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Probing the Limits of Representation: Serhii Zakharov's *Dira*

1. Introduction

The graphic novel (*графічний роман*) *Dira* (*Hole*) by Serhii Zakharov was published in 2016 and is interesting in many respects. First, the young Ukrainian comic market is in its infancy, and many readers are not accustomed to comics and graphic novels.[1] Second, the story concerns the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) – the occupied territories of the east of Ukraine – which is a sensitive matter because, in 2022, the conflict between the two republics rose to a full-scale war that is still ongoing.

Dira is deeply rooted in the political events in Ukraine after 2014, and it is impossible to understand the graphic novel without the cultural and historical background of the ongoing events since 2014. In late 2013, the so-called *Euromaidan* began in Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine. Groups of students and young people protested against the termination of the European Union–Ukraine Association Agreement. Since 2014, in the Eastern part of Ukraine, namely in the two *oblasts* (administrative divisions) of Donetsk and Luhansk, an armed conflict has been on the rise and escalated to a full-scale war in February 2022 when Russia attacked Ukraine. After a Referendum in 2014, two entirely new states were found within the territory of Ukraine. The separatist groups declared independently the DPR and LPR, which are not accepted by the Ukrainian government or the international community

In this chapter, I will examine how, through modes and means of representation such as focalization, *Dira* negotiates the above-mentioned conflict. My contention is that the graphic novel can be seen as a case study to show that the conflict within Ukraine is not only a geo-political conflict but also about identity and belonging, citizenship, and language. The analysis will show the point of view from which the events are told. To examine that, I will analyze the narration of the graphic novel because

1 Mburianyk statet in 2015 that the comic is still an unfamiliar genre for Ukrainians. "So unfamiliar is the comics form to audiences, the publishers deem, that they added reading instructions!" (*Ukrainian Comics of the 1990s* no pag.).

Dira contains short stories that seem to have no date or could also have taken place in a non-linear progression. The narrator tells his personal story as one example of many similar, current destinies in the east of Ukraine. He uses common narrative techniques such as foreshadowing and flashbacks to mediate his point of view.

The analysis of the graphic novel will prove yet another point: "Comics have a big task in Ukraine: Through them nation is built, historical events are discussed, and identity is constructed" (Lange "The Beginning" 245). I will explore how the narrator of *Dira* talks about both the conflict in the country and the personal fate of the author, Serhii Zakharov, an artist who was detained in the DPR in August 2014 for one and a half months.

First, I will provide an overview of the (still ongoing) conflict in the east of Ukraine. I will also examine the status of comics in Ukraine and introduce the graphic novel. Then, I will offer some brief remarks concerning the narrative structure of the text, along with remarks about the narration theory of Genette. Finally, I will analyze some episodes of the graphic novel to answer the following research questions: How is the conflict narrated (in words) and shown (in pictures) in the graphic novel? What role do language, representation and identity play in the graphic novel? How is the position of the narrator shown? By answering these questions, it will become clear how an ongoing conflict is depicted in the graphic novel and how the medium of the graphic novel recounts history that is still in the making.

2. The Narration of a *Dira*

As Kovalov (2014) demonstrates, the conflict in Ukraine itself is replete with narratives, and there seem to be two sides to the story: a Russian and a Ukrainian one (see Kovalov, esp. pp. 144-146). In many articles about the matter (see, for instance, Fischer), the narration of the conflict is explicitly mentioned as being highly controversial. Adopting a neutral approach to the events is complicated given the polarizing narratives covering this conflict, and "Whichever narrative we adopt, the continuation of the armed conflict is in no one's interest" (Kovalev 149). In this chapter, I will use one narrative (the Ukrainian one) as an example of how one conflicting party talks and writes about the conflict. I will demonstrate how political events interfere with the personal story of the author and what role language and identity play within the conflict. Therefore, I will

first offer some remarks about narration in general to identify the specific aspects of narration that will be the focus of the analysis.

The narration of the conflict in the graphic novel is ambiguous, as mentioned above. In this part of my analysis I will show how aspects such as identity and nation are represented in the graphic novel. In my paper, narration is understood as follows: "narratives involve temporal chains of inter-related events or actions, undertaken by characters" (Gabriel 63). Throughout the plot, readers follow the character and, in the case of *Dira*, experiences the Russian–Ukrainian conflict through the voice of the narrating agency as a part of it. When discussing the Ukraine conflict, one could simply consider the facts and figures, the death toll, and the internally displaced people. However, the graphic novel tells the story from the perspective of one Ukrainian citizen who is captured in the DPR. As I will show later, the narration is not objective but told from one man's point of view. He retells his experience, which is shaped by his view of the events.

The structure of the graphic novel is important to understand not only the *what* (is being depicted/ narrated) but also the *how* of the narration of *Dira*. Many graphic novels mainly work through the combination of images and text. As Lefèvre (2020) claims, "In comics (or other narratives) meanings are constructed by the reader's interpretation of the formal system (drawings and texts)" (no pag.). The analysis will reveal how the pictures and text in *Dira* are used. The graphic novel contains no speech bubbles, and text and pictures are in black and white. Many pages are completely without text and instead show only pictures. Moreover, the graphic novel has no page numbers.[2] The pictures of the graphic novel are used not only to recount events but also to show them to the reader. Like a picture book, the images transport the reader into the story. This transportation will be demonstrated in this article.

The process of reading and seeing a picture – and reading pictures in a sequence – is different from the process of reading a verbal text. In comics and graphic novels, the reader mentally frames the panel (Lefèvre no pag.), which means every reader adds their own meaning to the text and visuals. The pictures do not simply work as an illustration of the text; they are semiotically at least as, and sometimes more relevant than the text. Even if there are no panels in *Dira*, the following quote is relevant

2 Though there are no page numbers in the graphic novels, I have decided to add page numbers in this chapter to make it more readable.

for the graphic novel: "The reader has to accept that the arrangement of the panels on the page is not random but directed, and that the panels are interconnected. They form a sequence of successive situations" (Lefèvre). The narrator's arrangement of the narrated situations in *Dira* is not random; he chose to retell the story in an anachronous way. After the above introductory remarks about the narration as well as the comics and graphic novels in Ukraine, I focus on these aspects of *Dira* next.

To do this I rely heavily on narrative theory, specifically on terms and concepts used by the French literary studies scholar Gérard Genette in his study on *Narrative Discourse* (1980). According to Genette, there are three categories of relations within a narration: order, duration, and frequency (Genette, esp. pp. 33-160). With regard to order, there are two possibilities: As Seymour Chatman summarizes, the story and the discourse have the same order, or the story and the discourse are anachronous (cf. Chatman 353). The anachronous story will be the focus of the analysis because the graphic novel contains several small histories. The two main narrative techniques employed in the graphic novel are flashbacks and flashforwards. Genette distinguishes between a flashback and a flashforward: A flashback is, as Chatman succinctly puts it, "where the discourse breaks the story-flow to recall events earlier than what precedes the break" (353), whereas a flashforward describes a so-called foreshadowing – a reference to events that are yet to occur in the story. Later in this chapter, I will show how these two techniques are used in the graphic novel. The narrative techniques and the anachronous order of the plot are all related to the so-called diegetic world. Genette's central terms are *mimesis* and *diegesis*, and the differentiation between *diegesis* (poetic representation of 'one world,' or the way a story is narrated) and *diegese* (the level/s of the narrated world). Diegesis affects the levels of time, space, and action (for a useful summary, see Fuxjäger 18). If a narrated element can be placed with a reference to time, space, or action within a story, it is diegetic. In this chapter, non-diegetic events are understood as narrated elements without any diegetic reference to time, space, or action. As the analysis will show, the narrator employs a mixture of diegetic and non-diegetic elements. After providing a summary of the conflict and the structure of the graphic novel and introducing key elements of narration, I explore the anachronous structure of *Dira* next.

2.1 The Anachronous Events

Anachronous narration is an important aspect of *Dira*. For example, on page 54 the text begins with "from that moment, the worst part of my imprisoning began" (Zakharov and Mazurkevych 54). The reader, however, has no idea what "from that moment" means or what "that" refers to. The diegetic information is poor, except for the fact that, as readers are told, "approximately ten days I was beaten up daily" (Zakharov and Mazurkevych 54). The lack of details and the non-diegetic episodes in *Dira* support the idea that recounting a (traumatic) memory often also means the impossibility of putting into language incisive events in one's life. The use of flashbacks and the anachronous narration of the events in *Dira* convey that coherency and linear progression of story and plot are not possible. The authors aim, I would claim, to make the story more realistic and authentic by indicating that the narrator spontaneously (and involuntarily) remembers certain episodes of the story. The result is, what might be termed, an eclectic plot in *Dira*. But these seemingly spontaneous memories do not only make the plot more eclectic. The difficulty to indicate a certain time or location of the events could also have been intentional to increase anonymity and relatability: The fate of the narrator could have been the fate of every other person protesting against the local authorities at that time. His story hence represents numerous other stories similar to the one narrated in *Dira*.

At the very beginning of *Dira*, the narrator starts by saying that there is a gun pointed at his head. Then, several dates are mentioned prior to the narrator's arrest. The events he describes in the main part of the graphic novel have no date. Moreover, because of the lack of page numbers, the events described could take place in a different order, at a different time. As I will show later, the effect of this is that the events that took place in 2014 could also happen today, to another person. A broader national context can be interpreted here as well: When and where the events occurred are not important; what is important is that they happened and that Russia oppresses Ukraine and its people which is experienced in the person of the narrator. The graphic novel frequently refers to historical events of the nearest past. A single reference is made to an event further back in history: the 1937 massacre of Vinnitsya – a mass shooting of approximately 10,000 people by the Soviet NKVD, which is today's Russian Federal Security Service (FSB). Here, the narrator's position becomes clear: He compares the current situation in Donetsk with the situation of 1937 – once more,

people are shot by the Russians; once more, Ukrainians are the victims. Through this parallel, *Dira* mediates that history is repeating itself and, at the same time, that the narrator of the graphic novel is among the innocent Ukrainians who are shot by the separatist police forces.

Zakharov's and Mazurkevych's graphic novel must be understood as a personal narration (not an objective report), quite similar to Art Spiegelman's two-volume (historio-) graphic 'tale' *MAUS*, which narrates the author's parents' odyssey of surviving Auschwitz in the form of a subjective (recorded and then transcribed) recollection of Spiegelman's father Vladek. Because of the way *MAUS* highlights its own making (the tale of how it became told, in other words), and Spiegelman's implication in the writing of the book, his work has often been described as historiographic metafiction. I would argue that *Dira* operates with similar narrative techniques. In "Historiographic Metafiction" (1988), Linda Hutcheon explains that in a metafictional-historiographic work, a narrator adds "an equally self-conscious dimension of history" (3) to the historic events. This "self-conscious dimension of history" can also be seen in how the narrator in *Dira* proceeds – in an anachronous way, interrupting himself time and again. In addition to Hutcheon and her claim that conventions of both fiction and historiography are simultaneously used and abused in modern novels (cf. Hutcheon 5), Hayden White's discussion of the concept of emplotment in historiographic metafiction can help to understand the structure of *Dira* and the historiographic storytelling in the graphic novel. White (1974), states: "With emplotment I mean simply the encodation of the facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific kinds of plot structures" (83), which can be found in every chapter of *Dira*. Historical facts, as illustrated above, are mentioned and woven into the narrator's plot structures to show how Ukraine and the Ukrainians, represented by the narrator in particular, suffered under Russian oppression.

The events recounted in *Dira* took place in reality, which, according to Yiannis Gabriel, results in a "creative ambiguity [that] gives stories a unique combination of two qualities, those of having a plot at the same time as representing reality" (64). The story of Zakharov's capture and torture by the DPR prison guards is one example of a story that could happen (and possibly still is happening) in the eastern part of Ukraine every day. The narrator tries to "draw in a documentary way" (Zakharov and Mazurkevych 4) the events that happened like a documentation of the story of Zakharov. A person's memory is unpredictable, and one cannot be certain of whether events are remembered accurately or falsified by other

events that occurred thereafter. "Despite a growing interest in memory today and the establishment of memory studies as a field in its own right, the unreliability and irrationality of memory make it a simultaneously challenging and exciting topic" (Ahmed and Crucifix 1). Zakharov is a contemporary witness to events that are still ongoing today, as the prison cells where he was held in likely exist even today. The narration of events that took place long ago, from the memory of the narrator, is problematic because of the brain's limited capacity to remember the details of events. A memory can be falsified in retrospect but gives the impression of being sound and real. Nicol highlights that a retrospective narration can lead a reader to believe that all events narrated are accurate (cf. 187). Flashbacks are one aspect of the narration of events that took place in the distant past. In an interview, Zakharov was asked whether the memories he retells are his own experience, to which he responded, "Yes, it is based on my experience, and it is quite unpleasant sensations. But I want to say that there is nothing unique in my story. I mean, everything ended well" (Vagner no pag.). With the commentary "there is nothing unique in my story," he makes himself a witness who was lucky enough to survive and to document the events for those coming after him. Zakharov uses several techniques to recount his memories. Two of them, foreshadowing and flashbacks, will be discussed below.

2.2 Flashbacks and Foreshadowing in *Dira*

To demonstrate how history in the making is narrated in the graphic novel, I analyze the two main narrative techniques, foreshadowing and flashbacks, in the graphic novel. As mentioned earlier, foreshadowing and flashbacks are the most relevant techniques to order a narrative discourse. I will show how these two techniques are used to retell events anachronously and with what implications. First, I analyze foreshadowing using several examples in the text. The very beginning of the graphic novel is a prime example of foreshadowing: *Dira* starts with a double page showing a gun pointed at the reader (Fig. 1). Dallacqua (365) states that one of the main characteristics of graphic novels is their special attraction to the reader: "Readers walk with characters and see from their points of view." This is also possible with novels, but graphic novels promote visual literacy (Dallacqua 365) and therefore provide a higher level of relatability for the reader to identify with the main personage, as evidenced by the

first two pages of *Dira*: The text describes that it is terrifying to have a gun pointed at oneself and realize that the person who could pull the trigger is no longer sober. The narrator comments on his thoughts (it would not be aesthetically pleasing if my brain were to spill all over the wall), and there, with three dots, the text ends. This double page is not commented on, and page 7 starts with the events in Donezk in February 2014. There is no indication of when and where the gun incident took place or who the gun bearer is, other than that he had consumed alcohol. The narrator is homodiegetic; that is, to use Genette's wording here, "the narrator [is] present as a character in the story he tells" (Genette 244-245). One could even call this an autobiographical story because the hero, the main character, is the narrator of the story. The reader follows the hero through the graphic novel, and the narrator clarifies from the outset that this will not be a pleasant story and conveys his oppressive situation as a Ukrainian. Ukrainian readers now know, because of the context of the conflict, that a Russian must be pointing the gun at him. From the very first page, guns and other weapons are shown, and the reader knows that Ukraine is under attack and must defend itself.

The narrative method of foreshadowing is used to evoke emotions such as curiosity and suspense (Bae and Young 156). These emotions "can be important tools for the author to communicate with the readers for a dramatic effect" (Bae and Young 157). Every Ukrainian reading the graphic novel is emotionally involved because of the tragic past that Ukrainians share, including being attacked by the Russian Tsarist Empire several times. Especially now, with the full-scale war under way, this foreshadowing could be interpreted in a broader national sense: The non-specific diegetic situation, with no further information on time and place, could happen at any time, to any Ukrainian. The analyzed first two pages seem to be a rough introduction for the reader to the graphic novel, but my contention is that these two pages summarize all events that will occur later in the story. They show the narrator's anachronous telling of the story; convey the tone and emotions that will feature in the graphic novel; and exemplify how the narrator deals with the trauma that he experienced during the kidnapping. The individual trauma, the ongoing historical processes, and the emotions of the narrator all seem to be thrown together in these two pages, overwhelming readers' receptive capacities, one might say.

Fig. 1: Zakharov and Mazurkevych 6-7.

The narration technique of foreshadowing, as has been shown, sets the tone for the graphic novel. The narration also contains various flashbacks,

the second important narration technique in *Dira*. There are two kinds of flashbacks in the graphic novel: those with a specific date and place (diegetic) and those without a time or a date (non-diegetic). One example of a diegetic flashback is the referendum itself, which took place on May 25, 2014. The narrator also describes his unsuccessful attempt to vote in his old school because the doors were closed. These events are already common history, retold by a witness to those events. He indicates the time and date of these events, saying that he wanted to vote at his old school. The event can be located diegetically in the story. These two types of flashbacks characterize the story as one told from someone's memory. A story form is a natural and spontaneous cognitive unit for representing information (McGregor and Holmes 1999, 403), and the spontaneous aspect of the story can be underlined in *Dira*. In the episodes with flashbacks, the narrator seems to spontaneously remember something but cannot remember the exact moment or order of the events. The exact moment of when they happen do not seem to be important; what is important, however, is that they happened at all. One could state that these events – the referendum regarding the Donezk oblast illegally organized by the Russians – are one more instance of Russia oppressing Ukraine that will have a lasting impact in the collective memory of Ukrainians.

3. National Tendencies in the Graphic Novel *Dira*

As previously explained, the narrative techniques in *Dira* can be interpreted in a national context. To begin with, I elaborate on the name of the graphic novel: Zakharov chose *Dira* (*Hole*) because, first, the prison cell felt like a hole. Second, in an interview, he explained the name as follows: "And now the inhabitants of Donetsk use this name – Hole. They say 'in our hole'" (Vagner no pag.). The term could easily be used for cities such as Bakhmut, Irpin, and Mariupol – cities that were bombarded by Russia and no longer exist. Since 2014, people in Donetsk feel like they are living in a hole because of the Russians helping the separatists in the Eastern oblasts of Ukraine – "The term 'hole' reflects the current state of this place" (Vagner no pag.). Furthermore, Zakharov stated that in the graphic novel, the events themselves are not the main focus. It is obvious that the first goal is to show not so much the events that took place as the places of lack of freedom through which people go. Reporting as such is

impossible from these places for an understandable number of reasons (cf. Vagner).

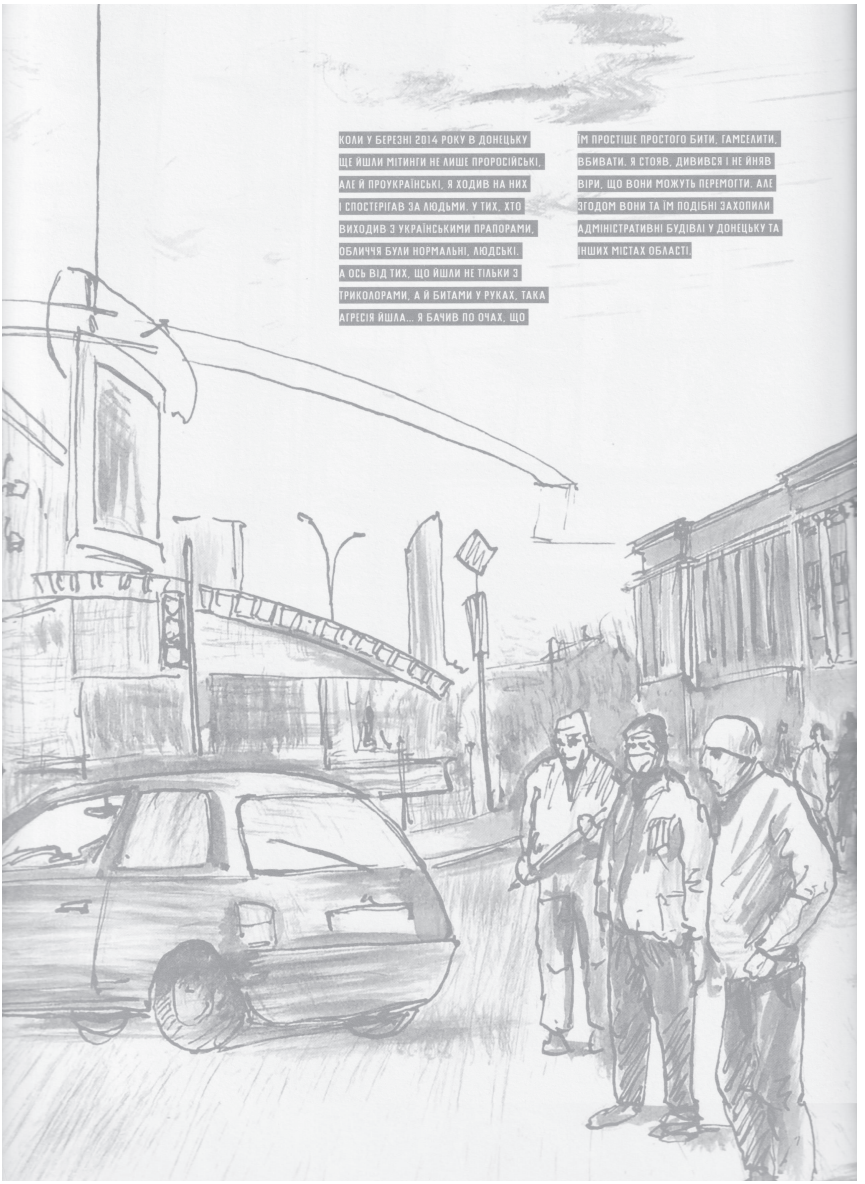

Fig. 2: Zakharov and Mazurkevych 14.

Zakharov sees his graphic novel as a report on current events in eastern Ukraine. The images he drew from his own memories illustrate the situation in the prison cells. In a broader sense, these images symbolize the struggle of Ukrainians for their independence and the integrity of their country. The narrator concentrates on the people in the Donetsk oblast whom he sees. One example is on page 14 (Figure 2): Here, he compares the "normal human faces" of pro-Ukrainian protesters with the "aggressive ones" of pro-Russian protesters, who are ready to hit someone with a stick or shoot with a gun. This interpretation is supported by the image of three young men carrying sticks and wearing long hoodies that mask their faces. It is evident from the start of the graphic novel that the narrator adopts a pro-Ukrainian position and feels oppressed by the Russians.

One key aspect of the narration is the question of language and identity through language. As I have shown elsewhere (2014), the last census of Ukraine and language was held in 2001; 67.5 % of the respondents cited Ukrainian as their native language, while 29.6 % stated that Russian was their native language (Lange "Taras Shevchenko"). Many people are bilingual – they understand Russian and Ukrainian, even if one of them is not their native language.[3] The narrator quotes the words of the pro-Russian separatists in their original language, Russian, a language almost all people in Ukraine understand. The direct quotation without any translation demonstrates the wider context of this conflict: The conflict within Ukraine also concerns identities, languages, and pro-Russian or pro-Ukrainian attitudes. The narrator shows that Donetsk is in the Russian-speaking part of Ukraine, whereas the Western part of Ukraine is mostly Ukrainian-speaking. The linguistic ambiguity in the graphic novel illustrates the conflict and the story on yet another level.

"The men who beat me were Russian" (Zakharov and Mazurkevych 56). This information is once again provided without any context of time or place. Readers have no idea how many people beat him, when, how often, with what, or why. He recounts that once there was a woman, but he offers no further information. Neither the number of Russians nor the time or frequency of the event is important – but it becomes clear once more that Russia and the Russians are beating up Ukraine and Ukrainians. The national context of the conflict can be seen almost everywhere in the

3 After the full scale war in 2022, most of the Ukrainians switched to Ukrainian seeing Russian as the language of the oppressor (cf. Lange "Ich spreche" as well as Lange "Taras Shevchenko").

graphic novel. A whole country is under attack – this becomes obvious when the narrator uses the emotional power of retelling the fate of the other prisoners. On page 76, for example, he recounts the story of a man named Albert, with whom he shared a small prison cell. They were bonded together, and Zakharov recounts not only his own fate but also that of his prison mate using the word "we." In the narration, it is unclear who the word "we" represents: Albert and the narrator, all prison inmates, or all Ukrainians. Once more, the narration could be understood on a national level – all Ukrainians who are terrorized by Russians.

The national aspect can also be observed in the colors of the graphic novel. Many images are dark, reminiscent of the dark prison cell Zakharov was kept in, except for the very last image at the end of the graphic novel, which is in color: the yellow-blue Ukrainian flag. On page 110 (Figure 3) of Zakharov's graphic novel, there is an outpost on the border between Ukraine and the so-called Peoples Republic of Donetsk.

The narrator states, "I drove into a new life" (Zakharov and Mazurkevych 110). The moment he is led free from his prison and the moment he is able to return to his home country, marked with a Ukrainian flag, is the moment the tension and suspense of the story abate. The reader immediately knows that the prison time is over because the narrator sees the "flag of freedom" – the Ukrainian flag. Here, one must understand the meaning of the Ukrainian flag at that time. The protesters at the Maidan are pro-Ukraine and pro-European. "They carry national flags and symbols and sing the national anthem every hour. To refer to their country is important to them, to show that they are Ukrainians and that they stand together against Russia" (Lange "Taras Shevchenko" 255). The carrying of a national flag became a symbol of freedom and self-determination for many Ukrainians in 2014. Moreover, historically, Ukraine's fight for independence did not begin in 1991, when the country became independent from the Soviet Union; centuries before Ukraine attempted to become an independent nation and wanted its language to be spoken countrywide. The Maidan brought a feeling of togetherness to Ukraine: "The Maidan movement established a consensus concerning shared goals (such as effective action against corruption) and an idea of solidarity among citizens that extended across large parts of Ukrainian society" (Halling and Stewart 1). Ukrainian readers will have this in mind when they see the Ukrainian flag on page 110 of the graphic novel. They will consider that flag to be a symbol of the fight for recognition and freedom. On a broader level, one could state that the colorful flag of Ukraine serves to symbolize life and

hope while the black and white images represent Russia and the loss and death brought to Ukraine.

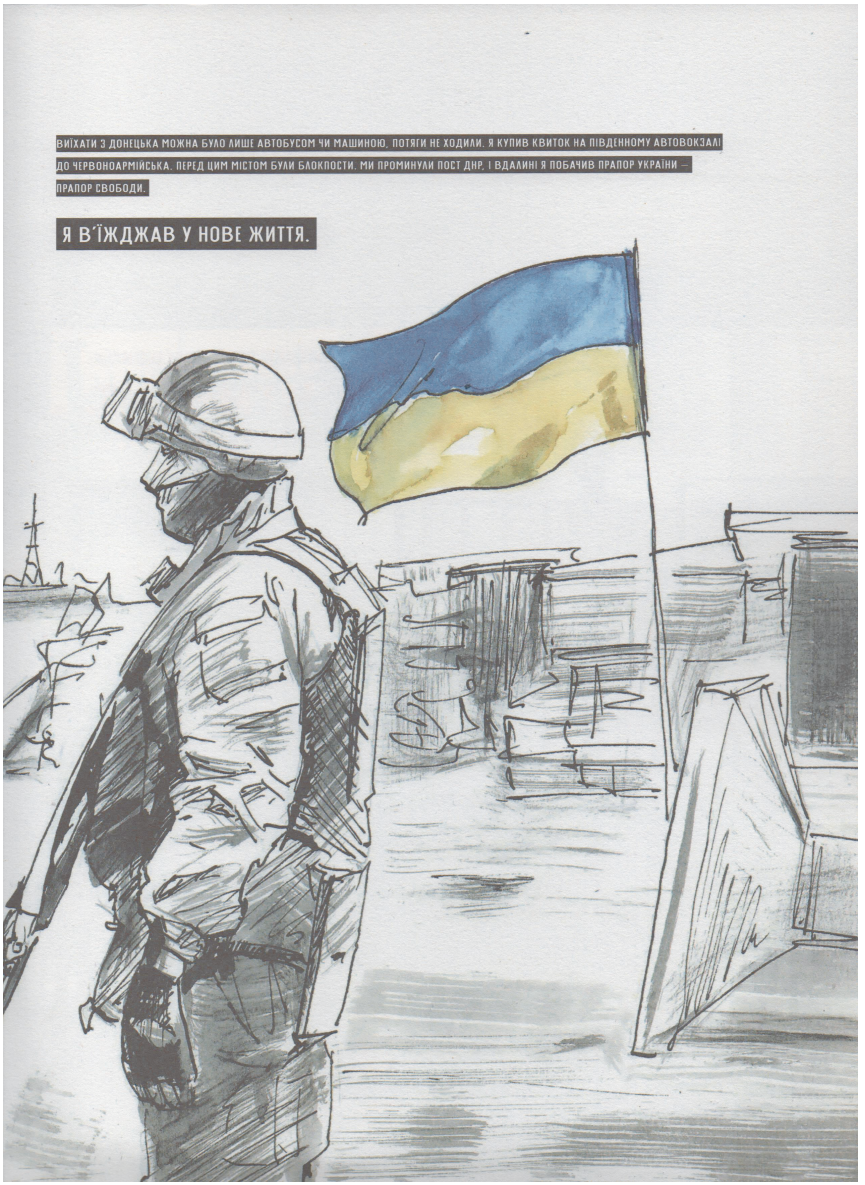

Fig.3: Zakharov and Mazurkevych 110.

4. Conclusion

One of the questions at the beginning of this chapter was: How does the medium of a graphic novel recount history that is still in the making, and how is the conflict in Ukraine related to identity, language, and representation? My analysis revealed that the authors of *Dira* use several techniques to narrate the story realistically, namely, by means of the narrating agency, flashbacks, flashforwards, and anachronous storytelling. The fact that the episodes are not set on a time and space continuum but happened at an unspecified time in 2014 in Donetsk makes the fate of the narrator one example of the destiny of a 'normal person' in the resistance. The narrator sees himself as an example of how the so-called People's Republics treat critics and artists in the resistance. However, he recounts not only his own memories but also the destinies of other people. As Vagner states:

> Zakharov's drawings are an endless line of tortured people, mostly lying on the floor of cells, in corridors and offices with desks, beaten by armed men in military uniform. It is not always possible to make out identification marks on them, and if you do not know that we are talking about what happened in Donetsk in 2014, you can imagine any prison in those countries where torture has become a part of everyday life. (Vagner no pag.; translation mine)

The black and white pictures make it impossible to distinguish places or people from each other. The lack of page numbers and the many small episodes give an impression of life in a prison cell. However, as Vagner mentions, this prison cell could be anywhere, and the prisoner could be anyone.

The narration, with its numerous flashbacks and foreshadowing, structures the story and evokes strong emotions. Most of the episodes and flashbacks have no date and hence could also be told in a different order. A linear, chronological progression of the events is denied in *Dira*. Diegetic words such as "from now on" do not help to set the story within a certain time frame, although the author makes it clear that he has been held captive for six weeks. This lack of time, place, and other diegetic expressions, as well as the lack of page numbers, characterize the structure of the graphic novel. The events depicted in *Dira*, in words and images, could happen to anyone, anytime, anywhere, and (while readers go through the images) somewhere someone is likely experiencing them – perhaps in another order, perhaps with other prison guards and other prison inmates, but unjustified arrests because of a human right to express free speech are happening today in various countries.

Zakharov's *Dira* is not only about his personal fate but also about the fate of his country. Once more, Ukraine is oppressed and tortured by Russia. In releasing the novel, he pays homage to all victims of oppression, and gives a voice to the Ukrainians. On the cover text, Zakharov writes, "We had to do it." Creating the novel was a way for him to process his experience: "In a way, it can even be called art therapy: of course, you relive everything anew, but at the same time you give up a piece of paper; that is, you take it out of yourself" (Vagner no pag.; translation mine).

Against this backdrop, I look forward to further research projects that could set this graphic novel in the context of the still ongoing open war between Russia and Ukraine since February 24, 2022. The front line is once again in eastern Ukraine, and Zakharov's story could also be interpreted as the fate of a modern Ukrainian being threatened by Russia in a full-scale war. I also look forward to future projects that will situate *Dira* in the larger medial history of graphic narratives that negotiate personal and national traumas, as well as in the extensive scholarship on (auto-)graphic fiction. The questions of how *Dira* mediates the narrator's attempt to cope with traumatic memories, and the author's challenges of trying to put on paper, to contain, to capture fleeting, incisive moments in time, and the pain and exhaustion that come with these efforts of trying to "take it out of yourself," are questions that deserve – and are in need of – further critical engagement.

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