Zombies, Orcs, and Fascists

Naming the Other in the Context of Russia's War against Ukraine

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The dehumanisation of the enemy is a common feature of any armed conflict and the ongoing Russo–Ukrainian War is no exception. This paper explores the rhetorical strategies of naming the enemy employed by both sides of the conflict, focusing on ideologically charged descriptions (e.g., 'fascists') and on utterly fantastic images from literature and mass culture (e.g., 'orcs', 'zombies', or 'witches'), which have circulated on media and in literary texts since the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

This new phase of the Russo–Ukrainian War led not only to a new and unprecedented level of violence, but also marked a shift in the war rhetoric. Between 2014 and 2022, war semantics – that is, the understanding of who is fighting whom, how, and why – remained largely frozen. The situation changed dramatically in February 2022, after the explicit attack by the Russian Army on Ukraine following an official statement by the Russian head of state. This rendered the former rhetoric and vocabulary of both sides outdated. The Russian side could no longer feign that the war was a domestic Ukrainian issue, or a 'civil war', which was Russia's official stance since 2014. Ukraine, in turn, also had to acknowledge that the armed conflicts were no longer limited to a specific region but instead represented a full-fledged assault of a foreign power on the Ukrainian state and its people.[1] This new situation required the development of a new language and a new understanding, including a new identification of the enemy, a pivotal element of any war rhetoric.

Obviously, this type of naming often serves as a mechanism for affective relief through verbal insults and denigration of the foe. However, in cases of more complex metaphors and allegories, such rhetoric also acts as a cognitive tool for conceptualising the complexities of war. This is precisely the point at which literature and culture become significant in modern conflicts, since here, the figures and narratives from

1 Serhy Yekelchyk, "Naming the war: Russian aggression in Ukrainian official discourse and mass culture", *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 64/2–3, 2022, 232–246, here 233.

popular culture play an increasingly critical role alongside national stereotypes and ideological clichés. In this context, literature and popular culture deserve close examination, as they provide the testing grounds for new political metaphors and a new vocabulary.

Zombification: From Literary Trope to Media Cliché

At the end of February 2022, a few days before Russian forces invaded Ukraine, videos and photos of Russian tanks and military vehicles painted with the letter 'Z' circulated on social media. Initially intended to identify specific task forces or squadrons, the letter Z (which does not even exist in the Cyrillic alphabet) soon became a symbol for active support of the Russian 'special military operation' in Ukraine.

For those opposing the war, the sign was interpreted on social media differently than intended, with users immediately contextualising it in Marc Foster's action-horror film *World War Z* (2013). The film is about a sudden zombie apocalypse that threatens all of humanity. Such decontextualisation of the Z as a rallying symbol allowed for conceptualising the invading Russian Army as a horde of aggressive zombies.

However, official Ukrainian media and government channels initially ignored these allusions. As Serhy Yekelchyk persuasively shows, in the first days of the invasion, the propaganda strategies of the Ukrainian state drew on the Soviet commemorative tradition. For example, President Volodomyr Zelenskyy used the term 'the Patriotic War' in his first video speeches in February 2022 and his administration took the initiative to reintroduce the honorary title of 'Hero City' and award it to cities whose defenders offered a particularly stubborn resistance against the Russian onslaught.[2] Yet, this challenging of Russia on the field of commemoration of the Second World War soon gave way to using characters and symbols from globalised Western popular culture.

Already in March, the president's advisor Oleksiy Arestovych, who gradually monopolised the media coverage of the war during that time, referred to the zombie comparison by calling the Russian troops "an army of doomed zombies"[3] and their march towards Kyiv "a zombie incursion".[4] On the Russian side, the first references

2 Ibid., 237–238.

3 Oleksii Arestovych, "Rosiiska armiia – tse armiia pryrechenykh zombie" ("The Russian Army is an Army of Doomed Zombies"), *Glavkom*, 10 March 2022, https://glavcom.ua/columns/arestovich/rosiyska-armiya-ce-armiya-prirechenih-zombi-828505.html [accessed: 31.07.2024] [author's trans.].

4 bigimir.net, "Arestovich: 'Zombi-nashestvie' RF konchitsia cherez 2–3 nedeli" ("Arestovich: The 'Zombie-Incursion' of the Russian Federation Will Be Over in 2 or 3 Weeks"), 22 March

to the Ukrainian 'zombie-warriors' were usually made in relation to the narrative of secret US biological laboratories on the territory of Ukraine and the supposed excessive drug use by Ukrainian military personnel.[5] While intended as a way to dehumanise the enemy, this naming created rhetorical implications that went beyond a mere insult.

Starting with George Romero's seminal film *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), the trope of a zombie apocalypse has always been a strong political metaphor in Western mass culture. At first glance, zombies do not necessarily have anything to do with war, in the sense of a conventional military conflict. However, if we define 'war' as a situation in which normality is programmatically suspended, then a zombie apocalypse offers precisely this kind of crisis – a collapse of modern society caused by the pandemic rise of a hostile species united in an attack on humanity. While in fiction the cause of a zombie epidemic varies significantly, ranging from voodoo sorcery to the spread of a virus, a zombie infestation is typically conceptualised as a kind of plague and not as a result of conscious decision-making, which traditional zombies are not capable of. Naturally, the idea of negotiating with such an enemy is absurd.

Similarly, for post-Soviet societies, the trope of a zombie apocalypse provides a narrative framework for stories about an unexpected and unstoppable transformation of society, in which one's neighbour suddenly turns into a hostile and aggressive 'Other'. Following the genre conventions of Western fiction, the post-Soviet zombie apocalypse, however, has its own literary pedigree and several distinct features.

First and foremost, a post-Soviet zombie is less an imaginary creature than it is a state of mind. The genealogy of this view can be traced back to Viktor Pelevin's seminal essay "The Zombification of the Soviet Person", first published in 1990.[6] After a lengthy overview of the voodoo tradition, Pelevin makes a rather straightforward argument that everyday life in the Soviet Union (with its ideologically charged, propagandistic rituals) was, in itself, an ongoing project of zombification. Pelevin, however, quickly adapts zombification to a post-Soviet reality (or, at least, for what

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2022, https://news.bigmir.net/ukraine/6262594-arestovich-zombi-nashestvie-rf-konchitsya-cherez-2-3-nedeli [accessed: 31.07.2024] [author's trans.].

5 See for example: Liudmila Chertkova, "Ukraina prevratila VSU v 'zombi-armiiu': prut na uboi" ("Ukraine Turned its Armed Forces into a 'Zombie Army': They're Roaring to Slaughter"), *Pravda.Ru*, 25 October 2022, https://www.pravda.ru/society/1763348-narkogosudarstvo_ukraina/ [accessed: 31.07.2024]; and *Luganskii Informatsionnyi Tsentr* (*Lugansk Information Centre*), "Boitsy VSU v Rubezhnom voiuiut 'v sostoianii zombi' pod vozdeistviem narkotikov – Miroshnik" ("The Soldiers of the Ukrainian Armed Forces in Rubezhnoye Fight 'in a Zombie State' under the Influence of Drugs – Miroshnik"), 07 April 2022, https://lug-info.com/news/bojcy-vsu-v-rubezhnom-voyuyut-v-sostoyanii-zombi-pod-vozdejstviem-narkotikov-miroshnik [accessed: 31.07.2024].

6 Viktor Pelevin, "Zombifikatsiia sovetskogo cheloveka" ("The Zombification of the Soviet Person"), *Novyi Zhurnal* (*New Journal*) 179, 1990, 324–338.

passes as reality in Pelevin's deliberately elusive fiction). Thus, following Eliot Borenstein's insightful analysis, it's possible to argue that,

> as in the West, [post-Soviet] zombies are the product of contagion, but along a completely different disease vector. The post-Soviet discourse is less concerned with zombie as thing than it is with zombie as process: not zombies, but zombification.[7]

This observation is not only applicable to highbrow literary texts but is also a stable stereotype in post-Soviet mass culture.[8]

Pelevin's idea of 'zombification' assumes a certain view of human nature, shaped by widely accepted beliefs about the influence of technology, media, and propaganda on an individual's identity. This perspective implies that individuals are highly receptive to external stimuli and lack agency in their consumption of information. In colloquial Russian, this idea is often associated with the use of television, dubbed the 'zombie box' (Russian: *zomboyashchik*), as the primary tool for zombification.

Thus, invoking zombification is an inherently political gesture. It turns 'zombie' into a collective noun describing stupid, lumpen masses, whose gullibility allows the regime to control the country. This can be connected to the frequent accusation that the majority of the population that allegedly supports Putin's regime are victims of zombification. For instance, the Russian opposition leader Boris Nemtsov asserted only two months before his assassination that "zombifying people is the main attribute of Putin's regime".[9] Putinists, in turn, hurl the same accusation at the supporters of the protest movements in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, essentially conflating crowds at a street protest with the proverbial zombie hordes. Since 2014 – that is, since the beginning of the so-called 'Ukrainian crisis' – the metaphor of zombification has been equally applied both to the supporters of the Euromaidan and the participants of the anti-Maidan rallies in Ukraine and Rus-

7 Eliot Borenstein, *Plots against Russia: Conspiracy and Fantasy after Socialism*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019, 184.

8 This is, for example, the case in the highly popular S.T.A.L.K.E.R. game series, which the Ukrainian studio GSC Game World developed. The game is a mixture of an ego-shooter and a survival horror and takes place in the Chernobyl exclusion zone, where the player encounters different physical anomalies, but also mutants and 'zombified soldiers', whose consciousness was corrupted and ultimately destroyed by the radiation.

9 Borenstein, *Plots against Russia*, 196.

sia.[10] Thus, the zombie metaphor effectively takes us back to the very beginning of the Russo–Ukrainian armed conflict, which started in the spring of 2014.

An informationally 'zombified' person ceases to be a valid interlocutor and cannot engage in a meaningful discussion. Yet, unlike the 'traditional' zombies of Hollywood blockbusters, they cannot be simply annihilated – thus, one needs to look for strategies for coming to terms with such 'zombified' compatriots. Ukrainian and Russian literatures reacted to this challenge almost simultaneously with two important novels: Sergei Lukianenko's *Kvazi* (2016; the original Russian spelling is КВАЗИ) and Volodymyr Rafeyenko's *The Length of the Days: An Urban Ballad* (*Dolgota dnei: Gorodskaya ballada*, 2017).[11]

Lukianenko, one of the most commercially successful Russian writers of the last decades and an ardent proponent of Putin's regime, sets his novel in 2027. The story unfolds in a world where a mysterious catastrophe occurred ten years prior, causing humans to coexist with the resurrected dead who evolved beyond their initial zombie state into intelligent and unemotional beings known as 'kvazis'. The narrative follows a Moscow police officer whose wife and son were killed by the undead. He attempts to uncover a conspiracy that aims to destroy the fragile peace between humans and kvazis. To succeed, the hero must overcome his grief and desire for vengeance and collaborate with some of the kvazis, learning to see his former foes as allies. However, the novel depicts this mutual understanding as limited and constantly overshadowed by suspicion.

The subtext of *Kvazi* can be interpreted as a political commentary on the ideological division between pro-European, liberal segments of post-Soviet society and their conservative, Soviet-nostalgic counterparts. The human society depicted in the novel seeks to preserve its identity by rejecting modern technologies such as radios and computers and reverting to an archaic lifestyle to protect itself from possible 'zombification'. In contrast, the novel portrays the kvazis as highly rational, tolerant, technologically advanced, and bicycle-riding vegetarians. Therefore, Lukianenko's novel presents a terrifying vision of a future where a liberal society of 'quasi-humans' may reign supreme.

The Ukrainian response to these newly drawn frontlines came in 2017 from the award-winning Ukrainian writer Rafeyenko. A native of Donetsk, Rafeyenko

10 For corresponding examples, see Triin Vihalemm and Jānis Juzefovičs, "'They say we are all zombies': Rethinking the role of audiences in a mediatized international conflict", *Global Media and Communication* 19/1, 2023, 3–28; Bradley E. Wiggins, "Crimea River: Directionality in Memes from the Russia–Ukraine Conflict", *International Journal of Communication* 10, 2016, 451–485; and William Jay Risch, "Prelude to War?", in: David. R. Marples (ed.), *The War in Ukraine's Donbas: Origins, Contexts, and the Future*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 7–28.

11 Sergei Lukianenko, *Kvazi*, Moscow: AST, 2016; and Vladimir Rafeyenko, *Dolgota dnei: Gorodskaya ballada* (*The Length of the Days: An Urban Ballad*), Kharkiv: Fabula, 2017.

wrote most of his prose fiction in Russian and, until the outbreak of the war in 2014, enjoyed more popularity in the Russian Federation than in Ukraine. In July 2014, however, he had to leave his hometown of Donetsk and moved to a town near Kyiv because of the incompatibility of his political views with those of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic. As an eyewitness of the first months of the war, Rafeyenko captured his experience in *The Length of the Days*, which depicts the occupied city of Z (recognisable as Donetsk) during the spring of 2014.

In the novel, the restoration of the Soviet Union in Z creates a tectonic shift in the structure of reality, letting irrational black matter devour the entire region. The city becomes an antiworld inhabited by bizarre images: the ghost of Rosa Luxemburg wandering the streets and giant flying beetles that carve up people, among other things.[12] The protagonists of the novel, two elderly men and a young girl, can only return and restore peace in the city if they find a statue of the elephant-headed Ganesha dressed in a Ukrainian embroidered shirt. Then they need to rub the statue's belly while performing three different mantras that will break the link between the city of Z and the Soviet legacy. In the final part of the novel, titled "The Displaced Persons", only the young girl manages to accomplish this, thus escaping the bizarre city. The two male protagonists, the representatives of the older generation, find themselves completely oblivious to their past and fail to escape.

Despite the novel's ironic tone, humour, and surreal plot twists, its message can be easily interpreted as nationalist. That is, it is a plea to abandon Soviet Russian culture in favour of a national Ukrainian one. However, the novel's narration from the point of view of supposedly zombified people resists straightforward interpretation. The so-called 'Z people' are recognisable as a Russian-speaking population of Eastern Ukraine, nostalgic for the Soviet Union. The novel presents them as both the reason for the war (they are literally the Kremlin's *casus belli*) and as its first victims, who deserve sympathy and solidarity.

Although in the current war discourse (shaped more by mass media than by works of literature) the collective images of zombified people are far less sophisticated and ambivalent, their literary genealogy should still be kept in mind, since the trope of zombification is implicitly present in the stories of the assaults of the 'zombified enemy soldiers', which circulate on both sides of the conflict.[13] Even if

12 Yuliya Ilchuk, "Memory as Forgetting in the Prose Fiction of Serhiy Zhadan and Volodymyr Rafieienko", *The Slavic and East European Journal* 65/2, 2021, 334–353, here 344.

13 Radio Svoboda (Radio Freedom) interview with Oleksandr Iabchanka, "'Ia takoho ne bachyv! Khiba shcho v filmach pro zombi-apokalipsys' – Oleksandr Iabchanka pro Bakhmut" ("'I Have Never Seen Anything Like This! Except in Films about the Zombie Apocalypse' – Oleksander Iabchanka about Bakhmut"), 11 April 2023, https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/oleksandr-yabchanka-bahmut/32358371.html [accessed: 31.07.2024]; and Elena Proshina, "SMI rasskazali o 'zombie-atakakh' boicov VSU" ("The Media Reported about the 'Zombie-Attacks' by the Soldiers of the Armed Forces of Ukraine"), *Rambler*, 31 October

the zombie imagery is inspired first and foremost by Hollywood movies or popular TV series about zombie apocalypses (which effectively place the devastated towns of Eastern Ukraine in the globally recognisable narrative about the breakdown of human civilisation), a zombified person as such is not necessarily a braindead, flesh-eating monster from a blockbuster but rather any person whose state of mind is corrupt. According to this logic, a heavily armed enemy soldier on steroids or a civilian who unconsciously consumes and reproduces 'enemy propaganda' on the internet can both be described as 'zombies'. Thus, rhetorically, the zombification trope bridges the gap between the battles on the real frontline and the outbursts of 'informational warfare' on the home front. If zombies are everywhere, so is the war.

Fascists and Witches

The intrinsic totality of 'zombification' means that this trope is open to a vast variety of images of the enemy, which spread in the context of the ongoing Russo–Ukrainian War. On the Russian side of the propaganda frontline, this zombified enemy is epitomised by the figure of a 'Ukrainian fascist', which comprises the core of Russian war rhetoric.

Since at least 2014, scholarly publications have discussed the propaganda tropes of Ukrainian Nazis or fascists. Most of these studies focus on ideology and history to debunk the myth of Ukraine as a country ruled by a Nazi junta.[14] While a legitimate scholarly endeavour, these analyses often obfuscate the fact that, in Russian war rhetoric, a Ukrainian fascist is not an ideological but an utterly fantastic figure – a person with a corrupted or manipulated consciousness and a representative of absolute evil. This type of person rejects or even undoes the common Soviet heritage of victory in the so-called Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) and thus rejects the central founding myth of the late USSR and contemporary Russia. In this regard, a

2022, https://news.rambler.ru/army/49607507-smi-rasskazali-o-zombi-atakah-boytsov-vsu/ [accessed: 31.07.2024].

14 See, for instance, Timothy Snyder, "Fascism, Russia, and Ukraine", *The New York Review of Books*, 20 March 2014, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2014/03/20/fascism-russia-and-ukraine/ [accessed 31.07.2024]; Oksana Dudko, "A Conceptual Limbo of Genocide: Russian Rhetoric, Mass Atrocities in Ukraine, and the Current Definition's Limits", *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 64/2–3, 2022, 133–145; Myroslav Shkandrij, "Living with Ambiguities: Meanings of Nationalism in the Russian–Ukrainian War", in: Olga Bertelsen (ed.): *Revolution and War in Contemporary Ukraine: The Challenge of Change*, Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2016, 121–138; and Tatiana Zhurzhenko, "Russia's Never-ending War Against 'Fascism': Memory Politics in the Russian–Ukrainian Conflict", *Eurozine*, 08 May 2015, https://www.eurozine.com/russias-never-ending-war-against-fascism/ [accessed 31.07.2024].

Ukrainian fascist is less a bearer of a certain ideology but, rather, a heretic, an apostate, and a Judas.[15]

Like the zombie apocalypse, the war of apostasy is always an existential conflict, a war of annihilation. In the case of Russian aggression against Ukraine, it is also a war for the purity of the imagined Russian community, a deadly quest for consolidation in the face of the 'Global West'. The discursive continuity between the sacralisation of the victory in the Great Patriotic War and the immortality of the fallen heroes makes the boundary between the ideological and pseudo-religious dimensions of the Russian war narrative blurred and permeable. Accordingly, Russian war rhetoric easily swings from the 'denazification' of Ukraine (as an officially declared *casus belli*) to the 'de-Satanisation' of the country – that is, to a holy war against Satanism and occultism, which, according to Russian officials, are flourishing in Ukraine.[16]

On this point, Russian and Ukrainian war rhetoric seem to reinforce each other in a paradoxical way, specifically when considering Ukrainian war narratives that present Ukraine as a land protected by powerful sorcerers and, above all, by witches. The image of Ukraine as a land inhabited by various demonic beings has its origins in Russian and Polish literature of the Romantic period.[17] In this literature, Ukraine was exoticised and represented as an object to be both tamed and admired. The reactivation of this image in the context of the current military conflict can be

15 The trope of this Ukrainian apostasy or treason is firmly anchored in the Russian master narrative. Its genealogy can be traced back to the Ukrainian Hetman Ivan Mazepa, who, during the Great Nordic War (1700–1721), defected from the Russian Army and sided with King Charles XII of Sweden. The Russian Orthodox Church laid an anathema on Mazepa's name in 1708. In the Russian imperial discourse, the term 'mazepinstvo' became an established rhetorical device for presenting Ukraine as being substantially a part of non-Orthodox or Catholic (Polish or 'Jesuit') culture that has been treacherously driven into the body of Russia to undermine its stability. In the genealogical tree of 'Ukrainian betrayal', the place of Mazepa was later taken by Symon Petliura, the military leader of the Ukrainian People's Republic during Ukraine's short-lived sovereignty from 1918 to 1921, and finally by Stepan Bandera (1909–1959), the head of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists. Today, in the Russian patriotic discourse, these three historical figures (as well as their followers) comprise a collective image of the 'Ukrainian Judas'. For more information, see: Alfred Sproede, "'Mazepinstvo' and Other Ukrainian Vexations Featured in Russian Conspiracy Theories (from Poltava 1709 to the Maidan Revolt and After)", *Philologie im Netz* (*Philology Online*) 93, 2022, 83–112.

16 See, for example, the article by Aleksei Pavlov, the Assistant Secretary of the Russian Security Council: Aleksei Pavlov, "Chto variat v vedminom kotle. Na Ukraine nabrali silu neoiazycheskie kulty" ("What is Brewing in the Witch's Cauldron: Neo-Pagan Cults Have Gained Strength in Ukraine"), *Argumenty i fakty* (*Arguments and Facts*), 25 October 2022, https://aif.ru/society/religion/chto_varyat_v_vedminom_kotle_na_ukraine_nabrali_silu_neoyazycheskie_kulty [accessed: 31.07.2024].

17 E.g., the poem *Rusałki* (*Mermaids*, 1829) by Józef Bohdan Zaleski or Gogol's collection *Vechera na hutore bliz Dikanki* (*Evenings on a Farm Near Dikank*, 1829–1832).

traced to a video from March 2022, in which an unarmed Ukrainian woman from the town of Konotop addresses an armed Russian soldier, threatening him with the spell of impotence.[18] Konotop as the unofficial 'capital' of Ukrainian witches has its origins in Hryhorii Kvitka-Osnovianenko's satirical novella *The Witch of Konotop* (*Konotopska Vidma*, 1837), which belongs to the Ukrainian literary canon. Yet, the figure of a Ukrainian witch is also firmly anchored within the Russian literary tradition, where it prominently features in the texts of famous writers like Nikolai Gogol, Orest Somov, and Mikhail Bulgakov.[19] The Ukrainian witch of these texts is a liminal figure who is both attractive and dangerous and is, therefore, a sexualised and exotic Other, but also a symbol of empowerment and independence.

This liminality explains the popularity of the witch as an allegory for contemporary Ukraine as a country at war. In the war context, a witch represents a frightening but undoubtedly positive figure – one that stimulates resilience and a persistent belief in the triumph of justice. For instance, a popular comic book, *Father: The Forge of Armour* (*Tato. Kuznia zbroii*, 2021), by Oleksandr Komiakhov features the Iron Witch. This character appears in the dreams of the book's protagonist, 14-year-old Marina, during the events of the Euromaidan and the first armed clashes in the Donbas.[20] In Marina's nightmares, the Iron Witch prophesises a terrible future for Ukraine. However, Marina gradually understands that the Iron Witch is not only the herald of the upcoming war but also an avenger, a defender, and a female warrior who brings death to enemies and protects Ukrainians.

After Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the poet Liudmyla Horova wrote the poem "To the Enemy" ("Vrazhe"), a grim and macabre poetic monologue of a witch who foresees doom and misfortune for Ukraine's foes. Later, the Ukrainian band Angy Kreyda released a track and a video clip of the same name based on Horova's lyrics. Performed as a magic spell, the text suggests that the invaders will suffer the fate the witch has prepared for them: "As many steps as you take in Ukraine, so will that many of your kin lie in a coffin". Additionally, the video features young women performing rituals with needles, candles, sculls, and other witchcraft paraphernalia (see figure 10). The song was a massive hit in Ukraine.[21]

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18 The video is available, for instance, on the X (formerly Twitter) account of Oleksandra Matviichuk: Oleksandra Matviichuk (@avalaina), "Woman from Konotop speaks to a Russian soldier…", X post, 02 March 2022, https://twitter.com/avalaina/status/1499117292545888260 [accessed: 31.07.2024] [author's trans].

19 E.g., the witch Solokha in Gogol's "Noch pered Rozhdestvom" ("Christmas Eve", 1832), Katrusia in Somov's *Kievskie vedmy* (*The Witches of Kyiv*, 1833), or Yavdokha in Bulgakov's *Belaya gvardiya* (*The White Guard*, 1925).

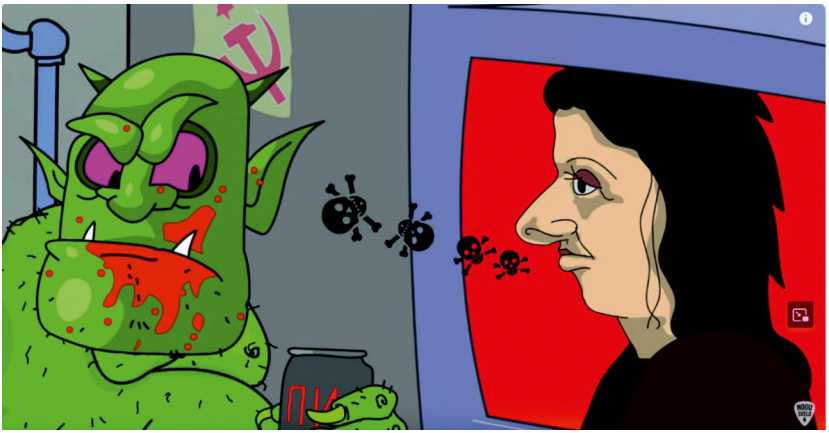
20 Oleksandr Komiakhov, *Tato. Kuznia Zbroii (The Father: The Forge of Armour)*, Kyiv: Liuta sprava, 2021.

21 The official YouTube video of the song got 13 million views by March 2023: Endzhi Kreyda / Angy Kreyda, "Endzhi Kreyda – Vrazhe (Ofitsiinyi Vydnohrai)", YouTube video,

Figure 10: Witches and witchcraft paraphernalia, screenshot from "Vrazhe" by Angy Kreyda

Endzhi Kreyda / Angy Kreyda, "Endzhi Kreyda – Vrazhe (Ofitsiinyi Vydnohrai)", YouTube video, 23 May 2022, 4:13, screenshot from 0:40, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cdEEffF7_rU [accessed: 23.07.2024].

Figure 11: A TV propagandist turns a human into a blood-thirsty orc



Nogu Sveló!, "Nogu Svelo! – Gimn Obrechennykh (Goida, Orki!)" ("Nogu Svelo! – Hymn of the Damned (Goida, Orcs!)"), YouTube video, 17 November 2022, 3:38, screenshot from 0:28, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q07dm6lPs2k [accessed: 23.07.2024].

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23 May 2022, 4:13, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cdEEffF7_rU [accessed: 31.07.2024] [author's trans.].

Ukraine's Middle-earth

While the witch represents a 'home-grown' phenomenon, rooted in Ukrainian literary and cultural traditions, terminology borrowed from *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy and from J. R. R. Tolkien's novels of the same name, on the contrary, refers to global mass culture. Specifically, *The Lord of the Rings* has provided Ukrainians with a universally understood vocabulary for naming the enemy.

Even prior to the Russian annexation of Crimea and the start of so-called hybrid warfare in the Donbas, Ukrainian and Russian social media occasionally referred to Russia, and particularly to its capital, Moscow, as 'Mordor'.[22] In literature, this rhetoric was first exploited by the Polish author Ziemowit Szczerek in his book *Mordor Will Come and Eat Us, or a Secret History of the Slavs* (*Przyjdzie Mordor i nas zje, czyli tajna historia Słowian*, 2013). Contrary to its title, the book does not provide a fantasy setting but offers a humorous account of the author's travels through Ukraine. Lying somewhere between a travelogue and gonzo journalism, *Mordor* primarily aims at a total deconstruction of a biased Polish cultural gaze at Ukraine and Ukrainians, but it also criticises the attitudes of Ukrainians towards themselves. This includes, among other things, the description of Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians as orcs from Mordor. Yet, in the book, the gaping abyss of Mordor is not a geopolitical entity but rather a metaphysical one, which is not synonymous with Russia. Although its localisation in Szczerek's book remains unclear, Mordor nevertheless offers a powerful metaphor for the vague but constant feeling of a threat coming from the 'East' – a threat of imperial revanche. While Szczerek tries to counter this anxiety with an ironic and humorous tone, he also provides a vivid example of the persistence of images from Tolkien's mythopoetic universe in the Ukrainian context and therefore offers a literary explanation for the popularity of *orky* (orcs) as a popular term for the invading Russian forces in 2022.

President Zelenskyy, his ministers, and government officials at all levels also used the term 'orcs' in reference to the Russian military onslaught against Ukraine. Numerous orc memes based on clips from *The Lord of the Rings* films also circulated on Ukrainian social media.[23] While the originator of this trend is hard to detect, most observers refer to a Facebook post that appeared on the official page of the Ukrainian Ground Forces on 25 February 2022 as a seminal moment for such

22 See, for example, Leonid Bershidskii, "Moskva pokhozha na Mordor" ("Moscow Resembles Mordor"), *Tsenzor.Net*, 02 May 2013, https://censor.net/ru/resonance/240801/moskva_pohoja_na_mordor_ukraina_na_stranu_hobbitov [accessed 31.07.2024]; and Ekaterina, "V sotssetiakh: Moskva okonchatelno ukrepilas v statuse Mordora" ("In the Social Networks: Moscow Has Finally Consolidated Its Status as Mordor"), *RB.RU*, 09 December 2014, https://rb.ru/article/v-sotssetyah-moskva-okonchatelno-ukrepilas-v-statuse-mordora/7418547.html [accessed 31.07.2024].

23 Yekelchyk, "Naming the war", 237.

memes.[24] Throughout 2022, state and mass media adopted the language of popular culture, leading to the meme's even greater popularity among the Ukrainian public. But what does this boom of the orc metaphor mean in the war context, and how do orcs function as rhetorical figures?

Orcs populate Tolkien's fantasy world of Middle-earth, where they serve as willing servants of Evil. In the books, they are humanoid, ugly, grey- or black-skinned, and bow-legged. Despite the emphasised fiction and fairy-tale 'unreality' of Tolkien's novels, the books convey a political categorisation based on different groups' physical characteristics and 'civilisational' contrasts. In the world of *The Lord of the Rings*, communities differ not only through skin colour and bodily size and appearance but also in terms of moral integrity and political righteousness: they are either benevolent and wise, as is the case with the Elves, or they are brutish, ruthless, and aggressive, like the Orcs. The absolute and insurmountable hatred between Elves and Orcs in *The Lord of the Rings* is thus not presented as the result of political decisions but is essential and existential in nature: warfare is the 'natural' fate of these two races, while peace between them is to be understood as only a temporary truce, a respite before the next conflict.

As Niels Werber observes, the totality of warfare in Middle-earth also denies the possibility of any neutral positions or moral and legal boundaries in the extermination of the enemy. The destruction of the Orcs, in the view of the Elves, must be on the same scale as they are produced by the Dark Lord Sauron. Meanwhile, Tolkien does not portray his protagonists in a worse light when they continue to massacre Orcs, even if the latter flee, are wounded, or surrender on the battlefield.[25] The classic *ius belli* of sovereign states, which defines the opponent as an honourable enemy, is programmatically suspended in this world and replaced by a biopolitical image of the absolute Other, who deserves neither mercy nor respect.

It is precisely this Manichean totality of the conflict between absolute Good and absolute Evil that makes Tolkien's universe a popular model for conceptualising armed conflicts, although the author himself rejected any allusions to real-world politics. In his theoretical essay "On Fairy Stories", Tolkien highlights the programmatic importance of distancing effects when he defines fantasy as occurring entirely in a separate "secondary world".[26] This does not mean, however, that the two worlds do not connect to each other, even if against the author's will. This connection is especially true for post-Soviet Russian fantasy fanfiction, which often deliberately tries to bridge the gap between the real and the fantastic, to deliver a

24 Ibid.

25 Niels Werber, "Geo- and Biopolitics of Middle-Earth: A German Reading of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*", *New Literary History* 36/2, 2005, 227–246, here 231.

26 Carpenter, Humphrey (ed.), *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981, 216.

geopolitical message. One of the most striking outcomes of this literary production was the reversal of Tolkien's dualistic worldview in *The Black Book of Arda* (*Chernaya kniga Ardy*, 1995), a novel by Nataliia Vasilieva and Nataliia Nekrasova, based on Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*, as well as in *The Last Ringbearer* (*Poslednii koltsenosets*, 1999) by Kirill Eskov, based on *The Lord of the Rings*. In both novels, the authors unequivocally take the side of the dark forces, thus portraying either the evil spirit Melkor as a kind of Promethean hero (as done in *The Black Book of Arda*) or the aggressive empire of Mordor as an advanced, multinational high-tech civilisation (as in *The Last Ringbearer*). Although these obvious geopolitical reminiscences of the demise of the Communist utopia and the collapse of the Soviet Union circulated in the limited sphere of fantasy subculture, the war against Ukraine and Russia's escalating contestation with the West certainly facilitate further revisions of the categories of 'good' and 'evil' (i.e., the norms of acceptable sociopolitical behaviour) in the Russian cultural landscape.[27] The resemanticisation of the central figures and concepts from Tolkien's literary universe may serve as an important indicator of these tectonic shifts.

Unsurprisingly, in the preface to the new edition of *The Black Book of Arda* (2022), Anna Dolgareva, an active supporter of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, deliberately places the book's plot in the context of the war in the Donbas by comparing the local pro-Russian separatists with smart and modest Orcs, who supposedly had always been suppressed and slandered by arrogant Elves.[28] This positive reversal of the orc figure resonates with official Russian propaganda on many levels, including the Kremlin's official claim that they launched the invasion to prevent the imminent "genocide of the population of the Donbas".[29]

In contrast, Ukrainian war rhetoric adheres to Tolkien's dichotomy of good and evil when it refers to the Orcs as aggressive and ultimately stupid creatures – an epitome of brute force. However, the term itself is applied almost exclusively to the officers and soldiers of the invading army and not to Russians as a nation. For instance, in the popular electro song "The Orc's Body Goes into the Ground, the Armed Forces of Ukraine Will Take Care of That" ("Orka tilo liazhe v grunt, dopomozhe ZSU") by

27 Iurii Saprykin, "Reviziya zla: Kak russkaya literature postsovetskogo perioda razbiralas, gde svet, a gde tma, i ne razobralas" ("Revision of Evil: How Russian Literature of the Post-Soviet Period Sorted Out Where the Light Is, Where the Darkness Is, and Failed to Do So"), *Kommersant* (*Merchant*), 16 December 2022, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5721611 [accessed: 31.07.2024].

28 Nataliia Vassilieva and Nataliia Nekrasova, *Chernaya kniga Ardy* (*The Black Book of Arda*), Saint Petersburg: Acta Diurna, 2022, 6–7.

29 Vladimir Putin, "Obrashchenie prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federacii 'O provedenii spetsialnoi voyennoi operatsii'" ("The Address of the President of the Russian Federation 'On Conducting a Special Military Operation'"), *Prezident Rossii* (*The President of Russia*), 24 February 2022, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843 [accessed 31.07.2024].

the artists Chico and Qatoshi, the orc is clearly identifiable as a Russian soldier. The song "The Armed Forces of Ukraine Are Close" ("ZSU blyzko") by The Butcherzz Band follows the transformation of simple Russian Vanias and Vovas into an army of orcs and ultimately celebrates their inevitable death in the fields of Ukraine. The macabre allusions notwithstanding, it is important to note that the latter song text assumes that one is not born an orc but can only 'become' one. This limitation also allows Russian artists, who oppose Putin's regime, to invoke the figure of the hostile orc as a primary enemy image. For example, in the song "Anthem of the Doomed" ("Gimn obrechennykh") by the Russian punk band Nogu Svelo! (Cramp in the Leg!), hordes of orcs invade – or rather infest – Moscow and subjugate it to their cruel and bizarre rule before marching further west (i.e., in the direction of Ukraine and Europe). However, the animated video clip for the song suggests that the orcs themselves are, first and foremost, the products of TV propaganda. In one episode, a TV propagandist, reminiscent of the notorious Russian media executive Margarita Simonyan, "transforms" ordinary TV viewers into orcs (see figure 11).

The image of a Russian soldier as an orc is a means of dehumanisation, yet it functions differently than its propagandistic counterpart, that of a Ukrainian Nazi (or fascist). While orc, as a pejorative label, refers predominantly to the members of the Russian military, Nazi does not have a clear referent and functions rather as a floating signifier (in the structuralist sense). That is, it can be applied to virtually any Ukrainian, regardless of their political and ideological views.

Conclusions

Images and figures from literature and popular culture shift the context and the discursive framing of the ongoing war and overlay it with additional, often unintended, meanings and connotations. This shift can, at least potentially, provide new models for the interpretation of events in Ukraine since the start of the Russian full-scale invasion. If we define 'model' as a simplified representation of reality, then a zombie apocalypse or an onslaught of orcs seem to indeed provide a relatively simple, abridged, and decontextualised understanding of war. While it is legitimate to view the spread and popularity of such perceptions as signs of infantilising or even trivialising the military conflict,[30] they can also be interpreted as means of stress management and morale boosters. More importantly, for the Ukrainian side, the active use of globally recognisable imagery remains an important factor for strengthening worldwide solidarity with Ukraine as a victim of unprovoked military aggression.

30 Mikhail Yampolskii, "Rezhim imperskoi paranoi: voina v epokhu pustosloviia" ("The Regime of Imperial Paranoia: War in the Age of Empty Words"), *Re: Russia*, 26 December 2022, https://re-russia.net/expertise/043/ [accessed: 31.07.2024].

While the content of this cultural production may not conform to principles of political correctness and can raise some justified ethical concerns, it also helps to strengthen the bond between the armed forces and society by fostering the shared sense of determination necessary for effective national defence. Thus, the German military analysts Nico Lange and Carlo Masala highlight Ukrainian popular cultural production as one of the key factors of Ukraine's resilience:

> Through music, culture, and humor, Ukrainian society is strengthening its cohesion, consoling itself over difficult situations, and bolstering its military motivation. This factor cannot be overestimated for total defense.
>
> It was precisely these cultural factors and opportunities for civil society to participate in defense through the provision of equipment, information, and/or data analysis that has seen Ukraine manage to form a global community of support and leverage it as a resource. This global backing has contributed significantly to Ukrainian military successes to this day.[31]

This kind of cultural response to Russian aggression, however, requires constant exchange and cultural negotiation between the state and society and thus reveals the highly decentralised structure of Ukrainian war rhetoric. In this structure, authorities often borrow images and vocabulary from popular songs, texts, and internet memes. This contrasts sharply with the highly centralised and state-controlled propaganda in Russia, which draws heavily on the memory of the Second World War and corresponding literary and cultural production. In Russian propaganda, references to Ukrainian Nazis (or even Satanists) construct the image of an absolute Other, thus enabling the presentation of a cosmogonic war between Good and Evil. Indeed, zombies and orcs are also examples of pejorative Othering, but unlike these fantastical figures, the notion of fascism is charged both historically and politically. It constitutes a discursive framework, in which, on the one hand, the war against Ukraine echoes the historical example of the Red Army's fight in the Great Patriotic War; on the other hand, this fight can only ever be a copy, or an imitation, of that truly 'cosmogonic' world war. Moreover, the propagandistic cliché of the 'fight against fascism' makes current Russian war rhetoric entirely retrospective: the Russian 'military operation' against Ukraine appears primarily as a war for a better past.

This past-oriented rhetoric often remains deadly serious in its tone, while its Ukrainian counterpart is open to irony, humour, and sarcasm, thus providing a truly postmodern framing of the conflict. Despite the overall grim context, references to

31 Nico Lange, "How to beat Russia: What armed forces in NATO should learn from Ukraine's homeland defense", *GLOBSEC*, February 2023, https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2023-02/How%20to%20beat%20Russia%20by%20Nico%20Lange%20v7%20web.pdf, 10 [accessed: 31.07.2024].

the fantastical figures of zombies, orcs, or witches are often playful. If only for a moment, they alienate and downgrade the gloomy seriousness of war, thus highlighting its temporary nature and loosening the war's deadly grip on Ukrainian society.

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