

The Postsecular Sacred

Religious Imagery in the Secular Context of War in Ukraine

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Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, images of Ukrainian resistance have been going viral throughout the world's media. Not many commentators outside Ukraine believed that Ukraine would resist and endure the assault of the Russian Army during the first days of the invasion. For this reason, pictures of the Ukrainian president not leaving the country and images of Ukrainian people showing their will to defend their state with weapons or by any other means made headlines worldwide. At the same time, images of resistance produced by Ukrainians on the ground flooded social media.¹ These images were spontaneous reactions to the war. One could distinguish several themes in this imagery. These themes pointed to historical events or topics that could evoke specific emotions among those who share the same culture and history.² Selling collections of such posters even became a way that the creative community gathered funds for Ukraine.³

Religion is one of the resources used to create this imagery of resistance. Thousands of images circulating on social media employ religious symbolism. But what does this imagery reveal about people's perceptions of the war? And which messages are encoded in these images? This paper approaches these questions by analysing the religious imagery in the secular context of the Russo–Ukrainian War. I argue that secular actors use well-recognisable images to convey messages of hope and resistance to broader audiences and that these images cross cultures, nations, and

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- 1 Roman Horbyk and Daria Orlova, "Transmedia storytelling and memetic warfare: Ukraine's wartime public diplomacy", *Public Diplomacy and Place Branding* 19, 2023 (original article published online 19 November 2022), 228–231.
 - 2 Kateryna Boyko, "Valkyries & Madonnas: Constructing femininity during the Russo–Ukrainian War", in: Ann-Mari Sätre, Yulia Gradska, and Vladislava Vladimirova (eds.), *Post-Soviet Women: New Challenges and Ways to Empowerment*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2023, 203–224.
 - 3 See, for example: Baza creatyvnykh posteriv (Database of Creative Posters), "Stand with Ukraine Visuals", <https://prjctr.notion.site/a441535fb4fb4a9cab4cda445ee3a869> [accessed: 31.07.2024].

languages. At the same time, these images go beyond the temporal dimension of the war and blur the boundaries of a temporal axis, presenting the war as an eternal struggle between good and evil. On the one hand, this imagery mixes secular and religious symbols in assemblages that reveal traces of a specifically Ukrainian past and present. On the other hand, these traces become universally recognisable thanks to the religious symbolism. The paper approaches these images as examples of the 'postsecular sacred', which is produced by a specific condition of postmodernity that erases boundaries between the secular and the religious, and between the sacred and the profane. Methodologically, the paper is based on a semiotic analysis of images circulating on social media. These images can be better understood through the theory of premediation and remediation, which argues that new cultural meanings are produced through the reshaping and renegotiating of meanings that already exist in a given culture.⁴ By analysing these images, we can better understand how people make sense of the war and to which resources they turn in the most critical moments of history.

Remediated Images of Resistance: Methodological Considerations

For this study, I analyse images that circulated on social media (i.e., Facebook, X (formerly known as Twitter), Telegram, and Instagram) from 24 February 2022 to 23 February 2023. I carried out this analysis in three steps: 1. collecting images with religious themes; 2. dividing the images into groups according to repeating patterns; 3. and conducting a semiotic analysis of the groups of images to decode the messages therein.⁵ In decoding the messages, I seek preestablished meanings in the images in accordance with the theory of premediation and remediation. As I argue above, this imagery is created with tools that already exist in the culture of the creators.

Literature and media scholars Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney explain pre- and remediation through the example of cultural memory formation: "[s]haping cultural memory is a work of refashioning, reconfiguring, formatting, absorbing, incorporating, selecting, and editing from the reservoir of available meanings in a given culture".⁶ Thus, studying these images involves looking for previously established meanings that can shape new images. In a way, this is a search for the 'pre-life' of representations to understand how the new representations are established. In Erll and

4 Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney (eds.), *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*, Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2009.

5 Stuart Hall, *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*, Birmingham: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1973.

6 Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney (eds.), *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*, 8.

Rigney's conceptualisation, premiation can be seen in the diachronic axis of representation and it refers to "the cognitive schemata and patterns of representation that are available in a given media culture [...] and which already preform the events that we later remember through remediation".⁷ We can view remediation through the synchronic axis of representation, as the patterns of representations, according to Erll and Rigney, "realized, over and over, by means of those media technologies that a community has at its disposal and to which it ascribes the potential of creating ever greater immediacy and memorial truth".⁸ However, it is not only representations of earlier events that shape understandings of a later event. Rather, art, mythology, and religion can exert great potential as premiators that shape our understanding of reality. In this specific context, religion and culture are premiators that shape people's understanding of war and resistance.

Postsecular Sacred Images

This study contributes to discussions on postsecularity and the transformation of religion in a postsecular context. I define postsecularity as the 'intertwinement' of the secular and the religious in new forms.⁹ Following scholars who encourage a critical exploration of the limits of secularity and who criticise secularity's normative status,¹⁰ this study focuses on hybrid forms of representation that simultaneously draw on religious and secular spheres. Meanwhile, religion is closely connected to nationalism, especially in Eastern Europe, where religion was suppressed for decades during the Soviet Union.¹¹ However, the analysed images cannot be simply explained by the political agenda and nationalist feelings of their creators, as the images were very often created spontaneously, without instruction from any institution or authority, and refer not only to national but also to broader Christian traditions and symbols.

Postsecularity, as a specific cultural and historical condition, allows for the creation of new forms of coexistence between the secular and the religious. Andrii Fert and I refer to this elsewhere as the postsecular sacred in relation to the religious

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., 8–9.

9 Arie L. Molendijk, "In pursuit of the postsecular", *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 76/2, 2015, 100–115, here 110.

10 Mario Rosati and Kristina Stoeckl (eds.), *Multiple Modernities and Postsecular Societies*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2012.

11 Liliya Berezhnaya and Schmitt Christian (eds.), *Iconic Turns: Nation and Religion in Eastern European Cinema since 1989*, Leiden: Brill, 2013; and Uilleam Blacker, "Martyrdom, Spectacle, and Public Space: Ukraine's National Martyrology from Shevchenko to the Maidan", *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 1/2, 2015, 257–292.

commemoration of the Euromaidan revolution.¹² The term postsecular sacred is also based on the understanding of postsecularity in relation to postmodernity. Gianni Vattimo argues that in postmodernity, we enter an era in which Christianity does not need to lead a polemic with rationalism and Enlightenment.¹³ Christian symbols can be used not as religious but as part of a broader culture and tradition. In such a way, postmodernity produces new hybrid forms of representation that result in combinations of different elements of culture, with religion being a part of it.

The Symbol of the Protection ('Pokrova') of Our Most Holy Lady Theotokos

The Virgin Mary is the most widely used religious figure in images of resistance. For instance, Nikita Titov's picture depicts the Holy Lady Theotokos holding a Ukrainian flag over soldiers in trenches and protecting them under a starry sky.¹⁴ This and similar visuals have parallels to another set of images that went viral during the first months of the invasion and that formulated the demands of Ukrainians to close or shelter the sky.¹⁵ In this way, religious symbols of protection are products of remediation from nonreligious images. Importantly, the images asking for sky shelter explicitly addressed countries and people outside of Ukraine, as Ukraine did not have the military capacity to protect itself and relied on the support of other states.

At the same time, the symbols of 'Pokrova' are premediated by well-known symbols of Orthodox iconography. Pokrova (or the Feast of Protection or the Intercession of Theotokos) venerates the Mother of God and is one of the biggest holidays in Orthodox Christianity. According to legend, the apparition of Mary the Theotokos occurred at the Blachernae Church during one of the sieges of Constantinople, where she spread her veil over the people as a protection against their enemies. As a result, the enemies withdrew, and the city was rescued. On icons, the Intercession of Theotokos is depicted as the Mother of God holding a cover, or veil, over people who seek protection. Pokrova derives from the word *pokrov*, which literally means 'cover'.

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- 12 Yuliya Yurchuk and Andrii Fert, "Sacralization of Memory of Euromaidan Protests from a Post-secular Perspective", in: Hanna Meisel and Liliya Berezhnaya (eds.), *Sacralization of History: Actors – Networks – Topics in Eastern Europe*, Budapest: CEU Press, forthcoming.
 - 13 Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, New York City: Columbia University Press, 2002.
 - 14 Pokrova, image from Nikita Titov, "Davno zrobyv tsei maliunok na Pokrova..." ("I made this drawing for the Intercession a long time ago..."), Facebook post, 06 March 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=4950682488332199> [accessed: 31.07.2024].
 - 15 See, for example, *Shelter our Sky*, image from Andriy Yermolenko, "Shelter our sky – we will handle the rest!", ArtDopomoga | Help Ukraine, <https://artdopomoga.com/shop/prints-on-fabric-and-textiles/shelter-our-sky-we-will-handle-the-rest-art-by-andriy-yermolenko/> [accessed: 31.07.2024]. "Close the Sky" was not only represented in visual culture, but also in music. See, for example: TARABAROVacom, "Close the Sky", YouTube, 17 March 2022, <https://music.youtube.com/watch?v=ouHIAUkikQc> [accessed: 31.07.2024].

Often, the cover has the colours of the Ukrainian flag, articulating clear national symbolism.¹⁶ This is not a coincidence, as Pokrova is a well-established symbol in Ukrainian national culture. The veneration of Pokrova as a patroness of the Cossacks took root in the 17th century, when her status as the protectress of Cossacks was established. In the 20th century, nationally minded Ukrainians venerated Pokrova as the protectress of the soldiers of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), the military arm of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), active between 1942 and 1956. Since 1947, the UPA celebrated the day of its creation on the same day as the Pokrova. And, since 2014, this day has been officially celebrated as the Day of the Defenders of Ukraine in the national calendar. Accordingly, Pokrova is part of both the religious and national calendars: Since 1 January 2023, the 14 October marks the Orthodox Feast of Protection, the Day of the Cossacks, the Day of the Creation of the UPA, and the Day of the Defenders of Ukraine.¹⁷

If we consider the premediated images of Pokrova, then we can go back as far as the 17th century. One of the best known Pokrova icons is the Deshky village icon from the late 17th century, which is connected to the revival of the cult of the Cossack Hetman Bohdan Kmelnysky (1596–1657).¹⁸ Pokrova iconography is also widely used in the commemoration of the protestors – commonly known as the Heavenly Hundred – killed during the Revolution of Dignity (November 2013–February 2014) and of the soldiers fallen in the war in the east of the country since spring 2014, as seen for instance on the icon in the Askold Grave Chapel in Kyiv (Figure 9).¹⁹

The images that implement the symbols of Pokrova inscribe the war and Ukrainian resistance into a longer history that stretches from the 17th century until today. These images contribute to a sense of historical continuity that shapes and strengthens the image of Ukraine as a country with a long history as well as a country under the protection of the Mother of God. It is worth mentioning that a nationwide electronic warfare system, which Ukraine launched as the new strategy

16 See, for example: Nikita Titov, "Davno zrobyv tsei maliunok na Pokrova..." ("I made this drawing for the Intercession a long time ago..."), Facebook post, 06 March 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=4950682488332199> [accessed: 31.07.2024].

17 Yuliya Yurchuk, *Reordering of Meaningful Worlds: Memory of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army in Post-Soviet Ukraine*, Stockholm: Acta, 2014; and Yuliya Yurchuk, "Global Symbols Local Meanings: The 'Day of Victory' after Euromaidan", in: Timm Beichelt and Susann Worschech (eds.), *Transnational Ukraine? Networks and Ties that Influence(d) Contemporary Ukraine*, Stuttgart: ibidem, 2017, 66–89.

18 On the cult of Khmelnytsky and Pokrova see: Serhii Plokhly, *Tsars and Cossacks: A Study in Iconography*, Cambridge, MA: HURI, 2002.

19 Yurchuk and Fert, "Sacralization".

in air defence, is called Pokrova, as announced by the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, Valerii Zaluzhnyi.²⁰

Figure 9: Pokrova icon in the Askold Grave Chapel



Pokrova icon, Askold Grave Chapel, Kyiv, 2021, photo courtesy of Andrii Fert.

Saint Javelin: Militarised Icons

Perhaps the best globally known symbol of Ukrainian resistance is the image of Saint Javelin, which depicts a saint carrying a Javelin, or an Advanced Antitank Weapon System-Medium.²¹ Saint Javelin was created by the Canadian marketing executive and filmmaker Christian Borys as the label for a charity campaign to help Ukraine at the beginning of the full-scale invasion.²² It can be read as a remediation of Chris

20 Valerii Zaluzhnyi, "Modern Positional Warfare and How to Win it", *The Economist*, 01 November 2023, https://infographics.economist.com/2023/ExternalContent/ZALUZHNYI_FULL_VERSION.pdf, [accessed: 31.07.2024].

21 See, for example, *Saint Javelin*, image from Saint Javelin, "Saint Javelin Sticker", official website, <https://www.saintjavelin.com/products/saint-javelin-sticker-1> [accessed: 31.07.2024]. See also the analysis of the feminine iconography of Saint Javelin in Boyko, "Valkyries".

22 Saint Javelin, official website, <https://www.saintjavelin.com/> [accessed: 31.07.2024].

Shaw's 2012 painting *Madonna Kalashnikov*, in which the Holy Mary holds an AK-47.²³ For Shaw, this weapon was both a symbol of "the official weapon of conservative Islamic terrorists, and a symbol of freedom and democracy during the Arab Spring".²⁴ It is worth mentioning that in 2007, the anonymous England-based street artist Banksy created the famous graffiti *Mona Lisa Bazooka*, which may also be a premeditation of Shaw's image.²⁵ In 2022, in the Ukrainian context, the Holy Mary holds a symbol of the Ukrainian struggle, revealing the hopes invested in the weapon. For Ukraine, the struggle for this weapon and the country's right to defend itself became as important as the combat itself.

The Saint Javelin image has already become a source of remediation itself, in this way serving as a premediated image. Different artists have rearticulated the image in their own art, imbuing new meanings into it. For instance, one remediation depicts a female saint in a Ukrainian military uniform with a Malyuk rifle.²⁶ The artist explains that they picked specifically the Malyuk rifle for "reimagining of the Saint Javelin art that had become [sic] one of the symbol [sic] of Ukrainian resistance" because the Malyuk rifle is "the Ukrainian home growth [sic] rifle, used by their special forces".²⁷

Through this remediation, the original image became more localised and nationalised. It might not work for an international audience in the same way as the original Saint Javelin, but it reveals the high potential of such images to produce new manifestations of resistance. The original Saint Javelin, on the other hand, evokes a more recognisable (and perhaps more transnational) image, which worked on the global market and helped collect 1 million Canadian dollars during the first month of the campaign.²⁸ Interestingly, the Malyuk rifle, also known as the Vulcan or Vulcan-M, is itself reconfigured from the Kalashnikov rifle into a bullpup layout. In this case, multiple remediations exist not only in the different representations but also in the refiguration of the material world.

23 See, for example, *Madonna Kalashnikov*, 30 inch x 40 inch, acrylic on canvas, 2012, image from Chris Shaw: Rock Posters & Art, "Chris Shaw at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art", 18 April 2013, <https://chrisshawstudio.com/2013/04/chris-shaw-at-the-san-francisco-museum-of-modern-art/> [accessed: 31.07.2024].

24 Shaw as cited in Boyko, "Valkyries", 213.

25 The author is grateful to Rostyslav Semkiv for drawing her attention to Banksy's image, which is a great example of postmodern collage and the postsecular sacred.

26 See, for example, *Saint Javelin*, image from Luches, *Saint Javelin*, DeviantArt, 11 April 2022, <https://www.deviantart.com/luches/art/Saint-Javelin-912697865> [accessed: 31.07.2024].

27 Luches, "Saint Javelin", DeviantArt, 11 April 2022, <https://www.deviantart.com/luches/art/Saint-Javelin-912697865> [accessed: 23.07.2024].

28 Bernd Debusmann Jr., "How 'Saint Javelin' raised over \$1m for Ukraine", BBC, 10 March 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-60700906> [accessed: 23.07.2024].

Madonna and Pieta Iconography

Most of the images that use religious themes concentrate on the image of Madonna. This is not surprising, considering the photos of Ukrainian women and children on the covers of international newspapers, starting from the first moments of the full-scale invasion. Madonna imagery serves as the direct source of this remediation. One of such images depicts a young woman with a child in a Kyiv metro station. It is only one of many examples of such remediations.²⁹

The picture was published by the Tubik Agency, a Ukrainian graphic design company. In the description, the agency wrote:

“Mother is the name for God in the lips and hearts of little children,” William Makepeace Thackeray once wrote, and now facing war in Ukraine, with thousands of civilians living in horror and not knowing if they have tomorrow, we also see thousands of expressions of mother’s love.

This artwork is one of them, and it is inspired by the real photo of the real mother hiding with her baby in the Kyiv subway while the city was under shelling. Sadly, that’s the look of Kyivan Madonna in 2022.³⁰

The post ended with the words: “Please, stop the war. Stand with Ukraine. Children shouldn’t suffer”.³¹ By citing the British writer and explicitly asking for support in the last sentence, the image and the message are created with the intention to reach an international audience. It seems that most of the images analysed in this study are created with the belief that a Ukrainian audience is convinced of the importance of support for their resistance, while it is an international audience that should be persuaded that Ukraine and its people should be supported. The postsecular sacred is used here to reach audiences both within and outside of Ukraine.

Another distinguished feature of such images is that they are inspired by photos (and stories) of real women and their children that were shown in the news.³²

29 *Kyivan Madonna*, image from tubik shop, “Kyivan Madonna Illustration HIGH RES”, Creative Market, 12 March 2022, <https://creativemarket.com/tubik/7056439-Kyivan-Madonna-Illustration-HIGH-RES> [accessed: 24.07.2024].

30 tubik shop, “Kyivan Madonna Illustration HIGH RES”, Creative Market, 12 March 2022, <https://creativemarket.com/tubik/7056439-Kyivan-Madonna-Illustration-HIGH-RES> [accessed: 24.07.2024].

31 Ibid.

32 For more examples of similar images, see: Boyko, “Valkyries”; and Anna Shykanova, “Ukrainska Madonna: u Kyevi maty vrianuvala dytnu, zakryvshy ii svoim tilom vid obstriliv” (“Ukrainian Madonna: In Kyiv, a Mother Saved Her Child from Shelling by Covering It with Her Body”), *RBK-Ukraine*, 19 March 2022, <https://www.rbc.ua/ukr/stylar/ukrainskaya-madonna-kieve-mat-spasla-rebenka-1647684163.html> [accessed: 31.07.2024].

These photos serve as premediated images later used for creating iconic, less personalised, and thus more recognisable images that transcend national boundaries. This implementation of photography has become a significant feature in the creation of the postsecular sacred in commemorative culture in Ukraine since 2014, as we argue elsewhere.³³

Notably, on 25 March 2022, Pope Francis evoked the Holy Mary when he consecrated Russia and Ukraine to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. He prayed the Act of Communion with all Catholic Bishops across the globe. After finishing the prayer of the Act of Consecration, the Pope commented:

This is no magic formula but a spiritual act. It is an act of complete trust on the part of children who, amid the tribulation of this cruel and senseless war that threatens our world, turn to their Mother, reposing all their fears and pain in her heart and abandoning themselves to her.³⁴

Although Ukrainians (both part of and outside the church) largely criticise the acts of Pope Francis,³⁵ it is worth mentioning that in the transnational context, the figure of the Virgin Mary is central not only in Ukrainian popular culture but also for the Catholic Church. The Pope's evocations of the Mother of God in the context of the war show that the war, too, has a central place in the Catholic Church. In this way, the Madonna, in relation to the war, is an essential element not only in the images created by Ukrainians on the ground but also as a symbol referred to by the Pope, a transnational actor representing the Catholic Church.

Icons and Ruins

A final grouping of images that depict the horrors of the war in Ukraine combine photos of war scenes and ruination with the well-known icons. This group of images differs from those discussed above. In contrast to art that imitates icons, here we see less of an imitation and more of an incorporation of the contemporary war into traditional iconography. For example, Ireneaus Yurchuk, an American artist of

33 Yurchuk and Fert, "Sacralization".

34 Devin Watkins, "Pope consecrates Russia & Ukraine: 'Spiritual act of trust amid cruel war'", *Vatican News*, 25 March 2022, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2022-03/pope-francisc-consecration-russia-ukraine-mary-war-lent.html> [accessed: 31.07.2024].

35 Tania Matiash, "Papa Rymyskyi neuvazhno chytav Dostoievskoho, inakshe ne dyuvavsvia by zhorstoki rosiian, – Markarova" ("The Pope of Rome Did Not Carefully Read Dostoyevsky, Otherwise He Would Not Be Surprised by the Cruelty of the Russians – Markarova"), *LB.ua*, 07 November 2022, https://lb.ua/world/2022/11/07/535034_papa_rimskiy_neuvazhno_chita_v.html [accessed: 31.07.2024].

and they are open to interpretation. The main, unambiguous message of the images is the horror of war and its consequences.

The artistic project “Icons on Ammunition Boxes” by Sonia Atlantova and Oleksandr Klymenko also fits within this context. The artists initiated it in 2014, when they started painting icons on boxes that came directly from the frontline in the Donbas. As the artists explain, these icons on ammunition boxes are not only witnesses of war but also symbols of the victory of life over death. This project contributes to such a victory not only symbolically but also practically, as, through the project, the artists collect money for a mobile hospital.³⁹

Conclusions

Religious symbols are actively used in the imagery of resistance in Ukraine. The use of such symbolism, however, does not show that Ukrainians are especially religious. Rather, these images serve as vehicles of representation that evoke positive emotional responses both locally (in Ukraine) and internationally, as they can be recognised by other people who share or are familiar with Christian iconography and traditions. Importantly, Christianity here functions more as a cultural tradition than a religion.⁴⁰ These well-known images are used to convey messages of hope and resistance to broader audiences and can cross cultures, nations, and languages. At the same time, these images cross beyond the temporality of the current war and blur boundaries between the past and present. The postsecular sacred produced by these images, with help of postmodern cultural tools, enables an erasure of boundaries between the secular and the religious, and between the sacred and the profane. Remediated in different times and contexts, these images are intrinsically hybrid, and thus open to interpretation by many groups and in many situations.

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39 New Lib, “Ikony na iashchychakh z-pid naboiv: Knihi, Oleksandr Klymenko, Sonia Antalantova” (“Icons on Ammo Boxes: Books, Oleksandr Klymenko, Sonia Antalantova”), <https://www.newlib.org.ua/ikony-na-iashchychakh-z-pid-naboiv/> [accessed: 31.07.2024].

40 On religion as a cultural tradition, see: Danielle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, Cambridge: Polity, 2000.

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