

CHRISTINA DIETL, KHRYSTYNA FOSTYAK,
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WAR IN UKRAINE

THEOLOGICAL, ETHICAL AND HISTORICAL REFLECTIONS

Aschendorff Verlag

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New Icons of War: Religious Motifs in Ukrainian Digital Popular Art During the Russo-Ukrainian War

Alina Mozolevska

The essay explores the role of religious motifs in Ukrainian digital popular art on Instagram during the Russo-Ukrainian War. Through the multimodal analysis of artworks by Ukrainian artists, the study examines how religious imagery is used to convey the emotional and symbolical dimensions of the war. The religious motifs represent a powerful source of artistic imagery and serve to express themes of loss, resistance and resilience amid the chaos of war. The research highlights how these visual narratives not only document the collective trauma and resistance but also reinforce national solidarity and foster a shared visual language that makes the wartime experiences of Ukrainians more accessible to national and international audiences.

1. Introduction

Visual art plays a crucial role in how we make sense of the world, not only by helping us organize and understand the reality, but often serving as a vehicle for new ideas or as a driving force for political or social change. Its power is seen in the ability to capture important historical moments, reveal political meanings, and express ideologies. Additionally, visual popular art possesses its own agency in generating new meanings and evoking emotional responses. It provides shared codes for certain communities, changing the way we see the world through artistic practices.[1] Moreover, in times of crisis, visual popular culture is instrumental to provide a universal symbolic language to build, reinforce or counter collective identities. It also frames the vision of the conflict

1 Cf. William A. Callahan, Sensible Politics: Visualizing International Relations, New York 2020. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190071738.001.0001.

by constructing the images of the self and the other. This symbolic language, which is able to transcend cultural barriers, also makes it possible to share and feel the pain of the victims of war and to envision the horrors and the suffering of the wartime. The development of digital technologies has accelerated the propagation of different kinds of content coming from the epicenters of the conflict, reaching millions of people far away from where the violence and aggression are taking place. This new space for the exchange, sharing and propagation of visual artifacts is blurring the borders between the witness and the observer and creates a new dynamic of interaction between the participants of war and the consumers of this content.

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine has resulted in numerous creative and emotional responses within Ukrainian society that have been widely shared on official outlets and social media. Visual art has become a powerful tool for national and international mobilization and the construction of war narratives, helping Ukrainians share their stories and emotions, and provide a visual representation of their new lived reality. The tragic events caused by the Russian aggression, and the significant challenges for millions of Ukrainians, not only mobilized the government and civilian population to resist the aggressor, but also boosted the creativity and expressiveness of Ukrainian cultural elites, triggering deep transformations of existing cultural, epistemic, and value paradigms as well as shifts in the perception of the self and the other.[2] The visuality of the Russo-Ukrainian war immediately became the center of media and academic debate. While the media extensively analyzed the role of visuals from the frontline, such as photo evidence and meme culture in the construction of resistance and resilience of Ukrainians,[3] academia rightly focused on the study of the development of a new mythology and the epistemology of war art.[4] Scholars also examined the interconnection of the official discourses about

2 Cf. Maryna Protas and Natalia Bulavina, Ukrainian Art in the Time of the War: An Art Episteme Shift, in: American Journal of Art and Design 7(4) (2022) 116–123.

3 Cf. Sarah Kreps, Paul Lushenko and Keith Carter, Lessons from the Meme War in Ukraine, in: Brookings (10 February 2023). URL: https://www.brookings.edu/articles/lessons-from-the-meme-war-in-ukraine/.
All internet links in this article were last accessed on: 18 October 2023.

4 Cf. Tetiana Botvyn, Maryna Aleksandrova, Liudmyla Krymets, Rufina Dobrovolska and Olga Rudenko, Philosophical Comprehension of the Formation and Development of Ukrainian Culture in the Context of Military Realities: The Geopolitical Aspect, in: Amazonia Investiga 11(58) (2022) 84–92. https://doi.org/10.34069/AI/2022.58.10.9; Oksana Smorzhevska, The Mythology of War: Artistic Images and Meanings, in: Almanac of Ukrainian Studies 30 (2022) 108–114; Iryna Vityuk, Міфопоетичний символізм російсько-української війни у медіапросторі: містично-міфологічні наративи

the war and mass culture[5] as well as the issues of weaponization of culture during war[6]. These academic explorations highlight the multifaceted roles of visual art in times of conflict, providing deeper insights into how popular culture influences and reflects societal resilience and narratives during wartime. Indeed, the current Russo-Ukrainian War encompasses multiple aspects of interaction between culture, politics and warfare. The attempts of the Russian army to destroy not only Ukrainian cities, but also the Ukrainian cultural and historical heritage and language, has transformed the physical assault into a true culture war,[7] an existential fight for the Ukrainian nation.

Along with culture, religion has been found to be highly responsive in evolving historical and geopolitical contexts. Religious practices and beliefs are deeply intertwined with the emergence, development, and peace-building processes of conflicts[8]. In some cases, turning to religion can serve as an instinctual response to insecurity and uncertainty during times of war and crisis, helping individuals find meaning in the changing reality and face the challenges brought on by conflict. Religious institutions and communities can also provide immediate support in critical situations, assisting in evacuation efforts

[Mythopoetic Symbolism of the Russian-Ukrainian War in the Media Space: Mystical and Mythological Narratives], in: Bulletin of Zhytomyr Ivan Franko State University. Philosophical Sciences 91 (2022) 116–135.

5 Cf. Serhy Yekelchyk, Naming the War: Russian Aggression in Ukrainian Official Discourse and Mass Culture, in: Canadian Slavonic Papers 64 (2–3) (2022) 232–246, https://doi.org/10.1080/00085006.2022.2106688.

6 Cf. Tatiana Zhurzhenko, Fighting Empire, Weaponising Culture: The Conflict with Russia and the Restrictions on Russian Mass Culture in Post-Maidan Ukraine, in: Europe-Asia Studies 73(8) (2021) 1441–1466, https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2021.1944990.

7 Cf. Jason Farago, The War in Ukraine Is the True Culture War, in: The New York Times (15 July 2022). URL: https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/15/arts/design/ukraine-war-culture-art-history.html; Amber French and Olga Sagaidak, This War is a War of Cultures: The Art World, A Leader in Ukraine's Nonviolent Anti-Occupation Struggle (29 June 2022). URL: https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/blog_post/this-war-is-a-war-of-cultures-the-art-world-a-leader-in-ukraines-nonviolent-anti-occupation-struggle/; Kristina Stoeckl and Dmitry Uzlaner, The Moralist International. Russia in the Global Culture Wars (Orthodox Christianity and Contemporary Thought), New York 2022; Mark R. H. Kosciejew, Endangered Cultural Heritage in the Russia-Ukraine War: Comparing and Critiquing Interventions by International Cultural Heritage Organizations, in: International Journal of Heritage Studies 29(11) (2023) 1158–1177. https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2023.2243457.

8 Cf. Jude Fernando, Framings of Religion, Conflict and Peace: Christianity, Conflict and the Pursuit of Just Peace in Asia, in: International Journal of Asian Christianity 4(2) (2021) 177–191. https://doi.org/10.1163/25424246-04020002.

or providing humanitarian aid.[9] In some cases, conflicts can also cause a high level of politization and securitization of religious actors within society, making religion a source of conflict itself, or using it as a tool for justifying military aggression, manipulation and propaganda.[10] These complexities of the relations between religion and conflict have already become a focus of academic studies in the context of the investigation of the role of religion in the Russo-Ukrainian War.[11] For example, Tetiana Kalenychenko in her paper "Meeting the Other: Peacebuilding and Religious Actors in a Time of War" analyses the impact of Russian aggression on religious actors in Ukraine. Her analysis uncovers their role in encouraging civic identity, responsibility, and forming new narratives, but also in creating some tensions within the society.[12] In another article, Tatiana Vagramenko studied the role of religious communities in saving lives during wartime, as well as protecting churches and religious heritage.[13] However, little has been done to investigate the impact of religious symbolism on the popular culture during wartime. Thus, it is important to explore deeper and understand the interaction between culture and religion during times of conflict. Which religious symbols and references are most effective in wartime visual culture? What narratives are constructed through the use of religious imagery? This paper aims to analyze how Ukrainian visual popular culture instrumentalizes religious symbolism to reveal the interconnection between the construction of war narratives and the utilization of religious references. Specifically, the study focuses on the analysis of Instagram visual art created during the first three months of the full-scale invasion (between February 24, 2022 and June 1, 2022) to tackle the power of religious symbolism in visual popular culture.

9 Cf. Danyil Karakai and Valentyn Hatsko, No Atheists in Wartime? (4 October 2023). URL: https://voxukraine.org/en/no-atheists-in-wartime.

10 Cf. Institute for the Study of War, Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment (April 9, 2023). URL: https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-april-9-2023.

11 Cf. Tetiana Kalenychenko, Meeting the Other: Peacebuilding and Religious Actors in a Time of War, in: Catherine Wanner (ed.), Dispossession. Anthropological Perspectives on Russia's War Against Ukraine (Anthropology of Now), New York 2024, 225–241; Tatiana Vagramenko, Grassroots Ukrainian Protestantism in the Context of the Russian Invasion, in: Wanner (ed.), Dispossession, 121–139.

12 Cf. Kalenychenko, Meeting the Other.

13 Cf. Vagramenko, Grassroots Ukrainian Protestantism.

2. Popular Culture, Religion and Collective Identity

In recent decades, the issue of the interplay between visual popular culture, media, and conflicts became extensively studied in media studies and the humanities.[14] The increasing ubiquity of visuals in the digital landscape of social media has sparked scholars to rethink the role of the visual in the socio-political life of communities. They engage critically with the visual culture and elaborate new approaches to analyzing the ways visual artifacts are being produced, circulated, and further interact with different spheres of life of societies.[15] To date, the existing literature has explored the role of popular culture in conflict mediation,[16] and conflict resolution or peace building processes,[17] focusing mostly on its ability to impact the non-material dimension of conflicts and to shape a collective sense of identity within the affected communities. The potential of visuals to encompass multiple levels of meaning, to become a repository and site for collective identity construction, represents one of the most studied aspects of contemporary participatory culture.[18] Following Eisenstadt's

14 Cf. Olga Boichak, Digital War: Mediatized Conflicts in Sociological Perspective, in: Deana A. Rohlinger and Sarah Sobieraj (eds.), The Oxford Handbook of Digital Media Sociology, New York 2022, 511–527. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197510636.013.31; Cahir O'Doherty, Assemblages of Conflict Termination: Popular Culture, Global Politics and the End of Wars, in: International Relations 37(4) (2023) 567–588. https://doi.org/10.1177/00471178211052813; Galia Press-Barnathan, Thinking About the Role of Popular Culture in International Conflicts, in: International Studies Review 19 (2) (2017) 166–184. https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viw030; Jennifer L. Schulz, Mediation and Popular Culture (Routledge Research in Media Law), London – New York 2020. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429059551; Gadi Wolfsfeld, The Role of the Media in Violent Conflicts in the Digital Age: Israeli and Palestinian Leaders' Perceptions, in: Media, War & Conflict 11(1) (2018) 107–124. https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635217727312.

15 Cf. Gillian Rose, Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials, 3rd edition, Los Angeles et al. 2012; Limor Shifman, Memes in Digital Culture (The MIT Press Essential Knowledge Series), Cambridge/MA – London 2014.

16 Cf. Mark Davidheiser, Conflict Mediation and Culture: Lessons from the Gambia, in: Peace and Conflict Studies 13(1) (2006) 21–42. https://doi.org/10.46743/1082-7307/2006.1067.

17 Cf. Press-Barnathan, Thinking.

18 Cf. Julia R. DeCook, Memes and Symbolic Violence: #proudboys and the Use of Memes for Propaganda and the Construction of Collective Identity, in: Learning, Media and Technology 43(4) (2018) 485–504; Noam Gal, Limor Shifman and Zohar Kampf, "It Gets Better": Internet Memes and the Construction of Collective Identity, in: New Media and Society 18(8) (2016) 1698–1714. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814568784; Giulia Giorgi, Methodological Directions for the Study of Memes, in: Handbook of Re-

and Giessen's definition, collective identity can be understood as a process of constant construction of in-group and out-group boundaries through social, cultural, or other performative practices.[19] The core of this process consists of the production of a sense of belonging through the creation of symbolic codes which distinguish between the self and the other.[20] This ongoing dynamic of exclusion and inclusion enables the recurring production and validation of norms, values, traditions, and beliefs through discourse, defining the social, cultural, religious and political positioning of a community within a wider socio-political context.[21] Similar to other forms of cultural construction around difference and sameness, visual popular art is considered a powerful identity building device.[22] It promotes identification, evokes emotions, and creates a shared voice for members of networked communities.[23] In times of conflict, the popular culture that is consumed by most of the population on a daily basis can have a unique mobilizing power, and the potential to influence societal interpretations of the conflicts, solidifying self-identity and shaping the visions of the actors involved in conflict.[24] In some cases, popular culture is also able to facilitate the exclusion of the other by sharpening group boundaries, contributing to the sense of we-ness and building the differentiation between self and other.[25]

Collective identity and common visions of the past, present, and future of a certain group are often constructed and reaffirmed through narrative structures that are propagated through culture. As Bruner in his work "The Narrative Construction of Reality" noted, "we organize our experiences and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative – stories,

search on Advanced Research Methodologies for a Digital Society (Advances in Knowledge Acquisition, Transfer, and Management), Hershey/PA 2022, 627–663. https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-8473-6.ch036.

19 Cf. Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt and Bernhard Giesen, The Construction of Collective Identity, in: European Journal of Sociology / Archives Européennes de Sociologie / Europäisches Archiv für Soziologie 36(1) (1995) 72–102.

20 Cf. Eisenstadt and Giessen, The Construction, 76.

21 Cf. Gal, Shifman and Kampf, It Gets Better, 1699.

22 Cf. DeCook, Memes.

23 Cf. Mette Mortensen and Christina Neumayer, The Playful Politics of Memes, in: Information, Communication & Society 24(16) (2021) 2367–2377. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1979622, here: 2369.

24 Cf. Press-Barnathan, Thinking, 167.

25 Cf. Noam Gal, Ironic Humor on Social Media as Participatory Boundary Work, in: New Media and Society 21(3) (2019) 729–749. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818805719.

excuses, myths …".[26] Conflicts often serve as a key element in the creation of the self-identity and self-narrative of a nation, providing established images of the enemies and building the sense of ontological (in)security.[27] At the same time, it is worth noting that one of the dangers of communicating these shared visions of the self and other consists in the possibility to "lock in images of self and other in a very simplistic, black-and-white fashion" and normalize the conflict as a part of self-narrative and state identity.[28]

In highly mediatized societies, the popular culture helps to construct, support or counter the narrative of collective construction of the self and other. Media brings to the forefront the stories of extraordinary events, peoples, and symbols, giving meaning to the crisis and making sense of the social reality. At the same time, religion can provide already existing shared background of the stories and widely accepted and established narratives. But religion and popular culture are not only connected via the construction of shared cultural codes for society, but the dynamic of their relationships is deeper and more diverse. As Bruce David Forbes noted, in the contemporary world religion appears not only in churches or temples, but also finds its multifaceted reflections in different domains of social, cultural and political life. Indeed, many popular cultural productions are inspired by religious stories, symbols or practices.[29] Best-selling popular culture artifacts contain religious references and/or convey grand religious narratives and myths. While analyzing the interplay between religion and popular culture, Forbes defined four major ways they relate to each other: the religious manifestation in popular culture, the cultural manifestation in religion, popular culture practices as religion, and the dialogue between religion and popular culture.[30] The present paper is focused on the first dimension of the interaction between popular culture and religion, more precisely on how religious characters, motifs, tropes, allegories and symbols are used as an expressive means in Ukrainian visual artwork from within the wartime. It is worth to note, that previous research has already done an in-depth analysis on how religiosity is being used in the contemporary popular culture. For example, scholars have analyzed how religious visual references

26 Cf. Jerome Bruner, The Narrative Construction of Reality, in: Critical Inquiry 18(1) (1991) 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1086/448619, here: 4.

27 Cf. Press-Barnathan, Thinking, 173.

28 Cf. ibidem, 174.

29 Cf. Bruce David Forbes, Introduction: Finding Religion in Unexpected Places, in: idem and Jeffrey H. Mahan (eds.), Religion and Popular Culture in America, 3rd edition, Oakland 2017, 1–24, here: 1.

30 Cf. Forbes, Introduction, 11.

are used in contemporary films and series[31] or investigated how popular music exchanges with the religious imagery.[32] Some of the works were also focused on the instrumentalization of particular religious symbols and explored, for example, the visualization of Christ or Virgin Mary in the popular culture.[33] Thus, academic interest demonstrates that popular culture is in extensive interaction with religion.

3. Artistic Responses to the Russo-Ukrainian War

From the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukrainian cultural elites immediately responded to the war through different methods, extending beyond artistic practices. Faced with the scale of Russian aggression and the resulting material and immaterial damage to the vast majority of the Ukrainian population, Ukrainian intellectuals and artists mobilized their efforts and responded to the immediate threat of physical and cultural destruction of the nation. The artists were giving interviews to international media, posting about the war on social media, organizing offline and online public events, and creating war-related compositions, including music, literary, visual and performative pieces, to raise awareness of Russia's war against Ukraine. During the first several months of the war, many individual and collective artistic initiatives were launched to describe and document the experiences of Ukrainians, to reflect on their lived reality that had changed as a result of the war and to make the Ukrainian cause more visible. For example, the platform Ukraine War Art Collection, an online library of artistic projects initiated by the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine, lists about 400 projects that were launched or implemented in Ukraine after February 2022.[34] This platform showcases a diverse range of artistic responses, including visual art, performative art projects, literature, music, theater, film projects, design, architecture, or other solidarity

31 Cf. Mariola Marczak, Screening Religiosity in Contemporary Polish Films. The Role of Religious Motifs in Visual Communication, in: Journal of Religion and Film 22(3) (2018) Article 10. Available at: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol22/iss3/10; Todd V. Lewis and K. Arianna Molloy, Religious Rhetoric and Satire: Investigating the Comic and Burlesque Frames Within *The Big Bang Theory*, in: Journal of Media and Religion 14(2) (2015) 88–101. https://doi.org/10.1080/15348423.2015.1051457.

32 Cf. Lavinia Pflugfelder, Heavy Metal Bricolage: Religious Imagery and "Religionized" Visual Language in Music Videos, in: Journal for Religion, Film and Media. Religion and Popular Music 6(2) (2020) 65–85. DOI: https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19529.

33 Cf. Anton Karl Kozlovic, The Cinematic Christ-Figure, in: The Furrow 55(1) (2004) 26–30.

34 Cf. Ukraine War Art Collection. URL: https://war-art.uccs.org.ua/.

projects. The visualization of the Russo-Ukrainian War represents one of the most powerful tools for shaping the social reality of the war, bringing together the nation and strengthening the collective sense of identity. This widespread visual popular culture on social media, reflecting the intensity of the first several months of the war and processing the traumatizing experiences of millions of Ukrainians, provided a fertile soil for the creation and propagation of the new wartime symbols. Some of the symbols were inspired by real events, while others expressed relevant values and beliefs.[35] These shared symbols of the war were utilized to convey a range of emotions triggered by the aggression, such as hope, anger, fear, and hate. Moreover, they encompassed significant concepts that hold relevance in the wartime context, such as national unity, mutual support, solidarity, resilience, and resistance.

Religious imagery immediately became part of the wartime Ukrainian symbolism and was instrumentalized to visually support the construction of visual narratives and symbols of the war. Some of the most popular and successful examples of the use of religious references in Ukrainian popular culture can be illustrated by the wide popularity of the Saint Javelin meme[36] (Fig. 1), a saint armed with an anti-tank missile launcher. It was originally the artwork *Kalashnikov Madonna* by Chris Shaw,[37] which was modified by Ukrainian internet users and became one of the first symbols of Ukraine's fierce resistance to the enemy. The St. Javelin image was largely used in media and crowd-funding campaigns at the beginning of the invasion[38] and later highly disseminated via different marketing products. Another famous example of religious imagery inspired by the events of the Russo-Ukrainian War, is the artwork *Madonna of Kyiv* by Marina Solomenikova (Fig. 2). It is based on the photo taken by journalist András Földes in the Kyiv metro, which depicts a mother nursing her infant during the air alarm in the capital under attack. This has become a truly iconic symbol of the conflict, representing the resiliency and hope of the Ukrainian people while also conveying the severity of the humanitarian crisis and insecurity of the early months of the invasion. The photo and artwork were

35 Cf. Veronika Lutska, Ukrainian Hopes and Struggles in 6 Symbols of the War (11 October 2022). URL: https://war.ukraine.ua/articles/snake-island-cotton-and-more-6-symbols-of-the-war/.

36 Cf. Saint Javelin Meme. URL: https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/st-javelin-saint-javelin.

37 Cf. Chris Shaw, Madonna Kalashnikov 2022 – Ten Years of an Icon (12 March 2022). URL: https://chrisshawstudio.com/2022/03/madonna-kalashnikov-2022-ten-years-of-an-icon/.

38 The internet community "Saint Javelin", for example, collected more than 2 million dollars for Ukrainian war efforts: https://twitter.com/saintjavelin.



Figure 1. Saint Javelin meme. Source: https://x.com/saintjavelin



Figure 2. Madonna of Kyiv, illustration by Marina Solomenikova (@marinoss_art), reproduced with the permission of the author. Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CauqET-t8-2/

widely shared on the Internet and later inspired the creation of an icon now displayed in a Catholic church in Mugnano di Napoli (Italy).

These examples illustrate the relevance and importance of religious images for Ukrainian war-time popular culture, but they are not unique. To examine in detail the ways in which the appropriation of religious symbols and references are used in Ukrainian visual art, this paper analyzes the mediatization of the visuality of the war on Instagram, one of the most popular platforms worldwide, which has more than 13 million users among Ukrainians (2023).[39] Together with other social media platforms, Instagram was actively used as a site for the distribution and sharing of war-related visual content.[40] Forty-five accounts of Ukrainian digital artists were selected for this analysis and a database of more than 950 images was collected (February 24 – May 30, 2022). The artists' profiles were selected according to their popularity on Instagram

39 Cf. Number of Instagram Users in Ukraine from September 2018 to August 2023 (1 September 2023). URL: https://www.statista.com/statistics/1024763/instagram-users-ukraine/.

40 Cf. Megan Specia, 'Like a Weapon': Ukrainians Use Social Media to Stir Resistance, The New York Times (25 March 2022). URL: https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/25/world/europe/ukraine-war-social-media.html.

(number of followers) and their presence on other digital platforms and in Ukrainian media in general (e. g. Ukraine War Art collection[41] and Ukraïner's project "Ukrainian artists against war"[42]). At the second stage of the analysis, 78 images containing religious symbols were identified which constitutes 8 % of the general amount of the collected data. The selected images were analyzed using O'Halloran's Multimodal Discourse Analysis method[43] combined with elements of Rose's approach to Visual Analysis.[44] This allowed us to investigate the interrelation between the image and the reality of war and to reveal the intertextual and intericonical potential of the visual imagery of these cultural artifacts. The analysis revealed not only the direct meaning of the artworks, but also analyzed the larger symbolic, cultural, and religious narratives and meaning that served to frame the Russo-Ukrainian War in a larger civilizational context.

4. Religion and Visual Narratives in Ukrainian Visual Popular Art

Although the images which use religious symbols and references consist of only 8 % of the analyzed data, the religious imagery is very prominent in Ukrainian digital art. Christian symbolism serves as the primary source of inspiration for Ukrainian digital artists, who combine elements of traditional iconography with popular culture and shocking images of the Russo-Ukrainian War. Many of the artworks contain an explicitly political message based on the Christian notions of good and evil, focusing on the depiction of the violence of the war through the lens of Christian morality and calling for national mobilization and cooperation. This analysis has demonstrated that religious symbols are used by the artists to construct key visual narratives of the war, including the visualization of both the self and the other. Religious motifs can be expressed on a compositional or visual level: some of the artworks use the composition of icons to convey the meaning of their artworks, while others explicitly use

41 For more on the Ukraine War Art Collection cf. Polina Gorlach, В Україні запустили медіатеку мистецтва, створеного під час війни [In Ukraine, a Media Library of Art Created During the War Was Launched]. URL: https://suspilne.media/culture/264957-v-ukraini-zapustili-mediateku-mistectva-stvorenogo-pid-cas-vijni.

42 Cf. Ukrainian Artists against War. URL: https://ukrainer.net/illustrators-about-war/.

43 Cf. Kay L. O'Halloran, Multimodal Discourse Analysis, in: Ken Hyland and Brian Paltridge (eds.), Continuum Companion to Discourse Analysis, London – New York 2011, 120–137.

44 Cf. Rose, Visual Methodologies.

religious motifs and visual expressiveness to frame the war narratives. In the context of discussing the religious symbolism of both narratives, the construction of the self and the other, it is worth noting that different symbolic references were used to shape both national identity and the image of the enemy. In the context of the construction of the self, images of the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ, Saint Nicolas, and other sacred figures are reproduced most frequently, while in the visualization of the other, the artists focus on negative references and symbols of suffering and death, such as the crucified Christ, the Devil, and Satan. The collective self is thus tied to traditionally positive religious symbols, which can express purity, protection, courage, and/or bravery. The other, the enemy, is predominately tied to religious imagery traditionally connected with suffering or aggression, which helps communicate or intensify the negative features of the other. As well, the representation of the other is connected to certain spatial religious associations. For example, places such as hell, a traditional symbol of evil and despair, is repeatedly associated with the artistic visualizations of Russian soldiers. As the embodiment of the collective enemy forces, the soldiers in these artworks are subjected to punishment and suffering for the crimes committed in Ukraine.

The degree of incorporation of religious imagery into the artist's work varies; some artists imitate traditional Ukrainian iconography in their work, while other artists use religious references in cartoons or collages more freely, and do not connect them to the traditional style or coloristic traits of icons. It is worth noting that art that imitates traditional iconographic styles is not prominent among the practices of digital artists on Instagram. The second style of the artwork is more frequent, as it allows the artists to combine elements of religious imagery with other traditional Ukrainian symbols, or with new symbols and personalities, such as the heroes and villains of the wartime. The most common religious reference used in Ukrainian wartime art posted on social media are the visualizations of the image of the Virgin Mary. This image has been repeatedly transformed to speak to the evolving reality of the war and is used to express a variety of symbolic meanings, including innocence, motherhood, suffering or hope. One of the most poignant symbols of the Virgin Mary can be found in the works of Ukrainian artist Olenka Zahorodnyk (Fig. 3). She combined the ruined landscapes of the war-torn country with the religious imagery of the traditional icon to emphasize the devastation the violence has wreaked on the nation. By assembling the saintly image from elements of the destructed houses, military anti-tanks fortifications and parts of missiles, the artist depicts the destructive consequences of the war and the suffering of the ordinary Ukrainians. Zahorodnyk creates a sense of anonymity and universal-



Figure 3. Artwork of Olenka Zahorodnyk (@alekon_zahorodnyk), reproduced with the permission of the author.
Source: https://www.instagram.com/alekon_zahorodnyk/

ity by portraying the iconic images without faces. It becomes a representation of the collective pain, loss, and grief experienced by the entire nation.

In many other illustrations, Ukrainian artists also utilize the image of the Virgin Mary to tell the story of loss and express the collective feelings of mourning and suffering during wartime. For this purpose, the image of the Madonna with the Child has been artistically reinterpreted to bring it closer to the context of the Ukrainian war. By visually expressing the concept of lost motherhood, artists depict one of the most powerful symbols of suffering experienced by Ukrainians. This representation not only captures the individual loss of every mother mourning her child, but also encompasses the collective trauma of the nation as a whole. The artworks of Oleksii Revika and Lyuda Samus exemplify this artistic approach (Fig. 4 and 5). As can be seen, the artists were able to skillfully capture the deep emotions associated with the themes of loss and collective suffering by using imagery related to the composition of the Madonna with the Child.

Despite the traumatic experiences faced by millions of Ukrainians during the war, there are also instances of positive reappropriations of the Virgin Mary in Ukrainian war-time art. In many illustrations, the image of the Virgin Mary with the child serves to express the joy of motherhood and illustrate the efforts



Figure 4. Artwork of Oleksii Revika (@oleksii_revika), reproduced with the permission of the author. Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/Ccr_eS0tazh/



Figure 5[45]. Artwork of Lyuda Samus (@ya.samus), reproduced with the permission of the author. Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CbaBgJptfUh/?img_index=1

of Ukrainian mothers to protect their children from the horrors of war. For example, the artwork of Liza Mykhailus depicts a Ukrainian mother holding her child on the background of falling Russian missiles (Fig. 6). It does not only highlight the striking contrast between the innocence of childhood and the brutal realities of war, but also conveys a message of hope for a better future for Ukrainian children. Often, such artworks are inspired by the real stories that emerged during the wartime, symbolizing the resilience of Ukrainian women. One such illustration, by Anta Frirean, portrays a Ukrainian woman who bravely covered her child during the missile attack in order to save the baby's life (Fig. 7). This story, which gained attention in Ukrainian news outlets, inspired the artist to create an artistic representation that combines the mother's actions with religious imagery. Another example is the work of Sophia Suliy called *Ukrainian Madonna*[46]. The illustration was inspired by the artist's neighbor, a young woman who was hiding with her child in the basement during an air attack on the capital. These everyday examples of the heroism, bravery,

45 Translation of the captions: "We cannot forgive our perpetrators forever and ever!"
46 The artwork is available at https://www.instagram.com/p/CauKrdCNQVx/.



Figure 6. Artwork of Liza Mykhailus(@yablonska.mykhailus), reproduced with the permission of the author. Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CbCcNKONere/



Figure 7. Artwork of Anta Frirean (@anta_arf), reproduced with the permission of the author. Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CbU4CwBMWXO/?img_index=1

and caring of motherhood during wartime, combined with religious imagery, express a powerful message of the strength and resilience of Ukrainian women during such turbulent times, ready to protect their children.

Examples of the weaponization of traditional iconic images can also be found. Here again the image of the Virgin Mary, as a symbol of the protective mother, plays a central role in the visualization of the self. However, in these illustrations the image serves to express the nation's power and resistance in the face of the prevailing enemy. The image of the saint is directly associated with Ukraine, which is signaled by the use of national symbols such as vyshynanka, sunflowers, and the colours yellow and blue. Compositionally, the images are reminiscent of traditional icons, in which the figure of a saint is placed in the center of the image and the head is surrounded by a halo. Through the choice of colours (such as red and black as colours of violence and bloodshed) and the depiction of arms and military elements such as military uniforms, ammunitions or equipment, a strong connection with the wartime reality is visually constructed (Fig. 8 and 9).

In addition to the image of the Virgin Mary, another significant religious motif in the representation of the self in Ukrainian wartime art is the use of



Figure 8. Artwork of Stanislav Lunin (@stanislavlunin), reproduced with the permission of the author. Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CaxUVaTtt00/?img_index=1



Figure 9. Artwork of Tetiana Kopytova (@kopytova_tetiana_horse_art), reproduced with the permission of the author. Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CctJB-tNvjI/

angels. These celestial creatures are incorporated into the Ukrainian visual art as a symbol of purity and innocence and serve as a poignant depiction of the loss and suffering experienced by Ukrainians. The depictions of angels are often associated with the civilian population, predominantly children or women, who were killed during the Russo-Ukrainian War. The power of these images lies in the representation of the innocence of these victims and their harmlessness at the same time. The angels of the victims are predominately depicted as flying into the sky, attempting to reach heaven, which also underlines the purity of their person (Fig. 10 and 11).

In less frequent cases, the religious imagery is used to construct the everyday reality of the war. This type of images does not heavily rely on the religious symbolism, but mostly uses easily recognizable figures and places situated in the everyday situations for a humorous or surprising effect. Such are, for example, the illustrations of Aza Nizi Maza and Oleksandr Grekhov (Fig. 12 and 13). They place religious characters into the wartime routine of Ukrainians, illustrating how their everyday activities are constantly interrupted by the air alarms caused by Russian missile attacks. This approach blends sacred and secular elements, highlighting the absurdity and brutality of war.



Figure 10. Artwork of Yaroslava Yatsuba (@bright_arts), reproduced with the permission of the author. Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CinmIqEtESa/



Figure 11. Artwork of Tetiana Kopytova (@kopytova_tetiana_horse_art), reproduced with the permission of the author. Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CgRd405Nelq/

Religious symbols are not only used to express loss and suffering, but also to construct the image of the enemy, albeit to a lesser extent. In this case, the main focus is on the abuse of religion and church infrastructure by the Kremlin authorities in mobilizing its population and justifying the war. The image of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow occupies a central position in the representation of the other. In these depictions, the image of Patriarch Kirill is combined with the symbols of Satan, such as the tail and horns, and the symbols of Russia's "special military operation" such as the letter *Z*. These symbols are further accompanied by depictions of the weapons used by the Russian army. Together, these symbols and imagery construct a powerful visual of the enemy as absolute evil, revealing all the destructive aspects of the Russo-Ukrainian War in portraying the other. The symbols used also highlight the role of the Russian church in inciting the attack against Ukraine. Combined with depictions of the weaponry, the illustrations tend to show that religion represents one more instrument of the warfare and propaganda machine of the Russian Federation (Fig. 14–15).

The collective image of the Russian army is also associated with the symbolic representation of the evil forces. Several artistic conceptualizations of the other can be found here. On the one hand, Russian soldiers are portrayed as ag-



Figure 12. Artwork of Aza Nizi Maza[47] *(@aza_nizi_maza), reproduced with the permission of the author. Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CbUtYy_tBvK/*



Figure 13. Artwork of Oleksandr Grekhov[48] *(@unicornandwine), reproduced with the permission of the author. Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CciaAcFt3MO/*

gressors, as those who attack sacred figures and places. In Fig. 16, the image of the Virgin Mary is placed central in the image and is associated with Ukraine, while the Russian soldiers are depicted as dark figures (evil forces) who attack the innocent saint. The Russian army is easily identifiable by the symbol *Z* on their uniforms. The red color of the painting intensifies the imagery of aggression and violence expressed in the artwork. By illustrating the conflict between sacred innocence and the evil forces, the artist brings to light the injustice of the war and illustrates the cruelty of the Russian invasion in this unprovoked war. The unforgiveness of the crimes of the Russian army is expressed through the motif of hell and the inevitableness of their punishment by divine forces as it is depicted by the artwork in Fig. 17.

Interestingly enough, the Virgin Mary was also utilized to construct the image of the other. The artist Oleksandr Shatokhin used the compositional elements of the icon and the image of the Madonna with the Child to unveil the nature of the cruelty incited by the Russian aggression[49]. By combining the

47 Translation of the captions: on the left: "Let's hide Jesus, there is another air alert"; on the right: "And then we will hit the fighter jets".

48 Translation of the captions: on the top: "The air alert is over"; on the left, in red: "bomb shelter".

49 The artwork is available at https://www.instagram.com/p/Caw_5i0L7nB/.



Figure 14. Artwork of Bogdana Davydiuk (@bogdana_davydiuk_), reproduced with the permission of the author. Source: https://www.instagram.com/bogdana_davydiuk_/

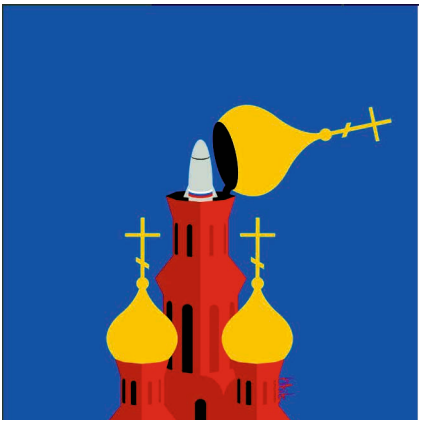

Figure 15. Artwork of Oleg White (@olkwhite), reproduced with the permission of the author. Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/Ca_7KZAtCC2/



Figure 16. Artwork of Yaroslava Yatsuba[50] (@bright_arts), reproduced with the permission of the author. Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CbViyuvt4nS/



Figure 17. Artwork of Mykhailo Skop (@neivanmade), reproduced with the permission of the author. Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CcdugzstHJN/

50 Translation of the captions: on the top: "They are so stupid"; on the left: "Where are they from?"; below on the right: "From Chornobaivka again".



Figure 18. Artwork of Oleksii Revika (@oleksii_revika), reproduced with the permission of the author. Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/ChJleLntTc0/

Virgin Mary with the symbols of death, the Russian tricolor and the image of a dead baby killed by the Russian army, the artist illustrates the madness and senselessness of the Russian aggression. Another example of such imagery is the artwork of Oleksii Revika (Fig. 18), which combines Russian imperial symbols such as the Georgian ribbon with the colors of violence and military equipment to visualize the enemy. Such illustrations serve a poignant reflection of the reality of the Russo-Ukrainian War and help to share the sorrow and grief of Ukrainians.

5. Conclusion

This analysis of religious imagery used in Ukrainian visual popular art during the first three months of the invasion has shown the importance of religious symbolism for artistic production in times of war. The religious imagery helps to bridge the reality of the war and the symbolic visions of the self and the other, which is crucial for processing trauma, self-affirmation and construction of collective identity. Visual art serves as a universal language to share the stories of loss, resilience, and resistance, but also to construct the image of the

self and the other by channeling common visualisations of good and evil. The religious imagery of digital art created in response to the Russo-Ukrainian War is predominantly inspired by Christian symbolism. The artworks incorporate some elements of traditional Ukrainian iconography and usually combine the religious references with cultural and historical aspects of the war to deepen the significance and the meaning of the art. The central image of the creative artworks is the Virgin Mary, which acts as a symbolic expression of loss, motherhood, strength and resistance. Both the representation of the self and the other are expressed through the image of the Virgin Mary, which again reflects the symbolic complexity of this figure. Other popular visual symbols are the images of Jesus, angels, and Satan. These religious symbols are often combined with elements of the war such as weapons or symbols of war and other symbolic expressions of Russia and Ukraine, intensifying the semiotic meaning of the pieces. Thus, Ukrainian wartime digital art actively uses religious symbolism to construct the universal notions of good and evil and to express and share collective emotions and identities.