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MEMES AS ANTIBODIES

Creativity and resilience in the face of Russia's war

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Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which began on 24 February 2022, brought terror throughout the country. Every day brought more bombings and more news of Russian soldiers pillaging, torturing, raping, and killing. The assaults were part of Russia's plan to take control of Ukraine's government and to re-establish Russian cultural dominance. During its three decades of independence after the fall of the USSR, Ukraine had unevenly but surely moved away from Russia's orbit, extracting itself from the Russian imperialist ideology that viewed Ukrainians as "little brothers" and Ukrainian language and culture as quaint or funny, but no match for "Russian greatness." Ukrainian citizens were inexorably shrugging off their inferiority complex and uplifting the Ukrainian language and culture, both legally and in practice, even while many remained bilingual with Russian (Bilaniuk 2017, 2020, 2022). They were rejecting totalitarian control and increasingly embracing what they saw as "European" democratic values. Meanwhile, Russia was becoming increasingly autocratic, and its leaders were irked by their loss of global political and cultural standing. Russia's efforts to reclaim regional dominance included military invasions and land grabs, as in Georgia's South Ossetia in 2008 and Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014. Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) operatives were sent years in advance to cultivate "rebel" groups and then lead them to break away from Ukraine's control, as documented in the Donbas region (Batytskyi and Kalynska 2022). With long-term preparation and greater military might, Russia expected its takeover of Ukraine in February 2022 to be complete in a few days. In their arrogance, the Russian leaders could not imagine that Ukrainians would have the desire and resilience to fight them off.

But fight they did, both physically and psychologically. While many enlisted in the armed forces or volunteered to supply, evacuate, or help those in need, there was another front that burst across the internet: that of the cultural resistance. News and documentation of the horrors of the invasion were soon joined by texts, images, and videos that rebuffed Russia's intimidation and destruction. Some of these were directed at a global public, to garner support for Ukraine (see Goodman's chapter, this volume), while others were directed primarily at Ukrainians, to inform, share, and support one another. As a Ukrainian-American observer from afar, as I struggled to process what was happening, I felt compelled to document the explosion of memes and various other instantiations of creativity that I encountered on social media. I took heart in this expression of the courage of Ukrainians who were facing the invasion. This burst of cultural production also extended to professional artists. Art historian and critic Olha Balashova described as it "an explosion of art."[1] Balashova was the head of the board of MOCA NGO,[2] which established a digital "Wartime Art Archive" to collect wartime artworks in a wide range of media, most of which were shared on social media by the artists. Even more so than usual, the line between professional art and popular artistic production blurred, as meme themes were taken up by professional artists, and key artworks were in turn taken up and circulated as memes on social media.

Over a year after the full-scale invasion, as I tried to understand the phenomenon of the explosion of creativity in response to the invasion, a biological metaphor presented itself: cultural production as an immune response. While this metaphor has limitations, it allowed me to make sense of several major trends in Ukrainian social media, which I examine in this chapter. I use the term "meme" in a broad sense, based on evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins' (1976) coinage referring to units of cultural information that are transmitted from one person to another, analogous to genes carrying biological information. Rather than just packets of information, I view memes as antibodies or other forms of immune response, in that they play an active role in countering invading ideas and destructive cultural logics. Following this metaphor, we can ask: what cultural and ideological threats did Russia present along with its military invasion, and how did Ukrainian memes counteract them? Strictly speaking, this metaphor presumes that Ukraine (comprised of Ukrainian people and Ukrainian culture) is an entity, like an organism, mobilizing to defend against a threat. Rather than assume a pre-existing entity, I argue that the meme production contributes to the construction and reinforcement of that national entity. The Russian attack, instead of disrupting Ukrainian identity, prompted a consolidation and renewed vigor in Ukrainianness and a sense of national unity. As Benedict Anderson (1991) discerned the power of print media to construct imagined communities that are nations, so I aim to show that social media facilitates national construction at a rapid and intense pace. But unlike the geographically bounded

and rooted community that Anderson theorized, the digitally circulating memes help construct a community that is imagined as bound and yet pervasive and boundless, including its displaced and diasporic members. Memes forge community, one oriented to include all who want to be part of it.

For this study, my media sources included posts on Facebook,[3] YouTube, and several Telegram channels, which often featured material reposted from other social media, including Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. I followed Facebook accounts by Ukrainian bloggers, performers, writers, artists, friends, and colleagues, who posted primarily in Ukrainian and sometimes in Russian. My own positioning as a Ukrainian-American scholar researching Ukrainian popular culture activism meant that most (but not all) of my contacts were supporters of Ukrainian language and culture and an independent, democratic Ukraine. The Telegram channels I followed also included popular military and activist channels, as well as the news channels Radio Svoboda (Ukrainian Radio Liberty), BBC Ukraine, and Babel, which also reported on cultural trends and occasionally posted compendia of popular memes that emerged in response to key events.[4] Ukrainian news media (outside of social media) also reported on the popularity of memes (e.g., Rudenko 2022). The material that I present here is a selection of some of the most resonant and widespread memes that emerged as Ukrainians' responses to Russia's full-scale invasion. While some of these memes circulated into the global media space, my focus is on material directed mostly at a Ukrainian audience, often requiring knowledge of Ukrainian and/ or Russian language and cultural contexts. Even while many were refugees and displaced from their homes, people were participating in building the imagined community of Ukraine through their social media postings.

The sayings, songs, and images examined here were posted on the internet, revoiced and reenacted in real life, and again recirculated through various channels online. The authorship of some of the posted images, texts, and videos is attributed, while in other cases the source is hard to trace through their recirculation and modifications, losing connections to original authorship, thus becoming part of what is known as "digital folklore" (de Seta 2020; Lialina and Espenshied 2009). One of the striking aspects of the war-response memes was that they circulated in many different contexts, from official to unofficial, from President Zelenskyy in his video reports to soldiers in the trenches, from official postage stamps to street graffiti in occupied territories. Indeed, one of the effects of this cultural explosion appeared to be the creation of unity across status, class, region, age, gender, and language in Ukraine.

In viewing the rapid cultural production as a cultural immune response, I consider how it functioned as a defense against the cultural and ideological threats that Russia presented along with its military invasion. I focus on three key themes. First, the most significant threat was an existential one: the Russian leadership denied Ukraine's legitimacy as a country and its right to exist.

Russian leaders, including President Putin, had stated that Ukraine was not a legitimate state, and with the full-scale invasion, there were even calls to eliminate Ukraine as a sovereign country and to erase Ukrainian culture completely (Düben 2000; Sergeitsev 2022). In other words, this can be viewed as genocide (CSCE 2022; Hook 2022; Snyder 2022). Second, and corollary to the argument that a sovereign Ukraine should not exist, was the idea that Russia and Ukraine are one, that their language and culture are essentially the same. Third was the idea that the Ukrainian people and their culture were weak and no match for Russia's culture and military might. As voiced by Russian ideologues, the expectation was that Russia would "take Kyiv in three days" and that Ukrainians would either welcome their "big brother" and "great Russian culture" or, if not, that they would quickly fall to the might of the Russian forces (Skibitska and Lohvynenko 2022). The explosion of memes targeted these destructive ideologies with the assertion of Ukrainian existence, an emphasis on Ukrainian distinctness, and a celebration of courage and endurance in the face of assault. The field of wartime memes in Ukraine is so rich that this analysis encompasses only a segment, but an ideologically and culturally very potent one.

Countering the existential threat

Dobroho vechora, my z Ukraïny ("Good evening, we are from Ukraine"). This simple phrase became one of the main catch-phrases of the war. At first glance, it may seem banal. Why would saying hello and that one is from Ukraine be so significant, and why did it become a viral phrase? Like the opening line of the national anthem, which translates as "Ukraine has not died yet," it is an assertion of Ukraine's existence. Said in Ukrainian, it is also an assertion of the existence of the Ukrainian language. The need to make such basic assertions is a response to Russian denials of Ukraine's right to exist, which date back to the Russian Empire's efforts to subsume the territory and population of Ukraine under its rule. The imperial Valuev circular of 1863 illustrates this conundrum, in that it imposed restrictions on the use of Ukrainian while it declared that the Ukrainian "language never existed, does not exist, and shall not exist" (Miller 2003, 97–115). Direct and indirect efforts to erase the Ukrainian language and culture continued throughout Russian imperial rule and the ensuing Soviet era, but Ukrainian identity and language proved to be remarkably resilient. Alas, the need to assert Ukraine's existence remained even after the USSR disintegrated and its member countries became independent, as political, economic, and cultural pressures from Russia continued. In 2003, Ukraine's President Kuchma even felt compelled to publish a book titled *Ukraine Is Not Russia*, presumably ghost-written, published in both Ukrainian and Russian editions (Kuchma 2003). This tome apparently did not convince Russia's President Putin, who in 2021 published his opinion that Ukrainians are not a distinct people and not a

real nation, setting up the groundwork to justify the impending plans of invading and taking over Ukraine (President 2021). Once the invasion began, one of the first actions of occupying forces was to seize and destroy Ukrainian literature and history textbooks, replacing them with Russian versions and replacing road and city signs with Russian ones (Biriukov 2023; Radio Svoboda 2022).

The iconic use of *Dobroho vechora, my z Ukraïny* can be traced to Marko Halanevych of the ethno-chaos band Dakha Brakha, who opened their concerts with that phrase. Dakha Brakha is one of the most renowned Ukrainian bands worldwide (Sonevytsky 2019, 139–167). They are phenomenal musicians and cultural ambassadors who have used their global success to "make the world aware of the new country but ancient nation that is Ukraine."[5] As part of their concerts, the band members displayed the Ukrainian flag and political slogans such as "Stop Putin" in English, to get their message across to the global concert-going public. But the opening phrase *Dobroho vechora, my z Ukraïny*, spoken in Ukrainian, was just as much directed at Ukrainians as the rest of the world. As Halanevych explained:

> It's important to show the world Ukraine, and to show Ukrainians that we don't need to have an inferiority complex. That we're not backward hicks, but progressive artists. There are a lot of creative, wonderful people here, people who are now striving for freedom, for a more civilized way of life, and are ready to stand up for it.[6]

Halanevych's phrase became the centerpiece of an electronic music composition titled "Good evening, (where are you from?)" by the duo Probass Hardi (Artem Tkachenko and Maksym Mokrenko), released in October 2021. The track incorporated Halanevych's voice repeating "Good evening, we are from Ukraine" as the only lyrics, along with powerful bass beats and traditional folk instrumentation, including a Ukrainian flute (*sopilka*), fiddle, and mouth harp.[7] The song was played widely on Ukrainian radio and then went viral on social media after the start of the full-scale invasion, used as a soundtrack for videos from the war front (Genderdesk 2022). The phrase came to be used by key government officials in opening their daily social media addresses to the public, most notably Vitalii Kim, the charismatic head of the Mykolaïv Regional Military Administration, and Oleksii Reznikov, the head of the Ministry of Defense. During the first months of the war, both Kim and Reznikov opened their reports with the Ukrainian phrase *Dobroho vechora, my z Ukraïny* (or *Dobroho ranku* ["good morning"], if filming earlier in the day), followed by their report in the Russian language. The greeting became an emblem, an assertion of Ukrainianness not contradicted by their own preference to continue their reports in Russian.[8] Soon the phrase was appearing everywhere, printed on T-shirts and pins and handwritten by Ukrainian soldiers on missiles destined for Russian military targets.

In the latter case, as well as in videos of Ukrainian military activities where the Probass and Hardi composition plays as a soundtrack, the phrase became not just an assertion of existence, but a challenge: if you are invaders, we will greet you with resistance.

In a demonstration of solidarity between official institutions and the people, the phrase *Dobroho vechora, my z Ukraïny* became the theme for a Ukrainian postage stamp. This followed soon after the issue of a wildly popular stamp commemorating the Ukrainian soldiers on Snake Island who famously defied a Russian warship's order to surrender, discussed further below. For their second war-themed stamp, the Ukrainian Postal Service organized a public online vote to choose the stamp theme itself, with five proposed themes. More than 650,000 people cast votes, with 229,783 choosing the theme *Dobroho vechora, my z Ukraïny*.[9] This was followed by a competition for the stamp design. Out of 1,500 submitted designs, five were selected and put forward for an online vote in which 834,000 people participated, with over 340,000 choosing the winning design. The winning image (see Figure 7.1) depicted a tractor with a Ukrainian flag pulling a tank with the Russian "Z" marking, with a bent gun barrel (Bespiatov 2022; Sadhzenytsia 2022). This stamp paid homage to the stories of bold villagers who took over abandoned Russian tanks, towing them away with farm vehicles and then turning them over to the Ukrainian Armed Forces or selling the parts for scrap.

The fact that so many people voted to choose the theme and then the design underscored the resonance of the phrase for Ukrainians and the renown of the tank-towing farmers, with the concomitant humor and irony that simple villagers could be mightier than a superpower's military. Beyond using the stamps for postage, people valued them as collector's items that chronicled historical events, sending them as gifts or using them for fundraising.

Akin to the phrase *Dobroho vechora, my z Ukraïny*, the English-language phrase "Welcome to Ukraine" also became popular in social media. It is also an assertion of Ukraine's existence on the global stage and also took on ironic meanings. It is the title and key phrase of a musical composition by JKLN (Jacqueline Faraui) released in May 2022, which went viral as a soundtrack for videos of the Ukrainian military carrying out their assignments. Like Probass and Hardi's "Good evening," the song features a prominent rhythmic bass, making it effective in evoking the adrenaline-filled atmosphere of the war front.[10] In addition, JKLN's soulful and mournful singing evoked the pain and suffering of war, with the English lyrics "Fire away, freedom calls, like a burning flame, tears and blood, we will not give up, welcome to Ukraine." In the middle of the track, the singer switches from English to Ukrainian, chanting *volia, svoboda, slava, Ukraïna* ("liberty, freedom, glory, Ukraine") like a mantra, asserting a place for the Ukrainian language in an otherwise cosmopolitan, English-dominated, electronic medium. In addition to asserting Ukraine's existence, there was a

FIGURE 7.1   "Good evening, we are from Ukraine!" postage stamp.

Source: Ukrainian Postal Service.

potentially ironic meaning when the "welcome" was addressed to invaders. This ironic meaning was clear when "Welcome to Ukraine" appeared on social media images of Ukrainian military defenses or on burnt Russian vehicles. The addition of *suka* ("bitch") after the English phrase made the irony even more obvious. For example, in a popular YouTube video showing a burning Russian military truck, Ukrainian soldiers from their foxholes call out in a mixture of Russian and Ukrainian, "*Nu sho, iak vam hostiepriimnost' shchyrykh ukraïntsiv, bliad'"?* ("So, what do you think of the hospitality of true Ukrainians, damn it?"). Another voice calls out "[unclear] *Slava Ukraïni!*" ("Glory to Ukraine!"). A third voice responds, in a mixture of Ukrainian and English, "*Ne tak, ne tak*, welcome to Ukraine, *suka!*" ("Not like that, not like that, welcome to Ukraine, bitch!").[11] The last part of that exchange itself became a meme and was sampled in another electronic music composition published on YouTube by Kozak Music.[12]

Another viral phrase that also asserts Ukraine's existence is *Vse bude Ukraïna*. In Ukrainian *vse* can mean "always" or "everything," so the phrase can be translated into English as "there will always be Ukraine" or "everything will be Ukraine." The latter version evokes the phrase *vse bude OK* ("everything will be OK"), in which "OK," pronounced in contemporary Ukrainian slang as one syllable ("ok" rhyming with "tock"), resembles the first syllable of the name of the country in Ukrainian (*uk*, from *Ukraïna*). Both interpretations, whether "Ukraine will always be" or the more expansive "everything will be Ukraine," served as an empowering assertion for Ukrainians, as their existence was threatened (see Goodman's chapter in this volume, which discusses a Facebook page by that name).

Celebrating difference: Shibboleths, resistance, and solidarity

Ukrainian and Russian are both in the Slavic language family, and as such they share some structural features with each other and with other Slavic languages. However, there are significant differences in phonology, vocabulary, and grammar. While language difference is difficult to measure, one indicator is the percentage of shared vocabulary. According to a study by Kostiantyn Tyshchenko, a comparison of Ukrainian and Russian shows that they have 44 percent morphemically identical and 18 percent morphemically similar terms, with 38 percent of the vocabulary completely different (Tyshchenko 2000, 266–267). This is comparable to the degree of difference between Spanish and Italian, or between French and Portuguese (Ohoiko 2020).

The difference between Ukrainian and Russian emerged as a shibboleth (a pronunciation test that reveals identity) in 2014, when Russian militants seized government buildings in eastern Ukraine. The militants pretended to be "local separatists," but inadvertently revealed their origins by using the term *porebrik* to refer to a curb, instead of the term *bordiur* used by local Russian speakers (Bilaniuk 2017; Shandra 2015). After 24 February 2022, the word *palianytsia* ("loaf of bread") became the new shibboleth, possibly returning to a shibboleth of the times of WWI and WWII (Mandziuk 2022). According to Russian phonology, /l/ and /ts/ in the given phonetic contexts are pronounced harder than the corresponding palatalized Ukrainian phonemes. Also, Russians would be inclined to pronounce /ny/ as [n'i] in this word. This would yield something like [paljan'itsa] in contrast to the Ukrainian [pal'anyts'a]. Other Ukrainian words with similar phonemes, such as *Ukrzaliznytsia* (the compound word for "Ukrainian railroad") and *polunytsia* ("strawberry"), also circulated in phrases meant to reveal undercover Russian operatives. *Palianytsia* was the most prominent of these shibboleths. Along with its phonology, the word carries with it the meaning of bread as the most basic nourishment in Ukraine, the product of its black earth soils. Young children played "checkpoint" by asking drivers of passing cars to

FIGURE 7.2   Artist Volodymyr Kazanevsky's vision of how the word palianytsia ("loaf of bread") can be a weapon, as it allows the detection of Russian sabotage and reconnaissance groups.

Source: Mandziuk 2022.

stop and say *palianytsia* (as seen on social media videos), and it appeared on graffiti (pictures of which circulated on social media) and in various memes (see Figures 7.2 and 7.3).

The *palianytsia* memes are often tied into other memes, such as with the image of a postage stamp from 2013 featuring a Ukrainian *palianytsia* bread loaf, with the addition of the phrase *ne mozhem povtorit'* ("we can't do it again"), which was posted on Facebook (see Figure 7.3). This is a play on the popular Russian phrase *mozhem povtorit'* ("we can do it again"), referring to the ability to defeat Nazi Germany, as the Soviets did in WWII, again if necessary.[13] *Povtorit'* can mean either "do it again" or "say it again"; hence the inability of Russians to properly say *palianytsia* also works as an assertion of their inability to achieve military conquest. Another meme shows a graffiti mural of a smiling cartoon cat pointing a pistol, and under it the Ukrainians words *kazhy palianytsia* ("say '*palianytsia*'"). The antithetical combination of friendly cat and pistol refers to the popular term for Ukrainian soldiers, *kotyky* ("kittens"), who are cherished and lovingly welcomed, but fierce defenders against enemies at the

FIGURE 7.3   Ukrainian postage stamp from 2013 depicting a loaf of bread, with the addition of the phrase *ne mozhem povtorit'* ("we can't do it again"). (Recreated by the author from an image reposted by Alexej Zaika on Facebook, 1 April 2022.)

same time. It was also common practice to superimpose emoji kitten faces over the faces of soldiers in photos on social media to preserve their anonymity.

One letter of the Ukrainian alphabet, *ï*, which is absent in Russian Cyrillic, also took on a special role on the cultural front. Even before the war it was celebrated as a symbol of Ukrainian uniqueness, honored by Ivan Malkovych (1997, 103) in his poem "*Svichechka bukvy i*" ("The candle of the letter *i*"). The letter appeared on T-shirts of the *Ne bud' baiduzhym* ("Don't be indifferent)" activist movement, and was erected as a 3.6-meter-tall sculpture next to the Shevchenko monument in the city Rivne on the occasion of Native Language Day (TSN 2013). After the 2022 invasion, the letter ï became a symbol of partisan resistance in occupied territories, appearing alongside yellow ribbons and posters declaring that cities were Ukrainian and that they awaited liberation by the Ukrainian armed forces. It was pasted and spray-painted on walls and chalked on the pavement in occupied cities of eastern Ukraine and Crimea (In Ukraine 2022; Rubryka 2022). The *Zhovta strichka* ("yellow ribbon")

FIGURE 7.4   Ï against Z. Poster proclaiming "Ï always wins," showing the letters falling like bombs over the Kremlin. The words Zlo ("Evil," written with the Roman letter Z, emblem of the Russian forces) and *Smert'* ("Death") appear lower right on the poster.

Source: https://www.zhovtastrichka.org.

anti-occupation resistance movement supported and collected documentation of such partisan activity on their eponymous Telegram channel and web page (see Figures 7.4 and 7.5).[14]

Lexemes that differ between Ukrainian and Russian in some cases took on an outsize significance, and wordplay based on differences abounded in online memes. One of the most widespread examples was the Ukrainian word *bavovna* ("cotton"), used to refer to explosions in Russia or Russian-occupied territories starting in 2022. This usage was based on the fact that the Russian word for "cotton," *khlópok*, has a near-homonym, *khlopók* (with the stress on the last syllable) which means "bang." Russians narrating videos about explosions seen and heard in Russia or occupied territories used the term *khlopók* ("bang"), likely because calling the occurrence an explosion could risk sounding like they were criticizing the government for negligence and inability to protect (Shevchenko 2022). In response, Ukrainians started referring to explosions in Russia and Russian-held territories as *bavovna* ("cotton"). This generated visual memes as well, in which the billowing clouds of smoke from explosions

FIGURE 7.5   Letter ї flyer posted in the Russian-occupied city of Heniches'k (Ru-bryka 2022).

were replaced by cotton bolls, recreating visually the homonymy between the Russian words for "bang" and "cotton" (Vidomenko 2022). The *bavovna* meme required knowledge of Ukrainian as well as Russian, and as an inside joke, it created a sense of solidarity among Ukrainians. Referring to explosions on the Russian side as "cotton" made light of them, as they could hardly compare to the extensive destruction of Ukrainian cities, towns, and villages inflicted by Russian bombings.

The differences between Ukrainian and Russian languages were also highlighted in mistranslations in Russian media reports claiming to represent what was happening in Ukraine. For example, DonPres, a news outlet of the occupying government in the Donbas region, created a report supposedly showing that children in Ukrainian schools were being instructed to denounce their family members (Krechetova 2022a). The article showed a picture of a bulletin board in a schoolroom, in bright colors and decorated with autumn leaf shapes, with a notice instructing children to tell their teacher if they have family members in Russia, if their parents speak Russian at home or watch Russian television, or if they say bad things about Zelenskyy. However, the heading on the notice board read, *Rozpovi vchytel'ke*, where both words are ungrammatical. In Ukrainian, the correct phrase would be *Rozkazhy vchytel'tsi* ("Tell the teacher").

The ungrammatical wording consisted of an incorrect imperative for the verb *rozpovisty* ("to tell") and a wrong case ending on *vchytel'ka* ("teacher"), one modeled on the dative form of "teacher" in Russian (*uchitel'niste*). The inability of Russian propagandists to manage the most basic Ukrainian grammar in their pseudo-reports brought a gleeful viral response from Ukrainians. The Ukrainian National Guard posted pictures of schoolchildren with servicemen, using the ungrammatical formulation *rozpovi vchytel'ke* to instruct children that they should "tell the teacher that we will be victorious." The Ukrainian Postal Service, various banks, telecommunication providers, and other businesses also used the phrase to promote their products and services, some even using the poster design with autumn leaves from the DonPres news article. The Press Secretary of the President of Ukraine joined the virtual flashmob as well (Krechetova 2022a). It is not clear where the erroneous translation originated, since even Google Translate would provide the correct translation from Russian to Ukrainian.

Another Russian tactic to undermine Ukraine's efforts to survive the war was the #LightOnZelenskyyOff online flashmob. In response to the mass bombings of Ukrainian power stations in the fall and winter of 2022, the Ukrainian government requested that people economize electricity usage, especially at peak times, until the compromised power grids were repaired. The first Twitter post with the #LightOnZelenskyyOff hashtag appeared in late October 2022, from accounts that had almost no followers. The National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine determined that the spread of posts was mostly done by automated bots (Krechetova 2022b). The posts usually showed a hand turning on a light switch and expressed dissatisfaction with Ukraine's politics, with statements like "my comfort is more valuable than the president's ambitions." Russian news media picked up the story to spread the idea of a Ukrainian populace that was not willing to make sacrifices to oppose Russia. However, the trend backfired, as Ukrainians saw through the Russian tactics and made fun of them. Some posted ironic messages featuring funny mistranslations of Russian words into Ukrainian, alluding to the work of bots, making the most of the nonsensical possibilities afforded by the difference between the two languages. A common phrase in this trend was the Ukrainian *nemaie sechi terpity tsi pekel'ni boroshna*, which literally translates to "there is no urine to suffer these hellish flours" (Krechetova 2022b). This is a willful mistranslation of the Russian phrase *net mochi terpet' eti adskie muki* ("there is no strength to suffer these hellish torments"). The Russian words for "strength" (*moch'*) and "urine" (*mocha*) are written identically in their genitive form (*mochi*), making possible the mistranslation to Ukrainian *sechi* (the genitive form of "urine"). The Russian word *muka*, which can mean both "flour" and "torment" (depending on stress, but written identically), was rendered as the uniquely Ukrainian word for flour, *boroshno*.

Defiance, courage, and resilience in the face of war

As Ukrainians asserted their existence and uniqueness, they also rejected Russian expectations that they were weak and would not defy Russia, as was evident in many of the memes already discussed. Perhaps the most famous meme of defiance originated on 24 February 2022, the first day of Russia's full-scale onslaught, when Ukrainians rejected a Russian warship's order to surrender with the phrase *russkii voennyi korabl', idi nakhui* (see Goodman chapter in this volume for more on the global impact of this phrase). The Russian-language phrase, which literally translates to "Russian warship, go onto a dick" but glosses better as "Russian warship, go fuck yourself," was spoken by a Ukrainian serviceman at a small Black Sea military outpost on Snake Island in response to a radioed message from the Russian warship *Moskva*. The recorded exchange went as follows, translated from the original Russian (Abramovich 2022):

> Russian warship: Snake Island, I, Russian warship, repeat the offer: put down your arms and surrender, or you will be bombed. Have you understood me? Do you copy?

> *Ukrainian 1:* That's it, then. Or, do we need to fuck them back off?
> *Ukrainian 2:* Might as well.
> *Ukrainian 1:* Russian warship, go fuck yourself.

This exchange achieved legendary status, as it demonstrated the stalwart defiance of Ukrainians in the face of a much greater military force. The vulgar words, although inadmissible in normal polite conversation, were seen as a fitting response to the abominations of invasion, torture, death, and destruction being carried out by Russian forces in Ukraine. Just as in 2014 during the Revolution of Dignity, extreme conditions made profanity allowable in broader public use and even brought it into official state spheres (Bilaniuk 2017, 352–354; Dickinson 2022). The phrase *russkii voennyi korabl', idi nakhui* spread like wildfire on social media, and appeared on billboards and store signs across Ukraine, on T-shirts and stickers, and in protest signs around the world. When the State Agency of Automobile Roads of Ukraine urged people to remove road signs that could help the invading enemy find their way, one group posted an image of a replacement "universal road sign" that indicated three directions for the invaders: *NA KHUI, ZNOV NA KHUI, DO ROSIÏ NA KHUI* (literally "onto a dick, again onto a dick, all the way to Russia onto a dick," which essentially translates to sending someone to fuck off no matter where they go) (Ukravtodor 2022). Such road signs were indeed erected in some regions, and later, once taken down, they were auctioned to raise funds for the Ukrainian Armed Forces (Hal 2022). The phrase appeared both in Russian orthography as *russkii voennyi korabl', idi nakhui*,

FIGURE 7.6 Roadside billboard in the city of Ternopil stating, "Russian warship, go fuck yourself" (in Russian but using Ukrainian orthography), with the word idi (go) stylized to look like a warship head-on, and to evoke the Ukrainian state emblem. Photo by Mykola Vasylechko.

and in Ukrainian orthography rendering the Russian pronunciation phonetically, *ruskii vaiennyi karabl', idi nakhui*, which served to make the Russian phrasing seem more comical. The phrase was even artistically morphed into the *tryzub* ("trident"), the state emblem of Ukraine, further emphasizing the defiance of Russia inherent in Ukrainian statehood (see Figure 7.6).

The vulgarity received further official recognition when the Ukrainian Postal Service announced a competition to design a stamp commemorating the Snake Island servicemen's defiance. The winning design pictured a soldier standing on a shore with his middle finger raised to a warship in the background. After Ukrainian missiles sank the Russian warship *Moskva* on 14 March 2022, the Ukrainian Postal Service issued a revised set of stamps, with the added label "Done" in English on some stamps and with the warship no longer visible on others. While the stamps clearly featured the non-verbal vulgarity of the soldier raising his middle finger, the printed text elided vulgar words with ellipses

FIGURE 7.7 "Russian warship … DONE!" postage stamp.

Source: Ukrainian Postal Service.

(Figure 7.7). In a similar vein, when President Zelenskyy invoked the phrase in some of his video addresses, he used euphemistic formulations, saying, "where the enemy warship is heading and will always head" or in the direction that "follows the Russian warship" (Zelenskyy 2022a, 2022b). Thus, authorities showed solidarity with the courage and defiance of the people, participating in the transgressive expression while simultaneously demonstrating some propriety and restraint.

In addition to the tank-stealing tractor drivers, many other memes also celebrated and honored the courage and resilience of ordinary people. On the first day of the full-scale invasion, a woman in Heniches'k in the Kherson region was filmed confronting invading Russian soldiers, excoriating them for invading her land, cursing them, and giving them sunflower seeds to put in their pockets so that "sunflowers grow here when you die" (Mufarech 2022). This video went

viral, showcasing the courage and defiance of an ordinary unarmed woman facing armed Russian soldiers. She spoke Russian as she defended her Ukrainian land (rejecting the idea that Russian speakers would want Russian rule), and invoked the power of sunflowers as a symbol of Ukraine, which resonated both in the country and globally. Her face was not visible from the filming vantage point, and her name was not publicized, adding to the sense that she represented any Ukrainian woman.

Some of the stories did identify their heroes, as with 83-year-old Vira Pylypivna who baked easter breads in a brick oven amidst the ruins of her summer kitchen in the village of Horen'ka in Kyiv oblast. Her daughter felt compelled to share photographs of her mother doing this, and they went viral. The image of a *babusia* (grandmother) continuing to use her brick oven when the rest of the house was in ruins exemplified the indomitable spirit of Ukrainians, unwilling to give up even in the harshest conditions. She did have to repair the partly destroyed oven first, but as there was no gas service yet in her heavily bombed village, it was the only option for homemade Easter bread. Not only that but also the brick oven is the heart of Ukrainian food traditions. Vira Pylypivna then shared the breads with neighbors and workers who were repairing the damaged utilities and spoke of how the hardships brought people together (Khotsianivs'ka 2022).

Not only ordinary Ukrainian people but also everyday objects took on symbolic power as exemplars of perseverance. As Sopova (2022) writes in her essay on the role of objects in resistance and mourning during the war, material objects are "part of us, they shape us, they carry our memories, they are affectively charged." A prominent example is the kitchen cabinet in Borodianka, a suburb of Kyiv. Miraculously, after intense bombing, a cabinet remained intact, attached to an exposed wall of a ruined building several stories up, with its dishes still in place. On top of this cabinet was a ceramic pitcher shaped like a rooster, an example of the folk art of the region. Memes abounded celebrating the indomitability of the cabinet and the rooster, identifying with them and taking inspiration from them, with captions such as "all of us are a bit like this cabinet" or "this rooster is now my idol" (Suspil'ne 2022; see Figure 7.8). Another meme, showing a cartoon cat holding the rooster pitcher, proclaimed "Ukrainian culture is unshakeable!"[15]

Ukrainians on social media showed courage, composure, and even humor in facing the dangers that invaded their lives, such as the ordinance that became commonplace across Ukrainian spaces. One meme showed a dachshund urinating on an unexploded bomb sticking out of the sidewalk, captioned "an ordinary dog in a Ukrainian city." A video that circulated on Telegram showed a man shaving his face in his bathroom while behind him loomed an enormous unexploded bomb, its point of entry visible in the ceiling above him. Other posts showed bomb casings converted into a barbecue grill or a bench for children. Ukrainian actor Maksym Burlaka took things a performative step further on International Yoga Day (21 June), posing in a headstand next to an unexploded

FIGURE 7.8 Folk art rooster pitcher perched atop a kitchen cabinet on a wall of a bombed building in Borodianka, Kyiv oblast. Photo by Yelyzaveta Servatynska, taken on 6 April 2022, after the city was de-occupied (Suspil'ne 2022).

bomb in Kharkiv. His goal was to draw the world's attention to the reality that Ukrainian civilians face, especially in eastern Ukraine, and also to remind Ukrainians that it is important to take care of their mental and physical condition at all times. (Burlaka 2022a; see Figure 7.9). Burlaka also created a video titled *Ioha za syhnalom tryvoha* ("Alarm yoga"), in which he instructs how to perform a series of yoga poses to channel the anxiety brought on by the war into positive benefits for one's body and spirit (2022b). He instructs that "it is very important to inhale deeply the scent of freedom, which the Russian government wants to take away from us." He combines yoga instructions with explanations of their symbolism, which he associates with the war. These include a pose expressing gratitude for Ukraine's defenders, poses portraying how the Russian army thought Ukrainians would meet them, how Russians greet their president, how Russian oligarchs encounter sanctions, and a pose protecting from bombing danger. Then Burlaka presents a series of poses done by two people that he calls *russkii korabl'* (Russian ship). In the end, this series of poses is shown to spell out the word *nakhui* ("onto a dick"), which Burlaka explains is where the Russian warship that told Ukrainian border guards on Snake Island to surrender should go. The soothing deadpan delivery combines comedy and seriousness, ending with the assertion that "everything will be well."

Such photos and videos were acts of defiance, showing that even in conditions of extreme danger, Ukrainians would persist with conviction. While many people were dying from such bombs, these memes asserted that Ukrainians

FIGURE 7.9   Maksym Burlaka in a yoga pose in central Kharkiv. Photograph by Stan-
islav Ostrous.

Source: Burlaka 2022.

would not live in fear. The most extreme threat, that of Russia possibly using nu-
clear bombs, became acute in media discourses in September 2022. Once again,
the Ukrainian social media response showed humor and defiance, with a plan to
meet for an orgy on one of the hills of Kyiv, Shchekavytsia, if indeed a nuclear
strike was imminent. This idea went viral, with similar plans emerging in other
cities, generating countless memes, showing that even the threat of nuclear an-
nihilation would not break Ukrainians.

Not all of the memes of defiance were humorous, as embodied poignantly in
the case of a Ukrainian soldier, later identified as Oleksandr Matsievskyi, who
was executed on 30 December 2022 after being taken captive. A video showed
the unarmed, tired soldier holding a cigarette, saying *Slava Ukraïni* ("Glory to
Ukraine," an assertion of resistance and sovereignty that dates back to the early
twentieth century), and then being shot multiple times. The killing of an unarmed
captive is a war crime, adding to the already long list of documented atrocities
committed by the Russian army. What stood out in this case was that, even when
surrounded by the enemy, the soldier was undaunted, and *"navit' dyvliachys'
v oblychchia smerti, prodemonstruvav us'omu svitu, shcho take ukraïns'kyi
kharakter i nezlamnist'"* ("even looking death in the face, he showed the whole
world what is Ukrainian character and indomitability") (Vasyl Maliuk, quoted
in BBC 2023). An explosion of images and text memes honoring Matsievskyi

followed (RBK-Ukraïna 2023). While the usual response to *Slava Ukraïni* is *Heroiam slava* ("Glory to the heroes"), in recognition of Matsievskyi's deed the individualized answering call *Heroiu slava* ("Glory to the hero") was used. The tragic event gave new meaning to the *Slava Ukraïni—Heroiam slava* call-and-response, reinforcing the idea that Ukrainians were being killed because of their commitment to their country's sovereignty. They would be defiant to the end, and unwilling to accept a subjugated role in relation to Russia.

Imagined community in the age of the internet

The explosion of memes in response to the Russian full-scale invasion served to unify Ukrainians as a nation at a time when they were displaced, dispersed, and threatened. Meme production can be viewed as an immune response to an invading entity (Russia), and it is through this response that the entity that is "Ukraine" was (re)constructed and solidified. Like never before, social media proved to be a significant front in the war, allowing anyone, not just well-connected officials and celebrities, to participate in cultural expression and resistance, creating new dimensions of "popular culture." In the memes reviewed in this chapter, solidarity was manifested between the government and the people, and between people of different regions of Ukraine, old and young, speaking different languages and dialects, civilian and military. As hierarchies were leveled, at least temporarily, the national imagined community was reinvigorated and sustained even beyond geographic national boundaries. The memes discussed here are the tip of the iceberg of Ukrainian online cultural creativity in response to war, a window onto everyday resistance, and what it means to be Ukrainian.

Notes

1 Olha Balashova, online lecture on "Ukraine's Wartime Art Archive," University of Washington, 15 March 2023.
2 MOCA NGO (Museum of Contemporary Art NGO) was established in 2020 to advocate for the museification of contemporary art in Ukraine. https://moca.org.ua/en/about-us/ (accessed 16 June 2023).
3 Facebook was singled out as the most important social medium by two prominent Ukrainian cultural figures, including writer Serhii Zhadan (personal communication, 14 March 2023) and art curator Olha Balashova (online lecture, 15 March 2023).
4 Accounts that I followed included performers who supported the "Ne Bud' Baiduzhym" activist group, members of the *boiovyj surzhyk* movement that began in 2014 (including Tatusia Bo, Ruslan Gorovyi, Liudmyla Gorova, Olha Dubchak, and Yevhen Manzhenko), and internet personalities/channels Fashyk Donetskyi, Anatoli Shtefanovych Shtirlitz, Operatyvnyi ZSU, Khuyevyi Kharkov, Bozhe iake konchene, Persha pryvatna memarnia, and Derzhavne biuro memiv. I also follow Telegram channel Vatnoie Boloto, which is entirely in Russian and often clearly directed at Russians, featuring material critical of the invasion and Russian politics.
5 Dakha Brakha press materials, cited in Sonevytsky 2019, 140.

6 Marko Halanevych, quoted in press materials cited in Sonevytsky 2019, 140–141. Dakha Brakha has voiced and displayed anti-war messages since 2014, and in 2022 the theme of war became more centrally incorporated into both aural and visual aspects of their performances.

7 Probass Hardi, "Good Evening (Where Are You From?)," YouTube video, uploaded 28 October 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BvgNgTPTkSo.

8 Starting in August 2022, I noted that both Kim and Reznikov delivered some of their video reports in Ukrainian or at least partly in Ukrainian. This was likely in response to criticism in social media regarding their continued Russian language usage.

9 In second place was "Pes Patron" (the famous bomb-sniffing dog) with 182,236 votes, and third was "Putin, Moskva palaie, Haaha chekaie" (Putin, Moscow burns, the Hague awaits) with 88,035 votes (Man'ko 2022). A stamp honoring the Dog Patron was issued in September 2022.

10 JKLN, "Welcome to Ukraine," YouTube video, uploaded 12 May 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ujdTL9eIgPk&t=0s. The original video has over 11 million views, with other versions also garnering over 1 million views each. The artist JKLN is Jacqueline (Jackie) Faraoui, a Ukrainian singer-songwriter and producer who was born in Kyiv and grew up in Athens, Greece (https://www.muzitee.com/featured-artists/jackie-faraoui).

11 Telekanal ATR, "Welcome to Ukraine, suka," YouTube video, uploaded 7 March 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mszKy7CeOa8&t=2s. This video has over 1 million views.

12 Kozak Music, "KARMV—WELCOME TO UKRAINE SUKA!/KOZAK MUSIC," YouTube, uploaded 14 May 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JrCCG7p5YKU. This video has over 245,000 views.

13 For an examination of the origins of the Russian meme-phrase "*mozhem povtorit'*," see Efimov (2022).

14 Yellow Ribbon webpage: https://www.zhovtastrichka.org (accessed 16 June 2023).

15 See Sopova (2022) for different angles of analysis of the kitchen cabinet meme.

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