


Ukrainian War Humor and Civic Activism in 2022

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Abstract

The 2022 war in Ukraine has produced the biggest virtual humor archive in the history of wars. We argue that Ukrainian war humor is a form of civic activism in the name of Ukraine's sovereignty. This civic activism is defined by resistance, solidarity, vigilance, and dedication to victory. The war humor circulates locally as well as on a global stage. It expresses the government's positions and the people's voices and empowers those affected by this war. Ukrainian war humor documents experiences of war realities; provides moral commentaries and emotional and aesthetic interpretations; and articulates visions for the future of Ukraine as a sovereign European state.

Keywords: war humor; civic activism; memes and cartoons; sovereignty; Ukraine

“Moscow is burning in my dreams.” Ukrainian war-time song “I Have a Dream (Moscow's Burning)” (2022).

On February 24, 2022, the Russian warship “Moskva” approached Snake Island in Ukrainian territorial waters. On the radio, Ukrainian border guards were requested to surrender.¹ Roman Hrybov responded: “Russian warship, go fuck yourself.” On the mainland, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky turned down the offer from the United States to evacuate saying “I need ammunition, not a ride.” These two events marked the beginning of the major European war in post-WWII history. It was fought not only in trench lines but with a pen and a pencil in hand and at a computer screen. The jokes about the Russian warship and Zelensky's iron balls populated social media and the public sphere in the coming months. Some Ukrainian artists recalled starting to draw cartoons on the first day of the war.

This article explores humorous war memes and cartoons produced in the first year of the war in Ukraine. Many studies of humor follow the Bakhtinian, Freudian, and Bergsonian traditions, and tend to structure their arguments in terms of “resistance” (humor as the power of the powerless) versus “state propaganda” (the weapon of the state) (cf. Rüger 2009, 35). In Soviet studies, war humor is commonly perceived as a tool of propaganda and a weapon at the hands of the state (see, for example, Gérin 2018, Norris 2013, Wolf 2017). Conversely, studies of popular jokes during totalitarian or authoritarian periods focus on humor as resistance against the state (see, for example, Adams 2005, Arkhipova and Mel'nichenko 2008). Approaches that challenge these dichotomies illustrate that humor can be co-produced and integrate different audiences.² According to Jan Rüger, laughter is an evolving politics (2009, 37). He shows that in the case of WWI support for the authorities in the Kaiser's Germany and resistance was interconnected with public laughter, which

expressed “the wider political, social, and cultural conflicts which characterized Berlin during the war” (Rüger 2009, 37).

In a parallel way, we see humor as evolving political and transformative engagements inter-connecting state authorities and various other strata of the population. We argue that Ukrainian war humor is a form of civic activism in the name of Ukraine’s sovereignty. This civic activism is defined by resistance, solidarity, vigilance, and commitment to victory. The war humor circulates locally as well as on a global stage. It reveals fictionalized reality and, at the same time, memes and cartoons are a form of reporting of facts and events. Ukrainian humor documents civic activism from Russia’s invasion on February 24th when one of the first memes “Russian warship go fuck yourself” was created, to the defense of Chornobayivka and Maryupol; to the sinking of the warship “Moskva”; to the liberation of Lyman, Izyum, and Kherson; to Russia’s mass mobilization of reservists; to the bombing of the Kerch Strait (that is, Crimean Bridge); to the problems of arms supplies to Ukraine; to threats of a nuclear attack; to mass fires in Russia; to massive blackouts in Ukraine after the Russian Army systematically targeted the infrastructure in many cities from October to the end of the year; to the shelling and burning of Bakhmut, Soledar, Maryinka, and Kreminna, among others, in the Donbas region of Ukraine at the end of 2022.

Ukrainian war humor documents civic activism of various social strata: tractor drivers steal Russian tanks; an old lady hits a drone with a jar of canned tomatoes from her Kyiv balcony of her flat; young and old people “participate” in an orgy at Mount Shchekavitsa in Kyiv during a nuclear attack; state emergency employees post the words that if the Kremlin is on fire, they also want to see it; and government officials congratulate Putin on his birthday by posting images of the Crimea Bridge explosion. Even animals become part of this civic humorous mission for Ukraine’s sovereignty: from an imaginary virtual troll army of Shibu Inus of North Atlantic Fellas Organisation, #NAFO, to a living hero dog Patron (“ammo”), a bomb-sniffing Jack Russell terrier, and a Kharkivite cat Stepan drinking a glass of wine, to a raccoon stolen by the Russian Army from the zoo in Kherson telling Russians: “You thought you captured me? It’s me who took you captives.”³

Memes and cartoons are the visual artifacts of civic activism. In this article, we define a meme as an image, a video, or a piece of text, humorous and often photoshopped circulating on the internet in variations.⁴ As Limor Shifman (2013, 7–8) notes, memes are often created with awareness of each other; they are circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users. Memes can be considered socially-constructed public messages (cf. Shifman 2013). A remix of memes through various iterations of the meme with changed or modified portrayals of the same content illustrates a co-construction and involvement of different audiences (see Wiggins 2019, 12). Memes are also defined by intertextuality; that is, references to various textual and actual, local, and global contexts. A few memes included in this article had English captions and they may or may not have been created in Ukraine. They might have been created to communicate to global audiences (see Budnitsky 2023, cf. Hemment 2022). While not all memes and cartoons can be examples of civic activism, the majority of those that circulated virtually were. They were based on people’s various wartime experiences. Sharing such humor allows one to claim involvement in these experiences (and also express emotions or aspirations) contained in the intertextual message of the meme or cartoon to express empathy towards those who lived through these experiences.

Memes and cartoons make visual arguments (cf. Wiggins 2019). They are a form of “(post)modern folklore, in which shared norms and values are constructed through cultural artifacts such as Photoshopped images or urban legends” (Shifman 2013, 15). In social media research relevant to this study, the diffusion of memes is considered to “reflect general social mindsets,” and user-driven imitation and remixing are pillars of participatory culture. Yeremieieva (2022, 38) notes, in the case of Ukraine, that reposting memes is considered a form of participation in the war since “laughter helps to fight enemies,” according to well-known Ukrainian bloggers.⁵ Bilaniuk (2024, 162) relatedly claims that, like never before, social media is a significant front in the war that creates new dimensions of “popular culture” and forges a social media community, pervasive and boundless that includes diaspora, displaced people, as well as global audiences (see Bilaniuk 2024, 145).

Various studies of social media have shown that political movements, such as Occupy Wall Street or the Arab Spring, rely on their use of social media for their success (see Papacharissi 2015). Zizi Papacharissi (2015) illustrated in her work that the Occupy Wall Street movement depended on Twitter to tell its story. The phrase “We are the 99%” became a popular slogan of affiliation with the movement (Papacharissi 2015). In these contexts, memes and cartoons are forms of political persuasion and advocacy and are modes of expression and public discussion (see Shifman 2013, 122–123). Moreover, tactical media, a form of temporary interventionist online activism and artistic practice, recognizes that protest and politics evolve across mediatized dimensions of everyday life (see Raley 2009). The processes of creating and circulating memes becomes less relevant in our case since the memes analyzed had high virality, were recirculated in different contexts, and had an impact on the public sphere, including the volunteering and fundraising actions discussed below.⁶

Popular cartoons share many characteristics with memes, even if they are usually authored by a single artist, have lower virality, and are less prone to remixing. War cartoons introduced in this article make visual arguments and send socially constructed public messages. They reflect on common war themes; they are intertextual and created with specific audiences in mind. Laada Bilaniuk (2024, 144) notes that, during the war, the line between professional art and popular artistic production was blurred, and meme themes were recirculated by professional artists while key artworks were, in turn, reproduced as memes on social media. Some cartoons, like memes, acquire public folkloric characters, as in the case of Titov’s cartoon with the sinking “Moscow” warship looking like the Kremlin. Because of these shared characteristics, we include cartoons as examples of civic activism. Some Ukrainian artists recalled starting to draw cartoons on the first day of the war. Yuri Zhuravel noted that “[Russian] orcs also actively comment on my work, so my weapon is long-range.”⁷

In this article, we use “civic activism” and “humor activism” interchangeably. *Civic activism* refers to actions by individuals or groups of people towards issues of public concern, in the case of Ukraine, the war, and its effects on individuals, communities, and the country’s life. *Humor activism* is civic activism that uses humor as a medium for action, which emerges in its creation, circulation, and consumption. We use the term the *virtual public sphere* since, as in a Habermasian public sphere, cartoons and memes express and form public opinions. Cartoons and memes were followed by likes and comments, which are beyond the scope of this article. During WWI and WWII, the public sphere was controlled by the authorities through laws and censorship (see, for example, Єремєєва 2018). The 2022 Ukrainian war humor circulated without government restrictions. In a virtual sphere, not reposting or liking a meme terminated its circulation, this way preventing it from reaching wider audiences.

As William Mazzarella (2013) points out, even in democratic settings, censorship and self-censorship exist — Ukrainians do not comment on their defeats, there are no muddy trenches, dead or disabled Ukrainian soldiers, and fear and danger are always at a distance. Memes and cartoons are generally not critical of the Ukrainian government or the president, even if criticism of the state was prevalent before the war (see Channell-Justice 2022). The Ukrainian Army has the role of protector of the people for which its civilians are thankful.

This article covers Ukrainian war humor for the year 2022, from the beginning of the full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022, to January 1, 2023. It relies on a database of 366 memes and cartoons collected from Ukrainian social media and media sites. This database was organized into themes (enemies, counterpropaganda, etc.), which provided a preliminary structure for the article. We limit our discussion to key symbols and major themes in war humor; that is, humor that was very popular in the virtual public sphere and reflected civic engagement throughout the year 2022. From our initial analysis, we left out humor on gender (women are prominent as fighters for Ukraine), religion, Europe and global themes, and personalities (such as Lukashenko, Macron, Pope Francis, or Elon Musk). In our analysis, we also relied on numerous other uncatalogued cartoons and memes reviewed online, including some major sites, such as Збройні Мемі України, Ukrainian Meme Forces (UMF), and Воєнні Смішинки. We also reviewed the humor journal *Perec* and the works of Ukrainian

cartoonists active in drawing on war themes and works written by Yuri Zhuravel, Oleksiy Kustovsky, Oleksandr Grekhov, Andriy Yermolenko, Andriy Petrenko, Oleksandr Kostenko, Oleksandr Konovalenko, Nikita Titov, and others. We also watched Ukrainian humor programs on YouTube channels (see the list at the end of the article) and explored Ukrainian and foreign mainstream media coverage of Ukrainian humor. Some of the cartoons and memes were from media sites in Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, France, the UK, Germany, Denmark, Japan, and the US. The Ukrainian memes and cartoons constitute the primary data, while the rest was used to contextualize Ukrainian humor and illustrate its global circulation. In this article, we primarily discuss prominent memes and cartoons that acquired the status of key symbols (the Russian warship, tractors, Putin, etc.) and had high virality and/or were recirculated outside the virtual public sphere; for example, on billboards, or prompted some volunteering or fundraising actions.

Not all Ukrainian humor is funny. Some cartoons or memes discussed below are examples of satire, they convey critique and moral condemnation. Others are examples of black humor, irony, or parody that are not necessarily funny to everyone. Laughter is cultural — some linguistic jokes discussed below, or jokes about Russians as meat or sliced bread, may not be funny to foreign audiences, but they were amusing to Ukrainians who created and circulated them since they tapped into local humor traditions. Laughter is also multidirectional (Klumbytė 2022), it appeals to different audiences who understand humor from the position of their personal background and knowledge. While foreign viewers can generalize meme messages about burning Moscow as Ukrainian resistance, for Ukrainians it may encompass multiple aspects: hope, invincibility, hatred, victory, and a wish to see Moscow's Kremlin in flames.

The following sections discuss four overlapping characteristics of civic activism emerging from war humor; namely, resistance, solidarity, vigilance, and commitment to victory. Various memes and cartoons communicate *resistance* to Russia's invasion by engaging in subversive rhetoric, conveying invincibility and resilience, and reclaiming the normality of everyday life. They also manifest the *solidarity* of the people, businesses, the public sector, and the government, as well as local and global audiences. Memes and cartoons of *vigilance* illustrate counterpropaganda initiatives when commenting on Russian fake news and propaganda discourse, or identifying dangerous outsiders. Many others tell the story about *commitment to victory* by denigrating and belittling the enemy, conveying a will to fight, and articulating a new future for Ukraine as a sovereign European country.

Resistance

At the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, several Russian pundits and analysts claimed that Russia would take control of Kyiv within three days by encircling Ukrainian forces and making them surrender. But Kyiv did not fall. President Zelensky asserted on the first day of the invasion, "We will be defending our country, because our weapon is truth, and our truth is that this is our land, our country, our children."⁸ Since then, the first major European war after WWII has not only been fought in the trench lines, but also with humor. Cartoons, and memes, sad and humorous, circulated via social media every day. Various memes and cartoons reveal resistance to Russia's invasion by refusing to comply with the occupants' requirements, celebrating victories, reporting subversive actions, expressing resilience and invincibility, and reclaiming the normality of every day threatened by air raids or nuclear attacks. Armed with humor, many people fight against the folly and absurdity of war, terror, and death, and the right to live in a sovereign state without the threat of annihilation.

The Russian warship

The first widely known memes and cartoons emerged right after the incident on Snake Island (Figure 1). In Ukraine, billboards with the words "Russian warship, go fuck yourself" were erected in



Figure 1. A magnet “Russian warship go fuck yourself.” Photo by Neringa Klumbytė.

different cities. These words were used in various other memes and cartoons to celebrate Ukrainian victories. After the flagship of the Russian fleet, the warship “Moskva” (“Moscow”), approached Snake Island on February 24th, it was hit by a missile from Ukraine and sunk on April 14, 2022. Ukrainian artist Nikita Titov drew a red Kremlin in a form of a warship drowning in blood (Figure 2), adding the famous words “Russian warship, go fuck yourself.” People joked on social media that “Moskva” was promoted to submarine. One meme portrayed Putin yelling: “That’s not



Figure 2. The billboard with Nikita Titov's cartoon. "Russian warship, go fuck yourself".

sinking, that's a special underwater operation," referring to Putin's insistence at the beginning of the war that it was just a "special military operation." Ukrainians produced a drawing "The five stages of grief in Russia." First Denial: "The cruiser Moskva didn't sink." Second: Anger, "The cruiser is on fire after the detonation of ammunition." Third, Bargaining: "The cruiser is all right, we've [evacuated] her." Fourth, Depression: "The cruiser continues to be on fire." Fifth, Acceptance: "The cruiser sank."

Trying to downplay the significance of the losses, Russian propaganda had, in some cases, attributed the explosions in their ammunition depots to detonations due to smoking and dropping a cigarette butt.⁹ When the warship "Moskva" was on fire, jokes circulated that the explosion happened because somebody was smoking a cigarette on a ship. Cigarette smoking became another common theme in many other memes. Humor activists pointed out that if this "Moskva" burned down, the other, that is, the city of Moscow, would burn down, too. They joked that cigarettes are dangerous to Russian national security. When the vital Kerch Strait Bridge, which links the Crimean Peninsula to Russia, otherwise known as the Crimean Bridge, exploded, an image of a smoking and laughing Daenerys Targaryen, associated with burning in "The Game of Thrones," in the background of the military objects on fire, populated social media (Figure 3).¹⁰

After the incident on Snake Island, the Ukrainian Postal Service commemorated the phrase "Russian warship, go fuck yourself" by issuing its first war-themed postage stamp (Figure 1). After the "Moskva" sank, it issued a new set of themed stamps, but without a warship this time. This time



Figure 3. Caption in Russian in some versions of the meme: “We had such a good smoke. So heavenly, homey.”

they added the label “Done” in English. Events like an international exhibition of cartoons in Odesa also carried the name “Russian military ship go fuck yourself.” This phrase became a theme for T-shirts and tattoos. It even provoked Russia’s Ministry of Defense to respond with a meme portraying a Russian warship launching a missile and the words “Never make Russian military warship angry.” But it did not stop the proliferation of Ukrainian warship memes. The phrase “Russian warship, go fuck yourself” became widely known outside Ukraine among the countries supportive of Ukraine. Already, at the beginning of the war, Russian warship symbolism institutionalized obscene words to communicate about the war.

The Russian warship stands for violation of Ukraine’s sovereignty and the phrase “Russian warship, go fuck yourself” encapsulates resistance. Meme and cartoon humor manifest dedication to victory and sovereignty, reiterated in the image of burning the city of Moscow. The Russian warship was a key symbol throughout 2022, which summed up and expressed in an emotionally powerful way what the first war encounters meant to people.¹¹ Civic activism materialized in the reappropriation and recirculation of the Russian warship images by the people, government officials, artists, and post office employees. Its global recirculation at the beginning of the war illustrated its engagement with global audiences.

Tractors

Another widely popular joke was of farmers stealing tanks, their key symbolic status reiterated in recurrence in various memes and cartoons. At the beginning of the war, footage of Russian tanks and military vehicles being towed away by Ukrainian farmers became a defining image of civic activism. Russian sources claimed that Ukrainians stole a tank in Lyubymivka in the Kherson region

on February 25th.¹² According to Voice of America Ukraine, the image became popularized when, on March 1 in Slatyne, a northeastern town of 6,000, just 13 kilometers from Russia, Viktor Kychuk and his friends towed a Soviet T-80.¹³ Different videos of Ukrainian farmers towing tanks of Russian military equipment emerged between February 25th and March 1st.¹⁴ Some of the videos might have recorded tractors towing the Russian military vehicles that were broken down, abandoned, or ran out of fuel. But, in jokes it was theft. The farmers in Ukraine have the fifth-largest army in Europe, one meme claimed. In another meme Russia's military convoy was portrayed with tanks and military trucks on a highway, while the Ukrainian military convoy had tractors (Figure 4).¹⁵ Humor activists portrayed Putin reading a book about tractors with the caption "Studying the Enemy" (in Ukrainian "Вівчення ворога").

One early version of a tractor towing a tank emerged in a video clip of a cheerful popular educational children's song called "The Blue Tractor," altered to tow a Russian tank marked "Z."¹⁶ In another reiteration of this theme, we see a photoshopped box of a Lego set with a tractor towing a tank called "Free Russian tank" and "not available in Russia." Memes portrayed tanks towing jets in the sky or ships in the water. Reuters published a coverage claiming that some people were duped that a Ukrainian farmer stole a Soyuz spacecraft¹⁷ after the Twitter handle "Sputnik_Not", a play on



Figure 4. Russian vs. Ukrainian military convoy.

the name of a Russian state-owned news agency, published an image with the caption: “BREAKING: Ukrainian farmer steals Soyuz rocket” (Figure 5).¹⁸ When Ukrainians learned that Russian soldiers were reselling stolen things from Ukrainian homes at a market in Belarus, a meme emerged depicting a yard sale where Ukrainian farmers were selling stolen Russian tanks and other equipment (Figure 6).¹⁹ Like a Russian warship, a tractor towing a tank was also commercialized and appeared on T-shirts, cups, magnets, pins, and stickers. A tractor with a Ukrainian flag towing a



Figure 5. A Ukrainian tractor steals a Soyuz rocket.

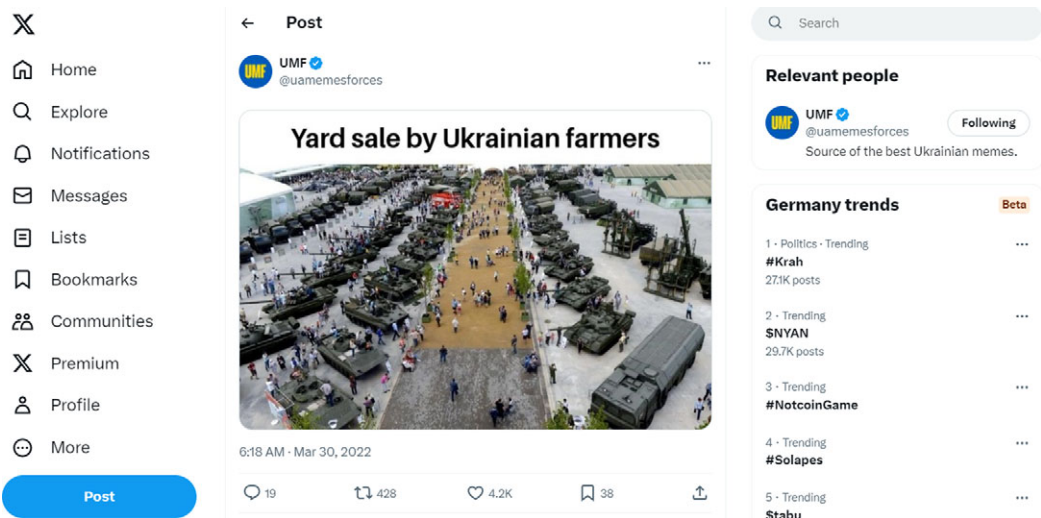


Figure 6. A Ukrainian farmer’s yard sale.

tank with a Russian “Z” marking with a bent gun barrel became the second war-themed stamp issued by the Ukrainian Postal Service (Bilaniuk 2024). In the selection of the second war-themed stamp design organized by the Postal Service, 834,000 people cast votes online (Bilaniuk 2024). By becoming commercialized jokes about tractors towing tanks, their circulation in the public sphere continued outside the virtual sphere. Moreover, sales of items were used to fund Ukrainian charities and the Ukrainian military.²⁰

The engagement of farmers emphasized the resistance of ordinary people and non-combat forms of activism. While not everybody could relate to a soldier or a president, a farmer in a small town defending its territory from intruders was a relatable figure. A tractor towing Russian military equipment narrated violations of everyday life and its peaceful restoration by confronting the enemy via stealing. Stealing by tractors and everyday resistance communicated forms of civic activism and mobilized people for action. As Sherry Ortner (1973, 1340) mentions in the case of key symbols in different cultures, key symbols “provide for its members ‘orientations,’ i.e., cognitive and affective categories; and ‘strategies,’ i.e., programs for orderly social action in relation to culturally defined goals.”

Sunflowers

Like memes and cartoons with tractors, images with sunflowers, another key symbol, also invoked peaceful resistance at the beginning of the war. The national flower of Ukraine, the sunflower symbolizes Ukraine’s independence. The origin of this image is related to a video with a woman who, after encountering armed Russian soldiers in her city, tells them to put some sunflower seeds in their pockets, “so sunflowers grow when you die” on Ukraine’s soil. “You are occupiers, you are fascists,” she tells them.²¹ In Yuri Zhuravel’s cartoon, “I told you, not to..., but into Ukraine!” a hand from the sky is pouring sunflower seeds into soldiers’ pockets as they die on Ukrainian land (Figure 7). Sunflower fields in memes or cartoons signified Russian soldiers’ death fields. An image



Figure 7. Yuri Zhuravel’s cartoon “I told you, not to..., but into Ukraine!” Courtesy Yuriy Zhuravel.

of a sunflower had been affixed to profile images on social media and was used in antiwar protests in Europe. Sunflowers were planted across from the Russian Embassy in Washington, D.C. An image of a sunflower was seen on the sleeve and face mask of First Lady Jill Biden.²² American cartoonist Jeff Koterba, on February 24, drew Putin in a tank aiming at a sunflower with the word “freedom.”²³ The symbolism of the sunflower indicated resistance; reflected and communicated civic activism in the virtual and non-virtual public sphere; as well as engaged people to act in the name of Ukraine’s sovereignty.

Everyday life memes

Many cartoons and memes on resistance communicated the resilience and invincibility of Ukrainians. Memes about everyday life were understandable, primarily to Ukrainians, and circulated in the informational space of Ukraine. They responded to everyday challenges regarding air raids, bomb shelters, food shortages, nuclear threats and blackouts. After the October 8th explosion of the Crimean Bridge, Russia retaliated with consistent bombing of critical infrastructure in Ukraine, with millions of people losing power. They caused massive blackouts and power cuts. The air raids continued in the coming months and millions of people lived without power on some days through the end of the year.²⁴ While power was usually quickly restored, damages had been incurred by repeated shelling. A journalist from Kyiv Veronika Melkozerova claimed in *The Atlantic*: “As Zelensky said, if we must choose between having electricity and living free of Russian domination, we will pick the latter.”²⁵ She referred to Zelensky’s famous Telegram post “Without you,” addressed to Russia in response to Russia’s bombing of energy infrastructure and cutting off power in September:

Without gas or without you? Without you.
 Without light or without you? Without you.
 Without water or without you? Without you.
 Without food or without you? Without you.
 Cold, hunger, darkness and thirst are not as terrible and deadly for us as your friendship and brotherhood.
 But history will put everything in its place.
 And we will be with gas, light, water and food ... and without you!²⁶

While the bombing of infrastructure was intended to break Ukrainians, meme creators responded picturing rising hatred rather than submission.

Russian missiles caused devastation, death, and suffering. Laughing at missile strikes and life in cold and darkness was also a way to overcome despair and preserve one’s dignity and morale. According to Veronika Melkozerova “The only weapon we have, amid regular power cuts, rising prices, and diminishing resources, is our endurance.”²⁷ Some jokes mentioned that Ukrainians have power, but not electricity. Civic activists in the virtual public sphere claimed that it is not true that there is no light in Ukraine, there is no electricity. There is no light in Russia. The character of another meme was torn between the realization of his needs (to charge the phone, cook a meal, wash the dishes, and turn on the washing machine) when the light was finally turned on. A lot of memes reflected on the difficulties of living without electricity, water, and heating, as well as on uncertainty due to the unpredictability of when the next blackout will take place. A meme about playing bingo during a blackout surfaced online. During this game, you have to mark what you have lost: electricity, water, internet, or heating.²⁸

Civic activism in the name of Ukraine’s sovereignty was integral to resistance themes. From the memes with the Russian warship and blooming sunflowers to everyday resistance by “stealing” tractors or refusing to be broken and playing bingo, Ukrainians communicated their desire to live in a sovereign country free from Russia, and expressed a deep commitment to preserving their everyday life and dignity.

Solidarity

The new forms of solidarity that emerged during the 2013–2014 protests, known as Euromaidan or Maidan, became even more prominent after Russia’s full-scale invasion (see Bilaniuk 2024, Channell-Justice 2024, Otrishchenko 2024, Pavlenko 2024). In 2022, Ukrainian citizens mobilized by hand-making camouflage nets and Molotov cocktails or by participating in various fundraising activities. Unlike during the Maidan when citizens were critical of the state, they now share solidarity with the state (Channell-Justice 2024). Valentyna Pavlenko (2024) also noted that national consolidation is reflected in the convergence of the political positions of ordinary Ukrainians and state authorities and that the war increased trust in various government institutions. Various sociological surveys confirm new forms of solidarity: in 2021, 55 percent of respondents believed that Ukrainians and Russians were different peoples, by March 2022 it was 77 percent, and in April 2022, it was 91 percent (Cyduh 2022). These numbers exhibit solidarity against Putin’s invasion rhetoric of Ukrainians and Russians as one people (Putin 2021). This solidarity is expressed in poems, songs, sayings, and slogans on billboards (Pavlenko 2024). At the entrance to Kharkiv on a billboard the words of the invincibility of the city meet people: “I am proud! I am unbreakable! I will surprise the world! Your Kharkiv” (see Pavlenko 2024, 58). The memes and cartoons discussed below also manifest the solidarity of people, businesses, and the government, as well as local and global audiences by cocreating or sharing humor, laughing together at the enemy, and engaging in virtual as well as non-virtual public spheres.²⁹

The Crimean Bridge

Grassroot civic activism overlapped with government, public sector, and business initiatives of humor propaganda and engagement, and manifested solidarities intersecting different individuals, various communities, and institutions.³⁰ In some cases, government officials reposted popular jokes or memes on their official social media. Before the war, on December 7, 2021, Ukraine’s official Twitter account @Ukraine posted a humorous image depicting four types of headaches: migraine, hypertension, stress, and, the worst, living next to Russia (Figure 8).³¹ The tweet gained close to 700K likes and circulated widely in Ukraine and abroad. On February 24th @Ukraine tweeted a cartoon showing Adolf Hitler grandfatherly touching childlike Putin. The tweet reached nearly 1.8 million likes and 292.5K retweets (see Budnitsky 2023). The Ukrainian Defense Ministry has been using memes to thank allies for weapons as well as ridicule the military prowess of the Russian Army.³²

Crimea has been central to understanding Russia’s war on Ukraine. In Zelensky’s speech of August 23, 2022, at the opening of the Second Crimea Platform Summit, he repeated Nariman Celâl’s (the deputy chairman of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar people) words that “everything started with Crimea and will end with it.”³³ After the explosion of the Kerch Strait or Crimean Bridge on October 8th early in the morning, Oleksiy Danilov, head of the Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council, posted a meme with the explosion and words “Good morning, Ukraine!” His other post of the destruction and burning of the train on a bridge was posted next to a video of Marilyn Monroe singing, “Happy Birthday, Mr. President,” alluding to Putin’s birthday a day earlier.³⁴ The official Telegram channel of the Security Service of Ukraine also posted a meme with a destroyed Crimean bridge. It had a caption with paraphrased words by Taras Shevchenko, a famous Ukrainian poet who wrote against Russia’s imperialism in the 19th century: “It’s dawn, the bridge is burning beautifully, a nightingale meets the SSU [Security Service of Ukraine] in Crimea” (Figure 9).³⁵ Ukraine’s national rail service posted a photo on Twitter of the Crimean Bridge’s rail line on fire and tweeted: “No smoking onboard the trains!”, adding a winking emoji.³⁶ As mentioned above, it referenced the Russian propaganda that attributed explosions in Russian ammunition depots to detonation due to smoking and dropping a cigarette butt. The Ukrainian bank, Monobank, offered a new image with the destroyed Crimean bridge

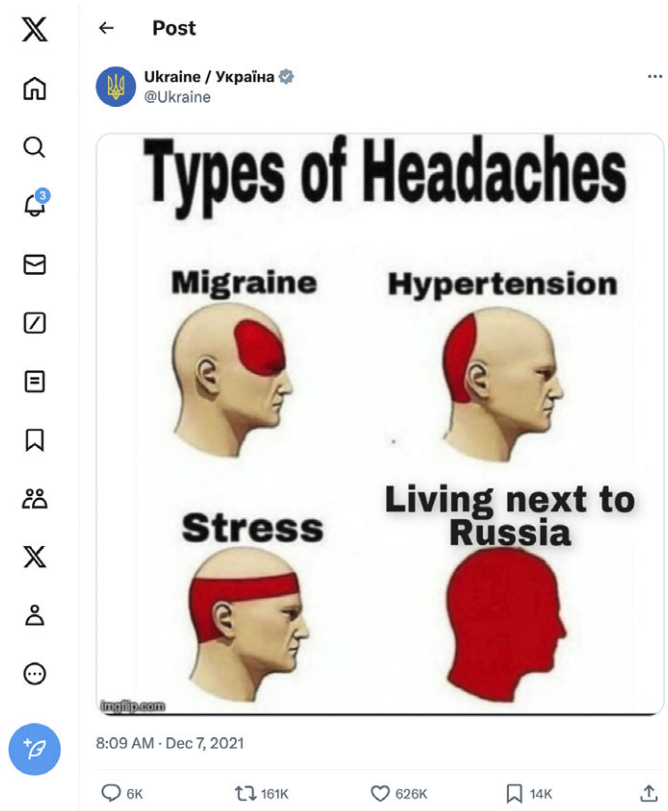


Figure 8. A meme posted on Ukraine's official Twitter account published before the war on December 7, 2021. It circulated widely after Russia launched the full-scale invasion.

and the burning train for their virtual mobile bank cards. By the afternoon, people downloaded it more than 300,000 times.³⁷

Companies such as the postal services Nova Poshta and Ukrposhta, mobile operator Kyivstar, e-commerce platform Rozetka, and electricity supplier Yasno also engaged in civic activism by creating and circulating memes.³⁸ They even competed over who would create the funniest memes on the same topic. When explosions took place in a military airport in Crimea, Ukrainian companies joked about resuming operations in Crimea once it was liberated by posting photo-shopped photos of a castle near the city of Yalta with their logos.³⁹ The popular Ukrainian restaurant chain Puzata Khata published a meme with its logo on the Red Square in Moscow.⁴⁰ Ukraine's postal service created a postal stamp — a scene from the film "Titanic" with a couple standing on the end of the bridge while the bridge collapses in the background.

At the beginning of the war Russian media called explosions caused by Ukraine's attacks on Russian military infrastructure in their territory and occupied regions as *khlopki*, "pops," or "claps" rather than "explosions" to downplay their significance. In Russian, the word has a homograph, *khlopok* (Russian *хлопок*), which means "cotton." In Ukrainian Russian *khlopok* is translated as *бавовна* or "cotton." Ukrainians started mockingly calling explosions in Russia and the occupied territories "Bavovna." After the word "cotton" gained popularity, the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense came up with a new mythical creature that burns Russia's military bases — *Bavovnyatko*. According to their X account post on August 27, 2022, *Bavovnyatko* "is a ghost animal. Fluffy and restless. At night, *Bavovnyatko* quietly comes to the occupiers' bases, depots airfields, oil refineries and other places full of flammable items and starts playing with fire

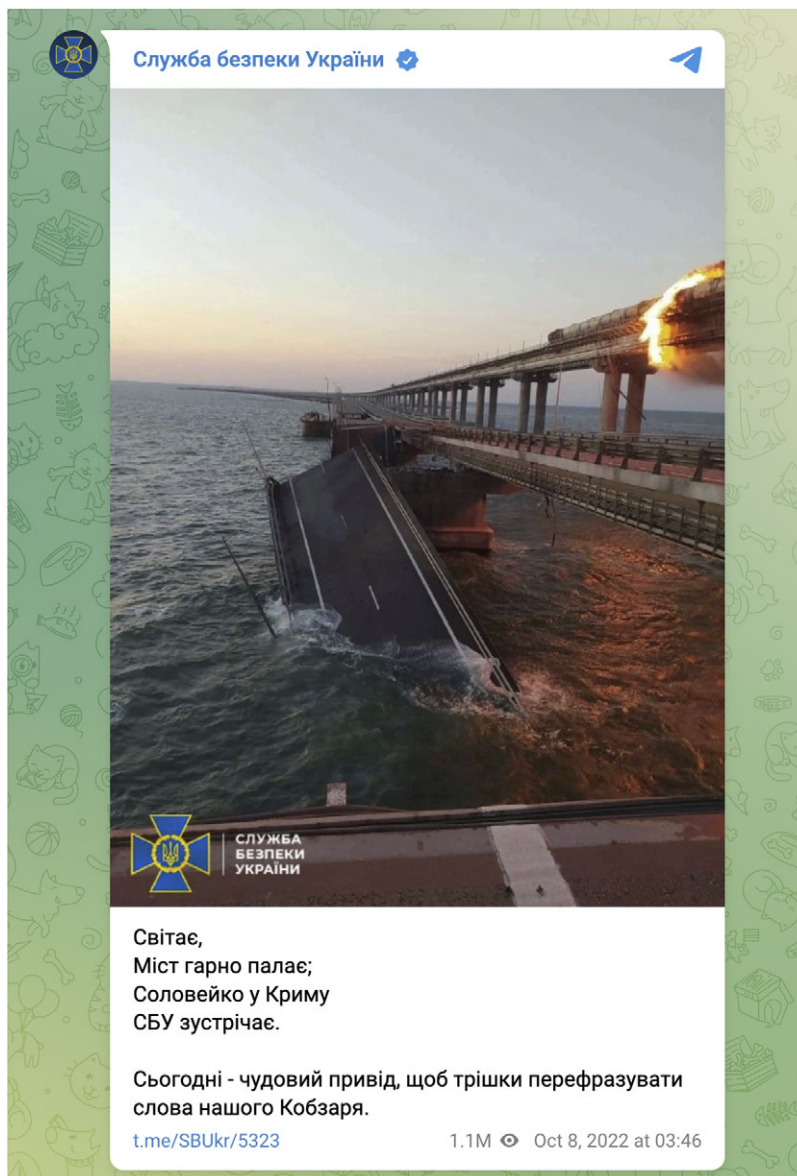


Figure 9. The official Telegram channel of the Security Service of Ukraine’s meme after the collapse of the Crimean Bridge with paraphrased words by Taras Shevchenko: “It’s dawn, the bridge is burning beautifully, a nightingale meets the SSU in Crimea.”

there.”⁴¹ (Figure 10). On day 227 of the war, a meme with cotton balls rising above the Crimean Bridge were posted @SlavaUk30722777. The caption of the meme noted: “it seems like a Cotton Season has arrived in Crimea” (Figure 11).⁴² Another meme showed the famous dog Patron (“ammo”) having a big sneeze, after which the explosion of the bridge followed.

Laada Bilaniuk argues that, as an inside joke, the Bavovna meme created a sense of solidarity among Ukrainians. Moreover, Ukrainian Bavovna humor shaped civic activism outside the virtual public sphere. In the summer of 2022, a rock group “100% Bavovna” was formed in Kyiv. They performed songs about the war. On August 26, the then UK Ambassador to Ukraine, Melinda



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Figure 10. Image from X, @DefenceU, the official page of the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine. August 27, 2022.

Simmons, on her Z account, posted a photo of a cotton flower on her table, captioned: “I have recently developed a fondness for this flower.”⁴³ The photo was liked 13,528 times and reposted 1,261 times. It illustrates how even inside jokes engaged broader communities and created solidarities. Simmons’ recognition was an example of global solidarities that had roots in the war humor of Bavovna.

The Orgy at Mount Shchekavitsa

On September 21, 2022, Putin announced a partial mobilization in Russia.⁴⁴ In his speech, he implied the possibility of using nuclear weapons. While people carried potassium iodine tablets in their purses in Kyiv, they also laughed at threats. After Putin’s speech, memes about an orgy on Mount Shchekavitsa in Kyiv in the event of an “end of the world” began to spread online. It was started by Ukrainian Natalia Piskova who posted on Twitter that a community in Kyiv, with a chat on Telegram, plan to gather on Shchekavytsia Hill to have an orgy in the event of a nuclear explosion. “So keep this in mind, just in case any of you have an unfulfilled sexual fantasy.”⁴⁵ The joke reached global audiences. Paul Massaro, a senior policy advisor for the US Helsinki Commission, tweeted about it using a famous quote from Ukrainian philosopher Hryhorii Skovoroda: “The world was chasing me, but I went to Shchekavytsa.”⁴⁶ Memes with a passionately kissing couple in the background of a nuclear mushroom populated the internet (Figure 12).⁴⁷ A young man,



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Figure 11. A “Cotton Season has arrived in Crimea.” Many memes portrayed explosions as cotton balls to make fun of Russian references to explosions as “clap” (*хлопок*) which also means “cotton” in Russian.

presumably one of the 15,000 who signed up for the orgy on Telegram, when asked about the orgy on Radio Free Europe, responded: “It’s an attempt to show that the more they try to scare us, the more we will transform it into something else.”⁴⁸ Similar groups popped up, including a group in Odessa that planned an orgy on Derybasivska Street.⁴⁹ Artist Oleksandr Grekhov drew Vincent Vega from “Pulp Fiction” (directed by Quentin Tarantino) naked with a coat in hand asking, “I made it to Shchekavytsia. But nobody is there.” The orgy idea led to civic activism in the public sphere: while people in Kyiv waited for an orgy, the Soloma Cats charity foundation organized a first aid training on Mount Shchekavytsia for Kyiv residents. They have trained more than 12,000 people, according to news media sources.⁵⁰ This civic activism transposed individual sentiments to the public sphere and the larger community, voicing the citizens’ position that they cannot be intimidated, manifesting their solidarity in the face of a nuclear threat.

Co-production and circulation of Ukrainian cartoons and memes show the solidarity of various strata of society, as well as NGOs, the public sector, businesses, and government institutions engaged in humor activism. Laada Bilaniuk (2024, 162) argues that memes unify Ukrainians as a nation and can be seen as an “immune response to an invading entity.” Bilaniuk uses biological analogy and applies a classical definition of “meme,” coined by Richard Dawkins (1976) as a unit of cultural information transmitted from one person to another, analogous to genes carrying biological information. She views memes as “antibodies or other forms of immune response, in that they play an active role in countering invading ideas and destructive cultural logics” (Bilaniuk 2024, 144). She argues that the metaphor presumes that Ukraine is an entity, like an organism mobilizing, to



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← Post



Canadian Ukrainian Fella 🇺🇦🇨🇦
@bilyk_alex

Have you guys already heard about Shchekavytsia Hill Orgy in Kyiv? There is a Telegram-channel where Kyivites register for the end-of-the-world orgy in case of a nuclear strike on the Shchekavytsia Hill, the place where, according to legends, Kyiv was founded.



8:46 PM · Sep 24, 2022

18 Reposts 5 Quotes 149 Likes 4 Bookmarks

Figure 12. At the orgy on Shchekavytsia Hill, Kyiv.

defend against the Russian threat (Bilaniuk 2024, 144). In her perspective, memes contribute to the construction and reinforcement of that national entity (Bilaniuk 2024, 144). Similarly, Bridget Goodman (2024, 182) concludes that humorous memes and artifacts “testify to the commitment of Ukrainian citizens to their own state’s sovereignty and their willingness to sacrifice and band together as a society to ensure its invincibility.”

Vigilance

The “culture of vigilance,” according to Kateryna Yermieieva (2022), is interconnected with the mobilization of society; it has defined the period of the Great Terror and WWII and currently defines the war in Ukraine. During the Stalinist time, vigilance as a form of continual suspicion defined a true communist (2022, 32). Vigilance, Yermieieva reminds us, included “activists’ voluntary supervision of Soviet bureaucrats, exposing violations and abuses of power carried out by officials as well as internal enemies” (2022, 32). Laughter was a weapon to eradicate shortcomings and fight internal and external enemies (see Єремєєва 2018, Ety 2019, Klumbytè 2022). During the Stalinist era, a kind of watchful red humor that chastised bourgeois elements, bribe-takers, saboteurs, and enemies of the people defined Soviet satire (see Yermieieva 2022). After Russia’s full-scale invasion, vigilance became integral to Ukrainian civic activism. Everybody had to “help Ukraine in their place”: that is, serve in the armed forces of Ukraine, donate, volunteer, or repost a meme (Yermieieva 2022, 38). At the beginning of the war, there were calls to take photos of the enemy equipment and to be aware of enemy saboteurs (Yermieieva 2022, 38). Citizens were urged to report separatist statements, unsafe telegram channels, and be cautious about fake news (Yermieieva 2022, 38). In memes and cartoons, vigilance was manifest in countering Russian propaganda and linguistic jokes.

Counterpropaganda

Some memes served to counter Russia's propaganda and acted as counterpropaganda; in these cases, counterpropaganda and civic activism overlapped. One of the key themes in humor between February and April was fake news about Ukraine on Russian television. Ukrainian journalists, bloggers, and military observers had been following closely Russian propaganda. Ukrainian informational platforms addressed Ukrainians and its Western partners and called for vigilance regarding fakes and disinformation. According to *kanaldom.tv*, *ukrinform.ua*, and the Ukrainian news sites, "with fake news, Russia either accuses Ukraine of its own crimes or reveals its intentions."⁵¹ Humor about fake news on Russian TV revealed the absurdity of Russian propaganda. One of the most striking media occasions for humor about Russian fake news was the Russian Ministry of Defense "news" on March 6, 2022, about "secret bio laboratories on Ukrainian territory where biological military weapons were being developed."⁵² The project was allegedly sponsored by the United States. It was claimed that the Americans planned to use birds, reptiles, and bats to spread dangerous diseases (among them the plague and anthrax) among ethnic Russians in Russia. Ukrainians responded by creating memes and cartoons with militant Ukrainian birds and bats, some of them reading methodological literature on how to effectively shit on Russians.⁵³

In some cases, to emphasize the absurdity of the fake news, a literal reading of a hoax was used in a meme. At the end of October 2022, a rumor began to spread in Russia that Ukraine was preparing a "dirty nuclear bomb." Putin, during the question-and-answer session at the Valdai Discussion Club, argued that he was aware of the Ukrainian government's intentions to produce a "dirty bomb," and asked Sergei Shoigu, the minister of defense, to warn colleagues from abroad.⁵⁴ In response, Ukrainian memes appeared, in which a cleaning lady "grandma Galya" washes a dirty bomb to make it clean: "Look at that, they think the bomb is dirty!"⁵⁵ (Figure 13).

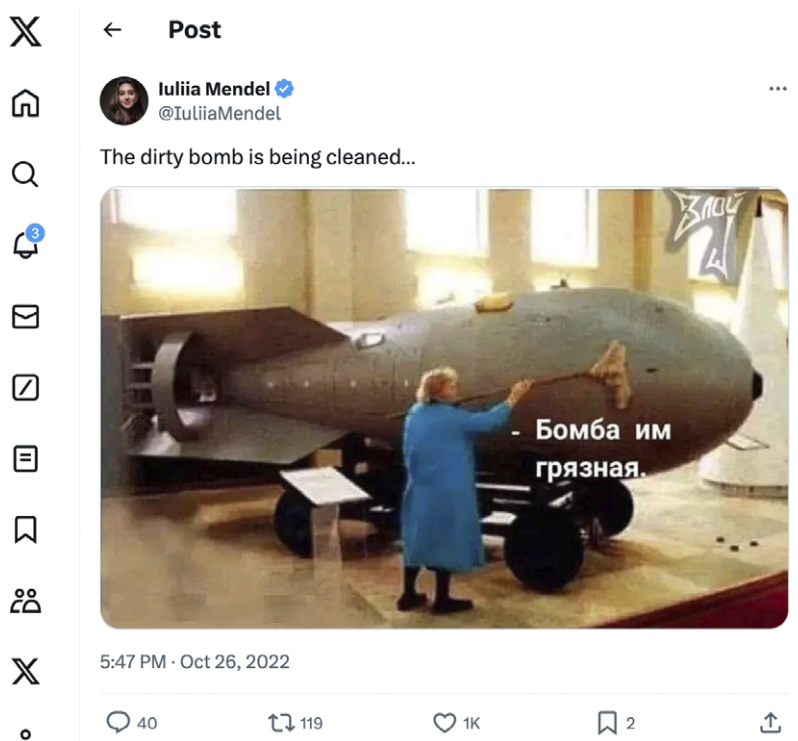


Figure 13. The caption read, "They think the bomb is dirty!"

At the beginning of the war, Russia passed a law that criminalized any public opposition or critical reporting of the war against Ukraine by prohibiting the use of the word “war.” The war in Ukraine had to be called a “special military operation.” Offenders of the law could face up to 15 years in prison. A meme with Leo Tolstoy’s 1867 novel *War and Peace* was created with a renamed title — “Special Military Operation and Peace.” This meme circulated globally as well. Ukrainian memes also confronted their labeling as “Nazis” by attributing fascism to the Russian Army, calling Russian troops “rashisti” (a new word popularized after the war started and used in Ukraine, it combines Russian+ fascist), and creating jokes about Hitler, Stalin, and Putin. When a video of Oleksiy Arestovych, the former advisor to the president of Ukraine, allegedly having sex with a man was posted online, a meme was created saying that it does not matter with whom he has sex, as long as it is not with a “Moskal” (derogatory “Russian”). This was a variation on the traditional theme of Ukrainian jokes that have been based on the statement “as long as it’s not a Moskal.”

Linguistic jokes

The war brought the language issue to the forefront. Russia’s authorities and ideologists argued about Russians and Ukrainians being “one people,” Ukrainian statehood as an artificial creation, and the Ukrainian language as a nonentity (see Putin 2021). Moreover, the Russian language became associated with the invasion and genocidal war, as well as propaganda claims that Russians had to protect Russian speakers in Ukraine. In response to Russia’s official positions towards Ukrainian nationality and language, Ukrainians engaged language vigilance in their humor activism. The majority of memes in Ukrainian social networks were created in Ukrainian. Some of them illustrated that mutual unintelligibility between Russians and Ukrainians goes beyond the language, as in a meme with a “Disaster Girl” and a burning “Z” truck behind her. The “Disaster girl” says viciously: “They tell me, Mashen’ka, we came to liberate you.” “I am not mashenka, I am Marichka, you fucker (Ukrainian *блять*).”⁵⁶ The joke draws on different usage of diminutive forms for Maria in Russian and Ukrainian: Mashen’ka in Russian vs. Marichka in Ukrainian. The image of this same “Disaster girl,” with a vile smirk and a knowing smile, appears in other memes with burning Russian army equipment, suggesting she was responsible for the fires. As in globally circulating memes with the disaster girl, it shows a smiling girl superimposed onto images of accidents and natural disasters to imply that she caused them.

In linguistic Ukrainian humor, the image of a Russian-speaking person becomes an object of ridicule because he or she either does not understand the Ukrainian language or uses it incorrectly. These jokes communicated Ukrainians’ self-assertion in the context of Russian claims that the Ukrainian language does not exist. The use of the preposition “on” instead of “in” in jokes when referring to Russia, spelling the word “russia” with a lowercase letter (approved by the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine), and the statement that the Russian language is Ukrainian, only with errors, are part of linguistic jokes.

Humor about language is a tool for consolidating Ukrainian identity and invoking unity and solidarity among Ukrainians. If an individual does not understand a linguistic joke, he or she can be identified as a stranger or an enemy. The Ukrainian word “паляниця” (*palyanytsia*, traditional Ukrainian bread) became a kind of test for citizenship as a non-native speaker is not capable of pronouncing the word correctly because of the Russian and Ukrainian phonological differences (Yeremieieva 2022, 40).⁵⁷ Therefore, a vigilant Ukrainian can ask a suspect to pronounce this word (or equally complex *zaliznytsya* (railroad), *polunytsia* (strawberry), or *nisenitnytsya* (nonsense)) (Figure 14). Humor about *palyanytsia* strengthens the image of the Ukrainian language as a tool of security and survival during the war.

Vigilance is part of civic activism emergent in jokes that counter fake news and disinformation. Linguistic jokes illustrate that language is a site of unity, identity, and recognition of insiders and outsiders. A vigilant citizen is aware of linguistic differences between the Ukrainian and Russian languages and can use language to identify the enemy. To engage in civic activism is not only to



Figure 14. A meme with Gru, a protagonist from the American animated film “Despicable me,” on the door to a souvenir store in Lviv. “Say *palyanitsia* (in Ukrainian *палляниця*).” March 25, 2022. Photo by Kateryna Yermieieva.

resist the invasion and express solidarity with others but also to be vigilant in the service of protecting Ukraine’s sovereignty.

Commitment to Victory

Sigmund Freud (1940 [1905], 112) argued in *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten* that “By showing the enemy as small, low, despicable, comic, ridiculous, we give ourselves the enjoyment of a victory.” As during WWI and WWII, in Ukrainian war humor, enemies are portrayed as weak,

stupid, and laughable (see, for example, Еремеева 2018, Norris 2013, 2019, Wolf 2017). In memes and cartoons, they are portrayed as murderers, drunks, thieves, and poor and indecent people.⁵⁸ They have low morals. Some memes and cartoons also exhibit hatred towards enemies, a unifying emotion against the dehumanized others.

Enemies

Russian soldiers were commonly portrayed as indoctrinated, zombified, and turned into *rashisti*. This discourse intermittently emerged in the state media, government official speeches, and announcements. In March, for example, the Ukrainian defense minister in an official speech claimed that his troops “would stand firm against Mordor’s assaults.”⁵⁹ On April 8, the governor of the Sumy province announced that the area was “free of Orcs.”⁶⁰ The next day, on television, the mayor of Makariv stated that the bodies of 132 civilians were “killed by the Russian Orcs.”⁶¹ These Russian Orcs or zombies were defeated by Ukrainian soldiers who are superheroes, invincible fighters, or civilians defending Ukraine outside the frontlines. In one of the memes, which might be not of Ukrainian origin, a monster is saying in English, “We may be savages but at least we ain’t Russians.” Another meme suggested to “stop calling Orcs Russians, it’s offensive towards Orcs.”⁶²

Starting with warship and tractor cartoons and memes, already at the beginning of the war, humor activism emphasized various themes about the incompetence of the Russian Army. One meme showed a captain from the film “WALL-E” captioned “Putin to Russian Soldiers in Ukraine: Welcome to week 3 of our two-day invasion.” (A reference to “WALL-E’s” captain’s words “welcome to Day 255,642 aboard the Axiom. ... the 700th anniversary of our five-year cruise.”) When Russian soldiers stole a raccoon from a zoo in Kherson before they withdrew from the city, internet users created memes “Save private raccoon,” a film by Kyrylo Budanov, Valerii Zaluzhnyi, and Volodymyr Zelensky (a reference to the film “Saving Private Ryan” in WWII by Steven Spielberg). Ukrainians joked that during the nine months of the war, the only strategically important object that was captured was a raccoon. Memes portrayed Russian soldiers with medals “For capturing raccoon.” Incompetent enemies were a common theme in WWI and WWII cartoons. During WWI, German cartoonists depicted American troops as tin soldiers, regiments of awkward billionaires, or cowboys riding on sea horses (Demm 1993, 185).

The poor performance of the Russian Army, due to its corruption, lack of motivation and preparedness, ill planning, and various failures was contrasted with the strength of the Ukrainian Army. Chornobayivka, a suburban region of Kherson, was one of the early motifs. Since February, Ukrainians attacked Russians who attempted to create a base at the Chornobayivka airfield, the place of the Kherson International Airport. They kept sending military equipment and troops while Ukrainians kept destroying them and the military warehouses multiple times. Counting how many times Russian forces were destroyed in Chornobayivka became a joke on its own (Figure 16). One Russian general was killed in Chornobayivka. Ukrainian attacks against the Russian army continued until November 5th when the Russians withdrew from Chornobayivka. Andriy Yermolenko’s drawing “Welcome to Chornobayivka,” with a skull in Ukrainian folklore themes, became a symbol of Russian destiny in Chornobayivka (Figure 15). Yuriy Zhuravel similarly reflected on the Russian Army’s cyclical losses (Figure 16). Artist Oleksiy Kustovsky drew a cartoon on Russian troop losses in Bakhmut referencing the public discourse on Russians as cannon fodder in the fight for Bakhmut at the end of 2022 (Figure 17).

Another place that became iconic because of the Russian Army’s incompetency was Chernobyl. The jokes about radioactive Russians referenced events in late February when the Russian Army seized the area of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster of 1986. They drove armored vehicles without radiation protection through a highly toxic zone disturbing soil with radioactive dust. Russian soldiers dug up trenches in the Red Forest, a forest known for the ginger-brown color of the pine

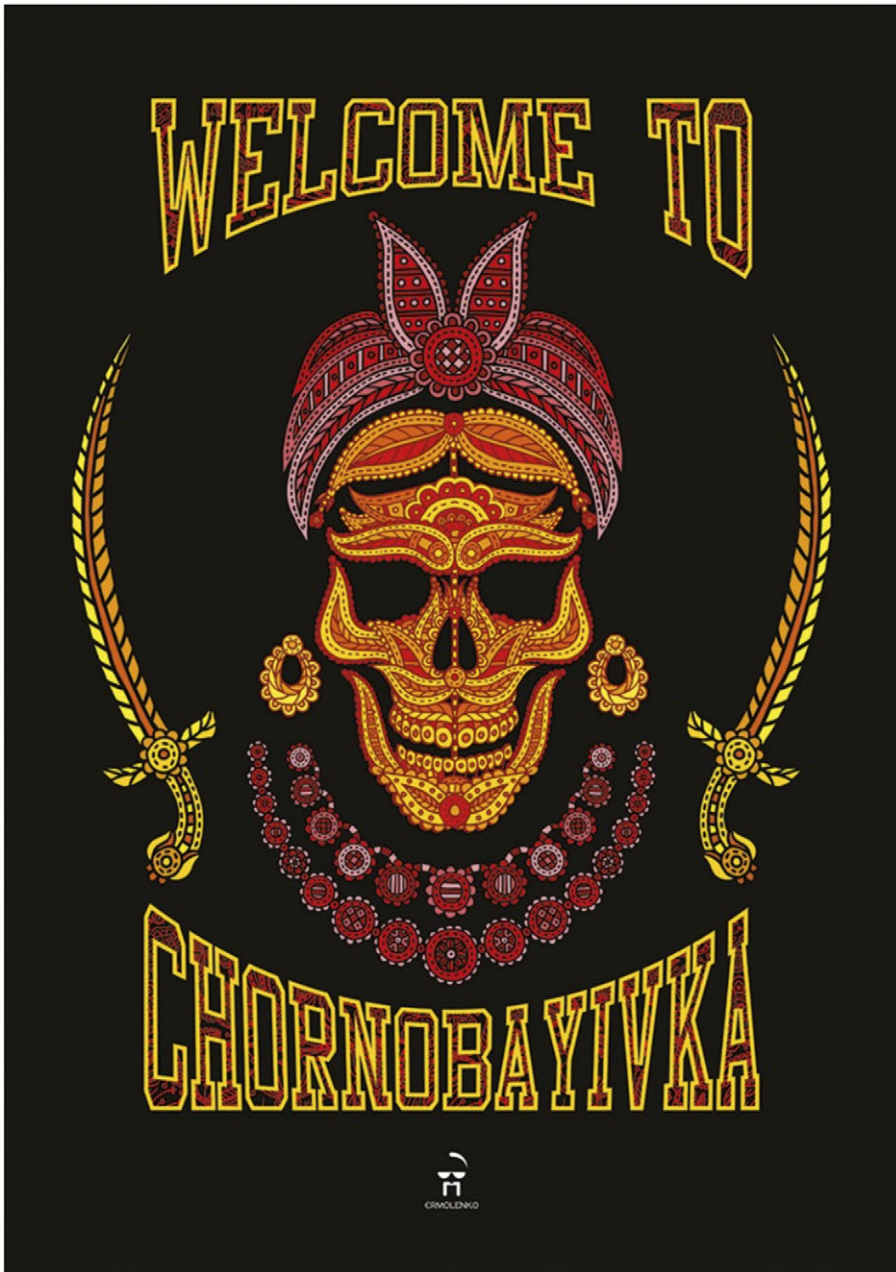


Figure 15. Andriy Yermolenko's drawing "Welcome to Chornobayivka." Courtesy Andriy Yermolenko.

trees dead after the absorption of high levels of ionizing radiation. One meme with a shining Russian soldier explained: "Russian Soldiers NEW radioactive camouflage makes it easier to spot them!" Jokes also referred to Chernobyl mutants: "if a Russian soldier has one hand, it means he is from Chornobayivka, if he has three hands, he is from Chernobyl."⁶³

When the mobilization of the Russian Army started in September, memes commented on its losses. A meme, "Model for mogilization of [the] population in Russia," the word "mogilization" is made from Russian могила ("mogila") or "grave" and "mobilization." Figure 18 portrays two



Figure 16. Yuriy Zhuravel's "Chornobayvka." Courtesy Yuriy Zhuravel.



Figure 17. Oleksiy Kustovsky's cartoon. Jan 5, 2023. Courtesy Oleksiy Kustovsky.

ways citizens are mobilized to fight and die in Ukraine. The first: you come when you receive a notice of being drafted, then you go to fight, and then you become a white Lada or a samovar (a traditional Russian tea maker that your family buys for compensation money after your death). If you refuse to fight, you go to prison and then you get recruited to a "Wagner" (an elite

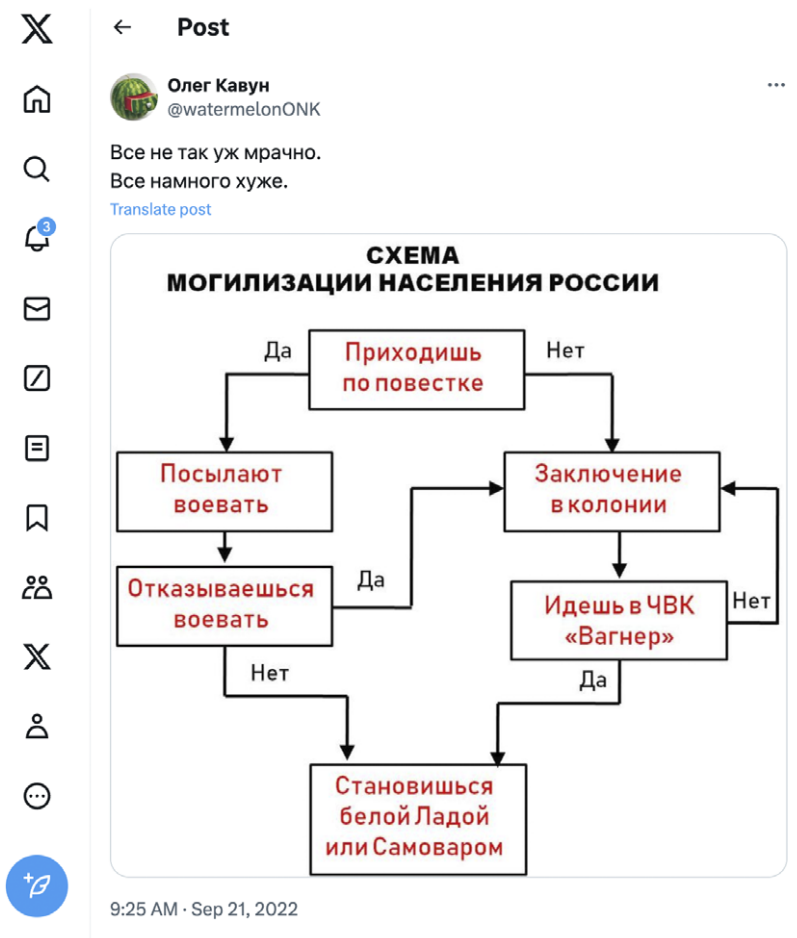


Figure 18. The model for mogilization (sic.) of population in Russia (“mogila” means “grave” in Russian).

mercenary Russian state-funded paramilitary group that recruited prisoners) unit, after that, you become a white Lada or a samovar.⁶⁴ The second: you do not come to the mobilization center when you get drafted, then you go to prison, then you get recruited to a “Wagner” unit, and next become a white Lada or a samovar. If you do not get recruited to a “Wagner” unit, you stay in prison; getting out of it is only by joining “Wagner.” The scheme shows that Russians have no option, they either die and their families buy white Ladas or samovars, or they go to prison.

A Russian state TV report about parents who bought a brand-new Lada from a state-run manufacturer with money received for the death of their son in Ukraine inspired a lot of memes. One meme invoked the famous Ilya Repin painting of Ivan the Terrible cradling his dying son whom he killed in anger. In the meme, though, a white Lada is standing next to the father and the killed son. Defense of Ukraine posted on its Twitter account an image of LADA with a note “Relatives of russian [sic.] soldiers killed in Ukraine often spend monetary compensation for their death on new cars. One major car manufacturer in russia [sic.] predicts a demand increase of 500,000 for Ladas, their flagship product, next year.”⁶⁵ The meme “Traditional Russian family” displayed a father with a glass of vodka, a mother with a Soviet Union flag and an axe in her hand, a daughter, and a white Lada as a “son.”⁶⁶

There are various other articulations of Russian soldiers' death. A common motif — a field of crosses, sometimes with soldiers' helmets marked “Z”, signifies the defeat of the Russian Army. Common folkloric themes also include three Russian soldiers stopping on a crossroad: if you go to the left, you will die; if you go to the right, you will become disabled; if you go forward, you will have to surrender. A soldier tells others: “I suggest going only forward!” (Cartoon by Serhy Fedko, *Perec*, 2022, No. 23, p. 14) (Figure 19). Humorous billboards offering Russian soldiers to surrender populated the public sphere. In Lviv, in March 2022, a poster offered “Russian occupiers [to] show a sign if you want to live! Show a trident (*trizub*)!” (Figure 20). A trident — colloquially, the *trizub* (in Ukrainian *тризуб*) — is Ukraine's coat of arms.

A common character in the memes has also been a captured Russian soldier, who looks silly rather than threatening (Figure 21a, 21b).⁶⁷ The poorly dressed soldier with a beany hat references the incompetence of the Russian Army. In a meme with Noah's ark, Noah exclaims “What the fuck is this!” (in Ukrainian “це ще що, блиат, раке”) when encountering this same tiny figure of the



Figure 19. Posted by *Perec*. (*Perec*, 2022, No. 23, p. 14). Courtesy Valery Chmiriov, editor-in-chief of *Perec*.



Figure 20. Lviv, March 25, 2022. Photo by Kateryna Yeremieieva.

Russian soldier in his vessel.⁶⁸ It is neither a human nor an animal, but looks human-like in the cartoon. It is an aberration that does not belong to the living things Noah had to save from the Flood.

Looting

Catherine Wanner (2024) notes that the loss of home and material objects is destructive to individuals' sense of self and the sustainability of communities. The destruction of everyday objects

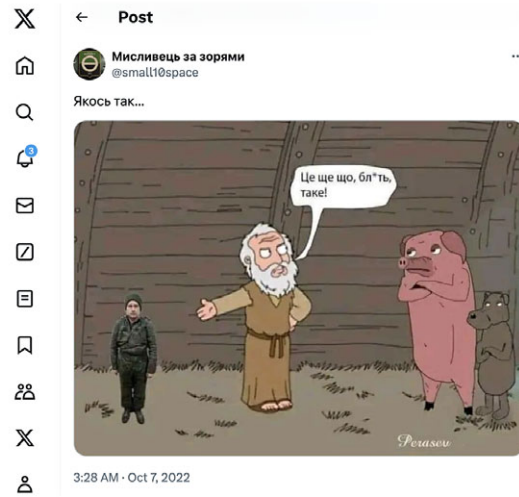


Figure 21 (a) Left, is a photo of a Russian POW who became a common meme character representing the Russian military. (b) Right, a meme with the Noah's ark "What the fuck is this!"

via looting is intrinsic to Russian state leaders' military strategy of the annihilation of the region. The cartoons and memes often focus on everyday life items, objects you can find in Ukrainian homes lost to the Russian Army looting. Thus, artists and civilians creating cartoons and memes speak about their own families', neighbors', and friends' experiences, engaging in civic activism to confront the looters with laughter. Dispossession results in mobilization against the Russian invasion (Wanner 2024). Thus, memes and cartoons about looting not only express indignation, they also mobilize audiences against the invasion in support of Ukraine's sovereignty.

According to multiple coverages of various sources, places that have been occupied by Russians have been marked by looting and destruction from the first days of the war. At the beginning of the war, the confirmation of widespread looting was preceded by a telephone audio, leaked by Ukrainian intelligence, which claimed to reveal what Russian soldiers discussed with their wives on what to steal while on assignment. The authenticity of the intercepts could not be confirmed, but the reports from liberated areas have lent them credibility.⁶⁹ Some villagers reported that "They took away all the clothes — literally everything, male and female coats, boots, shirts, jackets, even my dresses and lingerie,"⁷⁰ also tools, speakers, a table, a tent, and even a sofa.⁷¹ Russian soldiers were also taking kitchen appliances, TVs, and parts of cars. At the beginning of the war, they were sending packages via a Belarussian company. The memes reflected on it by suggesting how to capture a Russian soldier: set a trap with a golden ring, or a smartphone, or a washing machine, or a pile of clothing.⁷²

The washing machine became one of the most prominent looted items mentioned in the memes and cartoons. In one meme, referencing a reported finding of a washing machine in trenches, the images show a depressed and crying soldier under the caption "A Russian soldier after finding out that to connect a washing machine that he had stolen, it is necessary to have water supply and drainage."⁷³ In one cartoon, a Russian soldier stands on a washing machine with carpets, an old TV, shoes, a bucket, a pan, and a few tools with alcohol in his pockets and an automatic rifle (Figure 22).

Enemies are despicable and small, while Ukrainians retain their dignity and willingness to fight. Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelensky noted that the Russian acts were not merely opportunistic looting but, instead, part of a wider strategy to destroy the Ukrainian economy.⁷⁴ Cartoons and memes, however, do not speak about looted grain, agricultural machinery, or factory equipment, they



Figure 22. A monument for a Russian soldier. Oleksiy Kustovsky's cartoon. Courtesy Oleksiy Kustovsky.

primarily focus on home items. Widespread looting of individual homes, living in them and destroying them, or marking them up with feces was also a strategy to demoralize the population and destroy their everyday lives. In one cartoon by Yuriy Zhuravel, of April 5, 2022, a soldier is giving a teddy bear to his toddler, an older child already rides a stolen scooter, and his wife is decorated in a stolen coat and golden earrings. His backpack has a laptop and alcohol bottles. All of them happily enjoy their “gifts,” while soldiers’ hands and all the “gifts” have blood stains (Figure 23).

When Russians celebrated the May 9 Parade, humor activists portrayed parading tanks decorated with washing machines and other looted items; helicopters carrying washing machines; or even a toilet, a computer, and a smartphone.⁷⁵ These jokes get very dark when they report that Russian soldiers leave their dead soldiers behind to save space for looted goods on the trucks or wear Ukrainian soldiers’ underwear and socks they must have appropriated from captured or killed Ukrainian soldiers.⁷⁶

A defeated emperor

Among the major enemies is Putin, a small and ugly emperor. He appears as a skeleton, a rat, a pig, a vampire, a devil, a snake, a monkey, a child, a disfigured man, a prisoner, and a defeated emperor — grotesque and obscene with a bloody mouth or bathing in blood, burning in hell together with Hitler and Stalin, trying to shoot himself, hanged, or simply dead. In Oleksandr Kostenko’s cartoon Putin looks like an old lady in rags from the popular fairy tale “Tale of the Fisherman and the Fish.” He sits in front of a pig’s wooden trough in the background of a wooden shabby Kremlin (Perec, 2022, no. 7, p. 1). In the fairy tale, a greedy old woman is granted her wishes to live better and better by the golden fish, until she decides to become a tsarina and rule the seas with fish as her servants. Her last wish makes her lose everything and her great palace with a golden roof turns into a shabby little hut.



Figure 23. Yuriy Zhuravel's cartoon on looting, 4/5/ 2022. Courtesy Yuriy Zhuravel.

In Ukrainian memes, Russian leaders are portrayed as characters from fairy tales, while Ukrainian leaders as characters from popular action films or superhero movies.⁷⁷

Putin's self-assertion as a tough, strong, and masculine leader, celebrated in his propaganda through the years, is undermined in memes with Putin fishing shirtless with big breasts or in a video of him talking to France President Emmanuel Macron as his lover (while most of the world leaders shunned Putin over Russia's invasion, Macron talked many times with Putin). Alexander Lukashenko, the President of Belarus and a close ally of Putin, is portrayed as Putin's sexual partner, prostituting himself, sometimes dressed like a woman. Lukashenko is often portrayed as Putin's bootlicker, bed partner, a clown, or a peasant in rags.

Ukrainians did not forget to congratulate Putin on his 70th birthday on October 7, 2022. Rumors circulated that the explosion of the Crimean bridge was actually a present to Putin. In one cartoon, a wooden stake with a ribbon in Ukrainian flag colors is sent to "Volodia" to kill himself: "Volodia, happy birthday! May the wishes that your Ukrainians have for you come true!"⁷⁸ In another cartoon, we see Lenin's mausoleum and next to it an old-fashioned dog house with the label "Putin" (Figure 24).

Dehumanizing, grotesque, and dark characters of Russian soldiers and their "emperor" parallel WWII caricatures of the enemies. Stephen Norris notes that Boris Efimov, a Soviet caricaturist who published cartoons from 1918 to 1991, portrays European capitalists, Nazi thugs, American militarists, or colonialists with ugly physiognomy (Norris 2019). Efimov also juxtaposed the bright, clean, and forward-looking USSR with the awful, dark, decrepit, and bankrupt West (Norris 2019). According to Norris, Efimov sought to foster an emotional truth, one where he could help viewers gain political consciousness about the Bolshevik world (Norris 2019). Invoking hatred towards enemies was an intentional strategy in such cartoons. War humor often exhibits extremist jokes grounded in deniability (it was just a "joke") (see Lampland n.d.) or even a celebration of violence (see Ries 2023). As Georg Lukács, in his essay on satire in 1936, informed by his Marxist conception of class struggles in history, argued, satire animated by hate is an important vehicle of revolution



Figure 24. Oleh Hutsol's cartoon. Lenin-Putin Mausoleum, 2022. Courtesy Oleh Hutsol.

(Norberg 2018, 156). Many Ukrainian memes and cartoons illustrate that hatred of enemies is constitutive of civic activists' positionality. It has a mobilizing emotional force and encompasses Ukrainian moral strength. It also shapes solidarities against the invasion. The memes and cartoons analyzed in the case of Ukrainian humor activism are primarily a reactive and defensive mechanism reflective of indignation and hatred, which is a survival strategy in the context of destruction and loss. Hatred also conveys people's determination for victory and their commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty.

Thomas Szanto (2020, 453), in his study on the affective intentionality of hatred, claims that hatred has "an overgeneralizing, indeterminate affective focus, which typically leads to a form of collectivization of the target." Arguments about how this war affected Russian civilians who protested against the war had to flee the country, were forcefully mobilized to fight in Ukraine, or lived in fear of imprisonment became irrelevant; Ukrainian war humor did not discuss victimization of Russians. Memes laughed at Russians who were escaping and distancing from their regime as well as Russian passivity and lack of protests during mobilization. The all-Russian movement "Spring" opposed the mobilization by organizing all-Russian rallies under the slogan "No to mogilization (grave-isation)" on the 21st and 24th of September. However, the protests were not numerous. One meme articulated the political passivity of Russian citizens by showing an empty Red Square during the so-called protests.⁷⁹

Moscow is burning

In the fall of 2022, mystery fires and explosions in Russia started. Some of the fires damaged military objects, while others hit buildings unrelated to Russia's war infrastructure. They included oil depots in Nizhny Novgorod, Brayansk, and Belgorod; a chemical plant near Ivanovo; the Central Research Institute of Russia Aerospace Defense Forces in Tver; shopping malls; and a confectionary factory in Vladivostok. Like in the case of the Crimean Bridge, memes portrayed laughing Daenerys Targaryen with a cigarette in hand in the background of the burning buildings. They all referred to the joke about somebody dropping a cigarette and causing a fire. All these fires resonated with memes on burning "Moskva," the Crimean Bridge, or the fire in hell where Putin and the Russian Army were burning. They also resonated with the popular song "I Have a Dream (Moscow's Burning)" by Irena Karpa, Grigory Semenchuk, Lyuba Yakimchuk, and Yuriy Gurzhy. To speak about the ultimate

defeat of Russia's Army is to imagine the destruction of Moscow. The singers sing: "Russia's ruined, Russia's dying, sugar's out of stores, nuclear winter's snow it falls ... Moscow is burning in my dreams ... dog's take bites on Putin's body ... Kremlin's on fire, oh what a funeral pyre! Looks [like] someone has cursed this place, it is burning for hours, it is burning for days ... the sweetest dream I ever had, I wake up and I smile ... Invaders must die! Moscow, goodbye! Moscow's burning in my dreams. What a luck!"

The image of a burning Kremlin is another key symbol, a motif in many cartoons, memes, and jokes. In one cartoon, a cat is saying it would be so nice to live in a peaceful time, with a burning Kremlin and its clock in the background ((*Perec*, 2022, No. 23, p. 4). In real life, on the building of the Main Office of the State Emergency Service of Ukraine in Kyiv, passersby could see a panel with the words: "Is the Kremlin on fire? Call 101, we also want to see it" (Figure 25). The State Emergency Service of Ukraine also joked about the fires in Siberia and published a post on Facebook. It said that the "patron saints" had turned their backs on Russian firefighters because some of them had gone to fight in Ukraine. The post ends with a Ukrainian swear word: "Well, the hell with it, burn!"⁸⁰

After Zelensky visited Washington, D.C. on December 22, a new meme with Zelensky and Biden in the background of the flames of Moscow on fire emerged on social media. In Washington D.C., the US leadership promised continuous support until Ukraine's victory (Figure 26).

Many cartoons about enemies communicate a commitment to victory by denigrating and belittling the enemy, manifesting a will to fight, and articulating the new future for Ukraine as a sovereign country. This future is imagined in memes that align Ukraine with Europe, the US, and its allies. It is also invoked in memes on the destruction of Moscow that symbolize the eradication of what Russia stands for — invasion, war crimes, abuse of human rights, authoritarianism, and



Фото: у ДСНС у Києві висловилися про дії на випадок пожежі у Кремлі (facebook.com)

Figure 25. Words on the building of the Main Office of the State Emergency Service of Ukraine in Kyiv: "Is the Kremlin on fire? Call 101, we also want to see it."



Figure 26. A meme with burning Moscow after Zelensky's visit to Washington D.C. on December 22, 2022.

illiberal values. Ukrainian civic activism projects new potentialities for the future, in which we see Ukraine as a sovereign democratic country with Russia destroyed in flames.

Conclusions

Ukrainian civic activism is defined by resistance, solidarity, vigilance, and commitment to victory. Civic activism emerges in jokes about everyday life, such as playing bingo with categories of electricity, heat, and water, as well as in reflections on war events, enemies, threats to civilian life, or projections of the future. It communicates people's dignity, resilience, and invincibility. It makes arguments about their identities and solidarities and mobilizes others for the cause of Ukraine's sovereignty. While the sovereignty of Ukraine is rarely mentioned directly in memes and cartoons, the sentiments about statehood and the integrity of the Ukrainian nation emerge through the intimacies of war experiences, whether looting by enemies, threats of missile attacks, or jubilation at Ukrainian Army victories.

Like the political humor of the last decades, unrelated to war, Ukrainian war humor circulates in local and global social media and interconnects audiences within the virtual public sphere. The virtual public sphere not only communicates exchange taking place among people, the public sector, official authorities, and businesses, but it also informs non-virtual public sphere by prompting volunteering or fundraising initiatives, as in the example with the Mount Shchekavytsia when jokes about an orgy in the event of a nuclear explosion led to the organization of first aid training. Ukrainian humor activism counters Russian propaganda, raises vigilance, and manifests support for the Ukrainian Army. It also appeals to global leaders for support. While various earlier studies explored humor as resistance or state propaganda, our approach to humor as civic activism illustrates that it cannot be reduced to either resistance or propaganda. While it has elements of both, war humor in Ukraine is a weapon of society as well as the state.

Ukrainian war humor has many parallels with WWI and WWII humor in its expressions of hatred, portrayals of violence, depictions of grotesque and obscene images of enemies, polarizing discourse of “us” vs. “them,” dark humor, and advocacy of the superiority of the Ukrainian nation. In this context, some might be tempted to conclude that we see the return of radical nationalism, which was thought to be an outdated form of organizing societies after WWII. However, the war is shaped by a different temporality, framed by the logic of survival (see Otrishchenko 2024), which explains the coexistence of commitment to Ukraine as a democratic European country and the violent, dark, and obscene imagery. Although people laugh, they laugh in the face of death when missiles land on Ukrainian cities; when threats of a nuclear attack are made; and on receiving news of war crimes, deportations, and forced exiles. As many functionalist approaches to humor note, such laughter helps people to discharge, cope, and reconcile with realities. However, as we show in this article, war humor in Ukraine is not reducible to coping strategies and reconciliation. Those who create, recreate, circulate, and review memes and cartoons engage in activist work for Ukraine’s sovereignty. Memes and cartoons are propaganda and counterpropaganda tools, fund-raising efforts, informational campaigns, and visions of the future. They are chronicles of a painful emotional and moral journey through the war that Russia launched against the Ukrainian people. Ukrainian war humor also communicates “new potentialities” (see Bakhtin 1984 [1968], 49). Humor activists envision Moscow burning in flames which symbolizes not only the victory of Ukraine but also the new peaceful and secure future for Europe.

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 memescentral (@MemesCentral)
 Збройні Меми України (@ukrainearmedmemes)
 Aleksey Durnev’s “Упс, а що трапилось?” (“Oops, what happened?”)
 Меми війни (“Memes of war”)
 “Дизель Шоу,” (“Dizel show”)
 “БайрактарNEWS” (“Bayraktar News”)
 “Студия Квартал 95” (“Studio Kvartal 95”)
 Humor journal *Perets* https://www.perets.org.ua/Журнал_перець/
 YouTube channels: Dima Maleev’s “Ukrainian memes,” Aleksey Durnev’s “Упс, а що трапилось?,” Меми війни (“Memes of war”)
 Comedy programs: “Дизель Шоу,” (“Dizel show”), “БайрактарNEWS” (“Bayraktar News”), “Студия Квартал 95” (“Studio Kvartal 95”)

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Notes

- 1 The story is based on an interview with Bohdan Hotskiy, a commander-in-chief on Snake Island, see <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/19/russian-warship-go-fuck-yourself-ukraine-snake-island#:~:text=The%20island%20was%20associated%20with,after%20his%20death%20at%20Troy.>
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- 3 The North Atlantic Fella Organization (spellings vary) is a virtual social movement that supports Ukraine's cause and attacks its enemies on social media. Its members have avatars of a cartoon Shiba Inu dog. In 2022, they posted sarcastic memes mocking Russia's military performance and countering messages by its officials and propagandists.
- 4 For a brief history of the term "meme" and its function see Wiggins (2019, Chapter 1).
- 5 Humor in general is a common element in successful memes (see Shifman 2013, Knobel and Lankshear 2007). Ukrainian war humor is characterized by a focus on different strata of people, playfulness and repetition, relation to popular culture, and a visual appeal that contributes to meme success.
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