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REPRESENTATION OF UKRAINIAN CITIES IN THE CONTEMPORARY WARTIME NARRATIVE¹¹

Purpose: To identify peculiarities of the representation of Ukrainian cities in the war narrative, to analyze key images of these cities, to determine sustainability/transformation of the images of some Ukrainian cities since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion.

Methods: The paper uses the descriptive method and the content analysis to study the war narrative and further distinguish image-symbols of Ukrainian cities. The semiotic approach provides an opportunity to interpret the city as a text, a sign environment that is in constant motion and responds to internal and external challenges.

Results: The representation of cities in a certain narrative and formation of their images depend on many factors, including the historical development of the city, sociocultural context, geographical characteristics, ethnic and social composition of the city, and ultimately, the leading functions of a particular city, which may be determined by the development of tourism, industry, science, etc. Russian armed aggression has led to sustainability/transformation of the images reflected in the war narrative.

Conclusions: The analysis of the representation of certain Ukrainian cities in the contemporary war narrative has revealed several main trends. The cities are depicted in a personified way, possessing distinct individuality and character, and resisting the enemy. The physical loss of a city doesn't mean a mental loss; residents literally reassemble the city from their own particularly significant places. These include both well-known locations-symbols and private spaces (associated with moments of pre-war life, a sense of the city's spirit) that are stored in individual memory. The borderline nature of the cities is felt especially acute, the necessity to preserve the Ukrainianness and to remain a Ukrainian city that continues to function as a complete organism, becomes unbreakable and turns into a fortress, causes partial or complete irrelevance, and respectively, fewer or no mentions of other images of such cities.

Keywords: *representation of the city, symbol, urban space, war narrative, Russian aggression.*

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Images of cities reflect the perceptions of their residents, authorities, elites (cultural, political, etc.) or the view(s) from outside. These perceptions and visions are influenced by many factors, and images can be both relatively permanent and changeable. In this paper, I will try to answer the questions about how some particular Ukrainian cities have been portrayed in the wartime narratives since Russia's full-scale invasion.

It is important to identify several general key points that should be taken into account in the analysis: how and when the image(s) of the city appear, whether these images compete with/supplement/contrast with/are autonomous from each other, and in which narratives they appear/are constructed/are exploited. It is important to note that some images are formed based on cities' geography (resort Odesa, port city Mykolaiv) or on their "specialization," such as industrial centers (Zaporizhzhia, Mariupol, Mykolaiv, Kharkiv). In wartime, proximity to the border certainly plays a significant role (Bakhmut, Bucha, Gostomel, Okhtyrka, Sumy, Kharkiv, Chernihiv etc.).

This study attempts to examine the Ukrainian wartime narratives that are broadcast and available in public spaces (media, social media posts, poetry, advertising texts, murals, graffiti) and the images of particular cities within them. I understand narratives as stories that are conveyed not only and not necessarily verbally. We acknowledge a diverse range of the material, which, however, allows us to draw preliminary conclusions and roughly envision the prospects for more detailed and comprehensive study.

The threat to the existence of cities, particularly the destruction of not only physical objects but also iconic and symbolic ones, leads to a change in the way of urban life. Indeed, urban life itself as a phenomenon is under threat¹². Therefore, the specific nature of the wartime narrative determines the characteristics of the city images. New images are emerging or existing ones become more relevant.

The city is increasingly being called a living organism with its own character. The city itself can resist. A variety of pictures of the cities are appearing (they have different aesthetics and depth of comprehension, but their appearance is already indicative), including the well-known works by Victoria Naumova and Natasha Ie, in which cities are depicted as Ukrainian women [31; 39; 40].

In media texts and also in social media posts, the adjectives such as "unbreakable", "unconquered", "wounded", "scarred" are used to describe the cities that are under constant attacks by the enemy. An interesting observation is that even posts that are not directly related to the war have hashtags with the names of cities and these adjectives. A person/company promotes their business (for instance, they sell clothes, foods, i.e., are engaged in usual, normal, non-military practices) but at the same time they demonstrate their attitude to the city with which they have a connection. In that way the image that has appeared in the war narratives is transferred to the wartime narratives which have wider themes and issues and which, we dare to say, consolidate the image.

We can see the perception of the cities as organisms and the personification of the images in symbolic acts of support too, such as the installation of the banners with the "voices" of Ukrainian cities are installed (e.g., "Stand firm, we'll cover you! Kharkiv", "Kharkiv, thank you! Ivano-Frankivsk", "Kharkiv, hold on! We will meet your people. Lviv", etc.) [42]. Additionally, there is a simulated dialogue between Sumy and Starobilsk in a drawing by Donetsk artist Masha Vyshedska [6].

In wartime poetry, the cities are personalized too. Certainly, separate studies should be devoted to their research. Here, I will focus on the fact that the images of the cities in these narratives are balanced, despite the diversity and undeniable uniqueness of the authors' worldview. For example, in poetry written by Yuliia Batkilina "There are battles in the suburbs today. // The city is not sleeping,

¹² For more information on forms of urbicide, including "the cultural cannibalism" and urbicide in modern Ukraine, see Mezentssev, K., Mezentssev O. War And the City: Lessons From Urbicide in Ukraine. *Czasopismo Geograficzne*, vol. 93, no. 3, Bogucki Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Dec. 2022, pp. 495–521. URL: <https://doi.org/10.12657/czageo-93-20>; also on violence against cities: Mykhailova O. Urbicide—the strategy of the Russian occupiers in the Russian-Ukrainian war. *National Institute for Strategic Studies*, October 6, 2022. URL: <https://niss.gov.ua/news/komentari-ekspertiv/urbitsyd-stratehiya-rosiyskykh-okupantiv-v-rosiysko-ukrayinskiy-viyini>.

the city is calling its people, // with a quiet song, trumpets, curses, // have you ever heard a stone curse?"¹³ [13]. Also, in poetry by Natalka Marynychak: "the city squints and pulsates and flickers // smiles and leads you to the gate", "my houses and my Slobozhansky huts // bare their spines in this war", "the city breathes carefully under the skin" [21]. And in the song "Kharkiv. Your city speaks to you" by Natalka Marynychak [30]: "I know you can // make me whole // heal my wounds // heal my body". In poetry by Nastka Fedchenko: "The city falls into darkness, the city flounders in darkness, the city buys candles, the city cares most about freedom, not electricity, the city runs to the shelters or stands in endless traffic jams, curses missiles, raises money for cars and drones, the city knows that good will triumph over evil" [34]. Kolya Kulinich wrote: "The city will wake up – // There's a war around the city // Other towns are resting in the midst of the war // There's a chance that the city will stand // There's a chance of one in a hundred" [26].

Generally, the military strategy of destroying cities, targeting symbolic places, or reducing parts of the city to ruins aims to erase the space and break the connection between people and their city, to conquer, to redefine (this is also related to Russian attempts to mark the occupied cities with their own signs, to impose their own system of symbols). The space that has been broken down should automatically become lost space, putting the city's identity at risk. M. de Certeau points out a stunning fact: "It is striking here that the places people live in are like the presences of diverse absences. What can be seen designates what is no longer there: 'you see, here there used to be ...,' but it can no longer be seen. Demonstratives indicate the in-visible identities of the visible: it is the very definition of a place, in fact, that it is composed by these series of displacements and effects among the fragmented strata that form it and that it plays on these moving layers." He reflects on the characteristics that places have, calling them fragmentary histories, documents of the past hidden from the Different, compressed by the time that can be unfolded, but as histories are stored in reserve, in an encrypted form; after all, they are conventional signs encapsulated in bodily pain or pleasure [33]. Not by chance do sites in cities become so crucial in the wartime narratives. These sites don't defragment the image of the city but instead seem to assemble it.

I'll give some illustrative examples. Artist Anna Kauch created a series of drawings of the places that are especially iconic and valuable for Mariupol residents in her opinion. "She portrayed Mariupol in the way she knew it because wanted to bring these memories to drawings". The artist notices: "I would like to show how atmospheric this city was, remind the residents how it remains in the memory of each of us, and how we loved it, love and will love" [12].

In October of 2022, Anastasiia Ponomareva created a calendar for 2023 with landmarks of Mariupol. It "has beautiful graphic representations of main symbols of our dear Mariupol: the Old Tower, Hamper's house, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Petro Mohyla, Continental' hotel, the Mosque of Suleiman and Roksolana, the houses with a spire, the pier, the arc in the City Garden, the Drama Theater building, Azovstal and the warm gentle Azov Sea. I have already received the copy and I am very happy about this! I highly recommend it to every person in whose heart, like in mine, Mariupol lives and hurts. There are many of us dispersed in cities and towns. The diaspora of Mariupol is numerous and scattered around the world. The profit from realizing the calendar will donate to a good initiative that brings our Victory closer. So join in. It's worth it!" [23].

Important places for Kharkiv residents are portrayed by *line.e*. The series of postcards is called "You know, where we'll meet". In one Instagram post the artist thought over: "How can you feel Kharkiv? I will share my feelings here. Of course, we can write an endless list. I've conducted a survey recently and people have shared some interesting ideas, so perhaps I'll get back to this topic later" [37]. "Kharkiv is the sound of skateboarders at the Opera House", an old man with a music box in Sumska Street, a squirrel in Gorky Park, dances of old women in the Retro Park, and also Kulynychi, Bufet, Gradusnyk. This is not even the full list of the things that are embodied in drawings. These are accumulated stories that individual and collective memory of the residents try to keep at all

¹³ Here and until the end, a semantic translation of the poetic passages is carried out without preserving the rhyme.

costs. Each of these places has a story behind it and it really resembles a capsule of emotions that allows one to maintain a mental connection with the place and the city.

In poetry: “and each of us will have a war to fight // a loose personal one // each person needs a wall // his own wall // to survive // the wall of the university of the derzhprom of the city council // the wall that in your imagination is the center of the universe // the center of your personal rockfall // the place of strength // the place of your fall // the place of your awareness and patience // the place where you were born and died // and finally vanquished death”; “my river has coffee and a promenade // devastated banks // my river has seen more than one war // but after the war it says come // I will hug you” (Natalka Marynychak); “what do women take to evacuate? // A scarf with a picture of the // sea coast // and a lighthouse (to remember the stolen home)” (Ilona Chervotkina) [28]; “to each according to his faith – and here is our faith: // the city where we lived // a bright polyphony // memories woven tightly into cut braids” (Yelyzaveta Zharikova) [27].

The connection with the city is unbroken; we are deeply rooted in the city, and the city is rooted in each of us. In the poetry of Natalka Marynychak: “You are everything // and this river and both its banks // and this city too”; “I am big and black eyes of Saltivka // I am dark, jagged potholes of Oleksiivka // I am the intersection of Myronositska and Svoboda Streets // I am the mountains and hills of this city’s windings”, “On dark roads with barely visible rails // the train takes me out of the best city // it is impossible to take the city out of me // Kharkiv is as if it is your body // or you are its body // Kharkiv is as if your left hand is Bavariia // your right hand is Nemyshlia // your feet point to Osnova // your head is the Piatykhatky” [21]. In Nastka Fedchenko’s poem, each stanza begins with the formula “I am Okhtyrka. I am Chernihiv. I am Kharkiv. I am Zhytomyr. I am Lviv. I am Ternopil. I am Mariupol. I am Kyiv. I am Dnipro. I am Odesa. I am Mykolaiv. I am Enerhodar. I am Kruty. I am Kherson” and ends with “I am Ukraine” [34]. In Lera Merenkova’s Triptych about Kharkiv: “I am this city’s fingerprint // witness of doomed traffic lights // lifelines in the curve of its sidewalks // street god from wall pantheons” [9].

In the wartime narratives, an important meaning acquired the need to present Ukrainian cities to the world, in particular in the context of a clear distinction from everything Russian. Moreover, single photos or videos won’t be enough to understand the scale and results of the destruction. Even the relatively widespread “before/after” format¹⁴ (see e. g. the initiative of the Ukrainian Institute – the digital project Postcards from Ukraine), doesn’t delve into the essence despite its apparent clarity. The series of videos demonstrates how certain significant places can secure images too (Ukrainian Cities of Freedom).

The image “Kharkiv-Zalizobeton” (Zalizobeton is ferroconcrete in Ukrainian) is common in the wartime narratives (see the song by Papa Carlo “Kharkiv Zalizobeton”; also the poetry of Natalka Marynychak: “you can be sure // Kharkiv // zalizobeton”; the mural Kharkiv-Zalizobeton on the building of the Pokotylovka Children’s Library; the page of the volunteer project Kharkiv Zalizobeton, where you can receive items with the logo by Patrick Cassanelli as a gift for a fixed donation to the *Armed Forces of Ukraine*; a conversation about the authenticity of Kharkiv and its prospects in the article by Maria Holubka “Kharkiv: Heart of Ferroconcrete”; the project We are from Kharkiv! The City of Ferroconcrete by the CF “Kharkiv with You”, etc.) and combine indestructibility, unconquerability with a symbolically significant place as a whole, the image of the fifth Kharkiv, the Ukrainian Kharkiv of the 20th century (here, the connection between parts of the Kharkiv-Zalizobeton traveling exhibition and the iconic “*Slovo*” House, which was also destroyed, is quite understandable). Dina Chmuzh, one of the curators of the exhibition, notes: “Can we be sure that we know other cities, especially those in the east of the country? Don’t we use a set of clichés, operate with ideas that are often false and imposed? The exhibition Kharkiv-Zalizobeton offers to discover Kharkiv as a vibrant cultural and intellectual center, to trace the history of the “*Slovo*” House, from its construction to the present, and to discover what the inner strength of the city, its creative reactivity, and its specific Ukrainian identity are” [8].

¹⁴ Comparing photos “before” and “after” the attacks.

Attempts of Russian invaders to commit urbicide (to destroy the urban way of life, to break networks, both physical and symbolic) have stimulated the establishment of new social, logistical, and symbolic connections within and between cities. The residents, personifying the cities and places, multiply the meanings of these individual places, expanding the understanding of the use of certain spaces or individual buildings and the ways of remembering them.

It is worth noting that even the physical destruction of industrial facilities in a short period of time not only does not neutralize certain images but, on the contrary, emphasizes their significance and metaphorizes them. One thing that became symbolic not only for Mariupol but for the whole of Ukraine, was Azovstal. Mariupol in the war narrative identified with unbreakable, strong spirit, endurance, strength, but in fact with Azovstal. It is not only an industrial city (there are not only one factory) and not only an outpost (this image has been consolidated since the beginning of Russia's armed aggression in 2014 [find more e.g., 2]), but it is Azovstal.

“Azovstal Metallurgical Combine has deep roots in the Ukrainian industry. However, now it is a true witness and participant of the heroic resistance of Ukrainians to the invaders of the Russian Federation, the symbol of invincibility of our freedom-loving spirit and faith in victory” [1]. This is how this image appears in the Ukrainian wartime narratives. “And when you would like to give up, // Because everything cracked like a crystal... Remember only one: Azovstal” [10]. To support the Armed Forces, a project was created to sell bracelets made from the “last pre-war batch of metal from the legendary Azovstal Combine” [11]. “Every bracelet made of 5 grams of steel, has been made on a rolling mill 3600 at *Azovstal*. Exactly with this alloy was made mine for launching a spacecraft in 1981, a new sarcophagus for the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in 2012. In 2022 the sheet-rolling mill, which for many years operated mill 3,600, became one of the places where the defenders of Mariupol heroically held the line” [24]).

The Ukraine Cultural Foundation created an art portal The Art of Victory [14] in June 2022, which serves as a platform documenting murals dedicated to the defenders of Mariupol, of Azovstal as a symbol of invincibility, in 10 cities of Ukraine, but there are certainly many more such works. In the illustration by Oleksandr Hrehov and in one Kyiv mural by Bosie, Phols, Humor there is a text that is published on the website of the Azov division: “If Mariupol Stands, Ukraine Will Stand” [3]. It is no coincidence that Kyiv's Volodymyrskyi Bridge is also said to have withstood the blow because it is “from Azovstal” [16].

One version of the origin of the name Mariupol is the city of Maria [5]. It became a leading idea for the creation of images that spread in the wartime narratives. These include the song of the same name by the music band Okean Elzy, as well as poetry, pictures, photos, and memories published on social networks [7]. The image of the city of Maria combines invincibility, resilience, and God's protection. There is one comparison in poetry: “and the city of Maria does not sleep // it fights at night and in the morning // it is covered in blood now // all dreams and hopes are burned // the city of Maria does not sleep // there are missiles and bullets, destroyed churches // I would like to hear you again, mother // I would like to walk near the Drama Theatre again” [36].

The borderline nature of the cities is particularly acute in the wartime narratives: they are outposts (e. g. the eastern outpost is Kharkiv, the southern outpost is Mykolaiv, the northern outposts is Okhtyrka, Sumy, Chernihiv, Gostomel, Bucha), they are fortress cities [29; 32]. “Close to the borderline” has the same meaning as “frontline”. But the image of the frontline city to some extent started to transform from “a melting pot of cultures” to a space that marks the border between Your world and the Enemy's world. E. Poghosyan reflects in his article, dedicated to the semiotics of the conquered city, on establishing frontline cities as reserves for empires, desirable conquests, and that the conquest of such city always ensures the growth of an empire [30]. The resistance of the border city in this context makes its status as an outpost and fortress especially important.

Equally clearly (vitaly) significant became the Ukrainian identity of the cities, especially frontline ones. It is about finding or improving national, cultural, and political identities. It is important for Ukrainian cities to stay first of all *Ukrainian* in the realities of war. Such space remarking is noticeable in the wartime narratives where we can see the formula “Name of the city is Ukraine”. The symbolic overarching theme in Serhiy Zhadan's posts is in line with this: “Our flags

are flying over the city”; the resistance movement “Zhovta strichka” (“Yellow Ribbon”) in Kherson is also an example for the statement.

Since Russia’s full-scale invasion, the official narrative has used the term “Hero City”. The image has gone beyond the official narrative and often can be found in private social media posts in which we are talking about the cities that are under daily attacks by the enemy [35] (on Instagram alone in December 2022, there were 1,010 posts marked #KharkivCityHero, 266 posts #ChernihivCityHero, 127 posts #ChernihivCityHero), in posters, in poetry (“Hero City Kharkiv // daily dark news // nightly losses” [21]; in October a mural dedicated to the brave workers of the city’s utilities appeared in Kharkiv [18].

The analysis allows us to make certain generalizations and outline prospects for further research.

In the Ukrainian wartime narratives, we can see several distinct trends in the image of cities. Personalization and revitalization of the city, which has its own character, are prominent themes, illustrating how cities develop their own way of resisting the enemy. Cities are depicted as living organisms that can fight back.

The narratives highlight an inseparable mental connection between cities and their residents. This connection manifests as a deep identification with the city, where residents are rooted into the city and vice versa. This allows us to reassemble the image of the hometown from separate, significant places that are stored in individual and collective memory. Indomitability and indestructibility are key characteristics of frontline and front cities. Their borderline nature determines, if not the complete leveling of other pre-war images, but at least their temporary irrelevance. The wartime context has crystallized the Ukrainianness of these cities as a fundamental feature of the image and as a marker of resistance to invasion (not only physical, but primarily spiritual). New statuses of the cities that are suffering the most from Russian aggression, cause creation of new images of Hero cities.

It is crucial to conduct comprehensive studies encompassing a wide array of narratives, including those that emerge not only within Ukraine but also abroad. Comparing pre-war images of the cities with those that have surfaced since 2014 and 2022 is essential for understanding the profound transformations these images have undergone due to the ongoing conflict.

Конфлікт інтересів

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РЕПРЕЗЕНТАЦІЯ УКРАЇНСЬКИХ МІСТ У СУЧАСНОМУ ВОЄННОМУ НАРАТИВІ

Мета. Визначити особливості репрезентації українських міст у воєнному наративі, проаналізувати ключові образи міст, визначити сталість/трансформацію образів окремих українських міст від початку російського повномасштабного вторгнення.

Методи. У роботі використано описовий метод, метод контент-аналізу для вивчення воєнного наративу й подальшого вичленювання образів-символів українських міст. Семіотичний підхід дав можливість потлумачити місто як текст, знакове середовище, що перебуває в постійному русі й реагує на виклики внутрішні й зовнішні.

Результати. Репрезентація міст в тому чи тому наративі, формування їх образів залежить від багатьох чинників, зокрема історичного розвитку міста, соціокультурного контексту, географічних характеристик, етнічного й соціального складу населення, зрештою, провідних функцій конкретного міста, визначальним у діяльності якого може бути розвиток туризму, індустрії, науки тощо. Російська воєнна агресія зумовила сталість/трансформацію образів, які відбиті у воєнному наративі.

Висновки. Аналіз репрезентації окремих українських міст у сучасному воєнному наративі дозволив накреслити кілька основних тенденцій. Міста постають персоніфікованими, вони мають виразну індивідуальність, власний характер і протистоять ворогові. Фізична втрата місця не означає втрату ментальну, мешканці буквально збирають місто зі своїх, особливо значущих місць. Це і загальновідомі локації-символи, і приватні простори (з ними пов'язані миті довоєнного життя, відчуття духу міста), які зберігаються в індивідуальній пам'яті. Прикордонність міст відчувається особливо гостро, необхідність зберегти українськість, лишитися саме українським містом, що продовжує функціонувати як повноцінний організм, стає незламним, фортецею, фортом тощо зумовлює часткову або повну неактуальність, а відповідно меншу кількість або відсутність згадувань інших образів таких міст.

Ключові слова: репрезентація міста, символ, міський простір, воєнний наратив, російська агресія.

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