it reaches the margins of the picture. Though the pose of the girl seems relaxed, her body language hints at her potential deathly power and danger for those who will try to harm the ones she protects. The image is highly intertextual: next to the Cossack Mamay's symbolism, it contains multiple references to Ukrainian culture and events of the war. For instance, the crown of wheat ears refers to the role of wheat for Ukraine, the woman with a baby in her hands to the motherhood which needs protection, the dog symbolizing loyalty, and the shelter, which is not a real shelter but an old basement, reminds of Mariupol and other Ukrainian cities where people had to survive under the most difficult circumstances.

The second important group of images makes a reference to Marena/Morana, a goddess of Death in Slavic mythology closely connected with seasonal rituals of death and revival (Ivanov/Toporov 1987). It is remarkable that this group is the biggest one.

The situation with Morana/Marena is not simple. In fact, very little is really known about Slavic mythology because the information about it belonged to oral tradition and was thoroughly erased with the introduction of Christianity. Quite paradoxically, almost everything modern researchers know about Slavic mythology and paganism, they learned from Christian authors who left detailed descriptions of pagan beliefs while fiercely condemning them (Heishtor 2015). The first mentioning of Morana dates back to 1460, when a goddess with a similar name (Marzana) appears in one of the Polish chronicles *Annales seu cronicae incliti Regni Polonie* (1460). Still, in the source Marzana is described as the goddess of Harvest, not of Death. Only in 1719 Abraham Frenel in his work *Disertationis historicae tres de Idolis Slavorum* referred to Morana as the goddess of Death for the first time. This idea seemed extremely attractive to Slavic folklorists of the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century who started developing it. Nevertheless, it is still not clear if this interpretation has anything to do with historical truth, or if it is a pure invention of A. Frenel's imagination (Mikhailov 2017).

The image of Morena as the Goddess of Death became truly popular with the development of Slavic neopaganism after the fall of the Soviet Union. The followers of this teaching consider Morana/Marena a goddess of Death of the pre-Aryan origin, and some of them even claim that German and Scandinavian goddesses of death were derived from Slavic Morana. They energetically develop the image of this goddess adding numerous symbols and features, thus succeeding in making it quite eclectic (Ajdachić 2021: 169). Most neopagan websites describe Morana as a Slavic goddess of Death and Winter connected with Harvest, the patron of Witchcraft and Justice. Quite often, she is seen as a Slavic version of Kali and depicted with six hands. To her main symbols belong a spindle, which she uses to spin people's lives, a sickle used to cut the threads of lives as well as to harvest, a goblet made of a human

skull, a heap of skulls under her feet symbolizing her power to take lives and a black moon symbolizing both grief and revival. In such a way, Morana has been turned into an artificial myth related more to the world of fantasy than the world of history. However, this image is widely popular in contemporary mass culture, as multiple personifications of Ukraine with Morana's attributes prove vividly.

The work of Ukrainian artist Alina Antonova »Get out of My Land« (2022) represents Ukraine as a Warrior Maid coming down from the heavens. The composition of the picture resembles paintings with The Virgin Mary descending from the sky. The huge flower and wheat ears wreath on her head imitating a halo, white birds flying in the sky and the play of light in the picture make this religious parallel even more prominent. Still, while the figure of the Virgin Mary is normally depicted against the blue heavens, the sky in this case is covered with heavy clouds which allow only occasional rays of light to go through, a reference to the situation in Ukraine now. The Warrior Maid is dressed in a combination of traditional clothes (an embroidered blouse) and a military uniform (camouflage trousers, high boots and protective equipment). In one of her gloved hands she holds a modern rifle in a professional gesture, her other hand forms a fist. Under her feet there is a heap of human skulls lying on the ground. It is difficult to say whether these are the skulls of innocent victims of her enemies. The desire to find justice and to punish the guilty is quite obvious here. This image is highly representative as it combines Christian motifs (The Virgin Mary) as well as neopagan ones (Morana) to evoke a stronger emotional response of the spectators.

Though the style of Oleksyi Chornyy's work is completely different, he also combines references to important cultural myths in one striking image. Ukraine here is represented as a Warrior Woman dressed in a traditional complicated outfit with a beautiful necklace and a flower wreath. This woman has got several pairs of hands as a neopagan Morana (or Indian Kali). Over her head there is a fiery halo which may belong to two traditions as well – Christian and Hinduist. In the two front hands she holds a machine gun which looks very similar to the one used by OUN/UPA, one more pair holds two blooded sabres thus making reference to the Cossack past, and one hand she uses to cradle a baby. The background is divided into two halves: the upper one is black and the down part is consumed by red and orange burning flames. Though the UPA flag has a different order of colors (red/black), the reference to it in this case is evident. This picture demonstrates an attempt to create a new heroic image of Ukraine by appealing to different aspects of its mythological past.



*Fig. 7: Stanislav Lunin, Welcome to Free Ukraine (2022). Courtesy of the artist.*

In the last picture, created by Stanislav Lunin, Ukraine is also personified as a Warrior Maid (fig. 7). The girl's body language conveys that she has just finished a successful fight. Her huge gun is still smoking, her beautiful face and her embroidered blouse are splashed with blood, both her own and of the enemies. The girl is dressed in traditional clothes and wears a modern breastplate. Her intricate head-dress consists of two parts: a red and white flower wreath with yellow and blue ribbons and a halo made of wheat straw. A lot of attention is given to the gun which is depicted in a very realistic way with many lifelike details. It creates a bright contrast with a highly symbolic background with burned Russian tanks marked by Z and hands of people dying in a sunflower field.

## 5. Conclusion

Female representations of Ukraine published on social media (Facebook, Pinterest) during the Russo-Ukrainian war have become powerful carriers of meaning and turned into an ideological weapon used to influence the people's perception of the war and modifying it. These images share a number of characteristic features employing gendered assumptions and manifesting general tendencies which exist in Ukrainian society and, as a result, become vivid illustrations of the dominant ideological narrative.

It is worth noting that the target audience for the images representing Ukraine as a Warrior Woman are Ukrainians. These personifications are complicated allegories containing messages which cannot reach the people with no grounded knowledge of both Ukrainian cultural symbols and stereotypes, and Ukrainian war realities. Most representations draw on the images from the past and have a clearly marked contextual and historical nature, combining emphasis on heroic models derived from the Cossack past and the OUN/UPA struggle.

By and large, when men and women at war are visualized, the main masculine symbol is the strength of the spirit, while female one is the body, however, this is not always the case with the female personifications of Ukraine. Though all images depict Ukraine as a strikingly beautiful maiden or a young woman, only few of them are openly sexual and clearly aimed at the male perception of women as sex objects. Much more often they represent Ukraine as an independent actor capable of protecting not only herself but also her children. Besides that, these representations obviously bring into play a popular cultural myth about a Ukrainian woman as a Matriarch in opposition to the Russian patriarchal family system where a woman is treated as a subordinate.

In general, events involving violence, destruction, death, and suffering often produce imagery in which one party is repeatedly presented as an aggressor and the other as a victim (Bayulgen/Arbatlib 2013), and the Ukrainian war is no exception. This is not the war of the equals: Ukraine as a country is much weaker than Russia, and at the beginning of the war nobody believed in its ability to stop the invader. It is quite significant that Ukraine is mostly personified as a slender maid or a young woman who obviously lacks physical strength and goes on purely on the power of rage and despair. Paradoxically, such a depiction, in spite of all the warrior attributes, still reflects the assumption that Ukraine is a victim and makes the parallel between a rape/female abuse and the war in Ukraine rather prominent. As a result, a feminist idea that a woman should fight against any type of abuse is reinterpreted in a symbolic key: similar to a woman, Ukraine cannot stop fighting because otherwise it may lose not only dignity and freedom, but also life itself. From this point of view, all representations of Ukraine as a Warrior Woman convey a clear pro-war message. This finding suggests that such images are to some extent

a result of propaganda, and at the same time they transmit a powerful ideological message as well.

Notably, some images are accompanied by visual depictions of the war horrors (dead bodies, skulls, dripping blood), inviting the viewers to scrutinize horrific details. This strategy plays an important role because it is aimed at evoking empathy. Moreover, a number of these representations fall back on fantasy fanart and computer games design, employing widely spread elements and heroic imagery of popular visual culture.

Most viral female representations of Ukraine as a Warrior on social networks can be divided into two main categories: based on the »Berehynia myth« which is associated with defense and protection, and on the »Morena myth« connected with justified revenge and active resistance. Notwithstanding the category, Ukraine as a Warrior is always dressed in a traditional Ukrainian embroidered outfit, though in some cases artists also use elements of contemporary military ammunition to emphasize her status as a soldier. At the same time, the Warrior Ukraine always wears a richly decorated flower wreath which sometimes contains additional elements (wheat ears or straw) turning it into a halo, and has colorful ribbons (blue and yellow/black and red). What is more, most images depict Ukraine with loose hair symbolizing her desire for freedom (though in Ukrainian tradition it was not appropriate for a woman to go with loose hair in public). Other important symbols actively applied by authors, include a Ukrainian traditional red necklace (»namysto« – an ancient protective talisman) and »national« flowers combined with other natural elements (poppies, sunflowers, cornflowers, ears of wheat). Additionally, the images commonly highlight Ukrainian national colors (blue and yellow of the national flag, and red and black of the UPA flag) in the depiction of the background or as elements of the uniform and equipment.

A lot of attention is also given to the depiction of the weapons and other military equipment. Most often Ukraine is depicted carrying modern assault rifles, sniper rifles and machine guns which represent the best species of weapons available for Ukrainian soldiers at the front line.

To sum up, the use of female personifications of Ukraine on mass media during Russo-Ukrainian War is remarkable. It shows active artistic reaction to the events of the war aimed at the consolidation of the nation through recontextualizing the Ukrainian heroic past. At the same time, due to a number of intertextual connections and heavy use of symbols, these images reinforce the role of Ukrainian women in the war who demonstrate extraordinary courage and strength in the face of tragic circumstances.

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