

## The Role of Popular Culture in Times of Disaster: A Case Study of the War Morale Songs in the Russo-Ukrainian War

OKSANA STARSHOVA

Petro Mohyla Black Sea National University in Mykolaiv, Ukraine  
/ Pembroke College, University of Cambridge

POLINA MYRONENKO

Kyiv National University of Culture and Arts

### **Abstract**

The whole-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine has produced a massive response in various media and art forms. Memes, cartoons, graphic novels, street art create an interesting war imagery and portray the effect of the war on society and the individual. Our project focuses on the popular songs created during this war, especially those included in music videos. The songs perform various functions; they express emotions – of pain, sorrow, hope; they might be propagandistic calling for action; they might display deeply personal feelings about the lost world of peace; they may help one survive, and they also help one reflect on the impact of the war on the everyday life of the people and the country, in other words, on the current existential crisis. Songs refer to the moral issues and values in human life, and they articulate the pride in national heroes and national culture. In this article, we intend to collect, categorize, and interpret the songs with focus on the war morale songs that are employed in the mobilization efforts and the shaping of public opinion. Although they are of heterogeneous professional quality, our aim is to document the songs brought about by the war as the personal and political response to the events.

Our primary interest lies in the hermeneutics of the messages inscribed in the music, lyrics and visuals.

**Keywords:** morale, popular song, fighting spirit, resilience, folk motif, hermeneutics

## Introduction

In May of 2024 the Russo-Ukrainian war is still sorely on. By this time the Ukrainian society has gained over two years of its distressing history. It is the ongoing experience of living through a disaster with its losses and tragedies, but also with the re-discoveries of the national and personal self and of the sources for resilience. This war, like none before, has a powerful media component. As Svitlana Kot et al. note, “Digital technologies play a crucial role in war developments, shaping the perception of the war, creating new narratives, countering propaganda, or altering the stereotypes and the representation of the self and the other” (1). Various digital platforms (YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, etc.) serve as the media that emit, spread and turn viral multiple messages in an instant. At the same time, this war, like any other war, is accompanied by a great amount of cultural production. Numerous works of art, from poetry, painting, and street art to musical and theatrical performances, also accompany the warfare by becoming (consciously or not) assets of propaganda and means of translating ideological narratives. Yet, in a situation of existential crisis like this one, the arts also perform their most basic function of sensory response to emotional upheavals, expressing pain, terror, angst, hope and evoking sympathy on the recipients’ side.

We have chosen popular music videos for our research as they belong to an art that appeals to wide audiences, nationally and internationally, a multimodal art that narrates a story with the help of sounds, words and visual elements, affecting both the audiences’ reason and sensibilities. Following John Mullen, we regard a popular song as “a series of mass activities which are themselves a

significant part of the history of society. Popular song is a way that generations of artists and audiences represent the world to themselves and to each other” (1). The war song, in its turn, is identified as a vocal and musical composition related to war. Like any type of song that accompanies human life, war songs express emotions of pain, sorrow, hope, or calls for action. They help boost the fighting spirit, “help[s] to relieve stress and anger” (Howlett 66), become a propaganda asset, or reflect on the impact of war on the everyday life of the people and the country. They help one reflect on the situation and refer to moral issues and values in human life. Moreover, music awakens the senses and offers the possibility for self-identification; it “provides solace and courage in a world turned upside down. These responses to the chaos of war are powerfully human. As Ukrainians have long understood, music and the arts declare who we are” (Ruble 19).

During the Russo-Ukrainian war, especially at its outbreak in February 2022, the functions of the war song expanded as the artists took on additional responsibilities “to support Ukrainian Army Forces in any way possible, and to reinforce cultural diplomacy, including the worldwide popularization of Ukrainian music, thus conveying the truth about the war through music” (Tukova 194). So, popular music, like any other cultural product, has become the ambassador of Ukraine in the world and introduced Ukrainian culture to wider audience. Besides, popular music readily responds to the social and political needs inside the country. It is deeply intimate, and, at the same time, a publicly shared activity that can produce an immediate effect on great masses of people simultaneously, stirring common emotions: “The performing arts, as communal and social activities, bring humans together, in all their agreements and disagreements” (Ruble 21). Moreover, Galia Press-Barnathan emphasizes the role of popular culture as a powerful means of shaping public opinion since it reaches a wide audience while simultaneously conveying both information and emotions (167). Indeed, the ability of popular music to extend its embrace to a large number of people is explained by the variety of contexts in which it circulates: “We may listen for pleasure, for

identification, as an accompaniment to other activities (dancing, cooking), distractedly (as when watching a film) and in many other ways” (Moore 1).

There is still another reason for our choice of the wartime popular songs as our research material – it is an interest in music, especially the way it activates our senses, emotions, as well as our subconscious and bodily moves. War affects people to the deepest and most primitive levels of their being. At such a moment, music and vocal songs express the reaction of a person to the world around; the inner bodily rhythms accord with the rhythms of the external time and place. In other words, singing a song is a physical act; it is a physical expression of emotions. As musicologist Herbert Spencer states, “the function of music is to facilitate the development of the emotional language” (33). In his discussion of the origin and function of music, he connects the production of vocal sounds with muscle contraction excited by pleasurable or painful feelings; in other words, physical and emotional expressions are interrelated. He states that “feelings demonstrate themselves in sounds as well as in movements” (27). In this way, “these various modifications of voice become not only a language through which we understand the emotions of others, but also the means of exciting our sympathy with such emotions” (Spencer 27-28). Since war is a disaster during which the emotions are pushed to the extreme, the war song becomes the manifestation of feelings that also calls for sympathy on the listener’s side. Another idea expressed by Spencer is particularly interesting in reference to the Ukrainian song. He reflects on the connections between speech and the levels of musicality of certain nations, focusing specifically on the expressivity of cadences, modulations, and intonation. Furthermore, he suggests that varieties of intonation are expressed by different social classes of the same nation. While Spencer admits the scanty evidence proving his assumptions, we tend to accept his position in relation to the Ukrainian musical culture and its reciprocal relationship with speech.

Georg Simmel, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of language, arguing that “the source of vocal music is the spoken

word, which is exaggerated by emotions in the direction of rhythm and modulation” (36). Consequently, “wherever there are psychic processes among men, there is also language. Man’s drive to express inner emotions through external action, which previously could only be satisfied by gestures and shouting, is given a richer and more appropriate form through language” (Simmel 36). To sum it up, the meaning of the song is articulated through various media: 1. the words; 2. the voice, its pitch, loudness, timber, variations, and 3. the musical rhythm and melody. Moreover, contemporary visual culture adds another dimension to the song; it narrates a story in a series of visual images that accompany a song or overlay with a differing message, changing directions on the way from an initial idea to the final product, as we will see in one of our chosen songs.

In wartime, popular culture at large, and popular music in particular, becomes an important instrument by means of which people express their emotions; moreover, it asserts the values of patriotism, carrying out the effect of propaganda, serving as a support for the soldiers, as well as the civilians, in coping with the challenges and tragedies of the war. It also creates a link between the military life on the battlefield and the civilian life: it “can be a form and expression of resilience (and resistance) in war situations” (Clark 150). One of the Ukrainian hip-hop singers, alyona alyona, stated to William Adams in an interview that “The war has infused our songs with new messages. People now seek more hope, truth, and ways to release emotions such as anger, grief, or sadness through music.” The crises of war are mediated by popular culture, and our main objective in doing this research is documenting the wartime experience articulated through the popular music of the time.

Our corpora contains more than 65 songs and music videos produced during the two years of the war.<sup>1</sup> We intend to focus on the music video clips as finished pieces that send their messages by the musical, linguistic, artistic, and visual media and are stored on the YouTube platform. We will not consider live performances, concerts, flashmobs, Tik-Tok and Instagram videos. A rather comprehensive overview of the musical stage in the first months of

the full-scale invasion could be found in Violetta Dutchak's article "From the Music of Maydan to the Music of War: Ukrainian Phenomenon." We aim to structure the music videos according to the uses and practices, as well as the themes, that most often find their artistic expression in the period, with a future intention to investigate the development of the genre and possible thematic variations. The songs are heterogeneous in quality – some of them are more amateur or provincial, others have received the support of the state and are more engaged in the political and ideological warfare. Anyway, all the songs prove witnesses to the disaster that has struck Ukraine for an indefinite period of time; they encode artistic responses to the catastrophe and produce messages inscribed into the music, lyrics and visuals.

This study is our initial foray into the realm of popular music during the Russo-Ukrainian war. We aim to find the categories in which the popular songs fit, according to the purpose and the message expressed, although any categorization is conventional. Structuring the corpora, we inevitably encountered challenges, as "the repertoires of wartime popular song are huge and tremendously varied" (Mullen 2), to say nothing about the interconnectedness between themes, uses, practices, and the agency of the songs' production and functioning. For our classification of the song corpora, we assume that the following categories could be considered: songs of war morale; soldiers' songs; patriotic songs; songs of women and war; songs of cities; songs of wounds and losses; anti-war songs. While each of these categories deserves close analysis, as a starting point for the discussion we will focus on the category most broadly represented and engaged in the ideological warfare – the songs of war morale.

For our study we chose to employ the methodology of hermeneutics that allowed us to interpret the music pieces in the context of the present-day reality, and to place them in a historical perspective through intertextual links. We consider songs as intentional acts that incorporate two vectors of interaction with the recipient: the desire to share the emotion with the listener/viewer and the need to affect the listener's emotions in order to lead to

action. The medium of music videos of war songs made obvious the application of multimodal discourse analysis (O'Halloran; Kress) that aided the interpretation of various modes of artworks and enabled us to integrate visual, musical, and textual elements into the construction of meaning. We will also focus on the symbolism of traditional Ukrainian folk motifs imbued in music, but also in the texts and video frames.

### War Morale Songs

The songs of war morale have one essential function – they support the military spirit and help soldiers fight. Writing about this category of songs in WWI, Mullen aptly notes: “The central characteristic of these songs was their usefulness, it was said, to increase people’s willingness to fight and remain cheerful” (1). They are equally vital for soldiers on the battlefield and for the civilians, as they mobilize the power for resilience, help recruitment into the army, and work towards international support.

The war itself was an event that shocked, frightened and simultaneously blocked the creative flow. Since February 24, the life of every Ukrainian has changed; therefore the role of popular culture in general, and music in particular, turned from entertainment into a way of reuniting the national idea, and militainment, which, in turn, happened to be one of the most powerful tools of propaganda. The two impulses – of a deeply personal reaction and the need for mobilizing the collective morale – converged, and, out of the silence of the first days emerged voices. Those first voices were rather individual before they grew into the movement of the massive production by bands, groups and creative unions. The first days of the invasion became an incentive for several simple, half-amateur, almost home-made music videos. Max Barskih in ‘Bude Vesna’ (‘There Will Be Spring,’ 5 March 2022) used video fragments of real ruined cities and destroyed peaceful lives; KOLA recorded her music video ‘Ukraino – My Syl’a’ (‘Ukraine – We are the Strength,’ 8 March 2022) on her smartphone at home. In February 2022, Andriy Khlyvnyuk, the

vocalist and lyricist of the Ukrainian band BoomBox, performed a capella a Ukrainian patriotic march ‘Oi u luzi chervona kalyna’ (‘Oh, the Red Viburnum in the Meadow’).

The march was renewed by the war in Ukraine, although it had been written more than a hundred years earlier. In response to the invasion, Khlyvnyuk cut short his tour in the US to return to Ukraine in order to join the Territorial Defense Forces. He recorded the video in the half-military uniform with a yellow strip around his arm as a marker distinguishing Ukrainian forces and with a machine gun in his hands. He is standing in the Square in Kyiv with the St. Sophia Cathedral against the blue sky in the background. The video was uploaded to Khlyvnyuk’s Instagram account on 27 February, where it became viral. The effect of the 4-second video was tremendous – only four lines from a substantially longer 5-verse song performed in a sacred place of the emptied capital frozen with shock, perplexity and fear – offering hope for the mobilization of the people’s forces to fight back the invasion, to stand together against the aggression, and to fight for a victorious future. Here is one of the numerous comments under the YouTube video: “Early spring. An empty, deserted Kyiv. I feel anxious and confused. And a song is playing in St. Sophia's Square. . . It will take a dozen years or more, but after watching this video, I personally will not be able to hold back the tears. For me personally, Khlyvnyuk became a symbol of our first hope!!! Thank you, Andriy.”

|                            |                                                |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| Ой у лузі червона калина   | In a meadow there is Red Kalyna                |
| похилилася,                | Bowing down low                                |
| Чогось наша славна Україна | Sadly, our glorious Ukraina                    |
| зажурилася.                | Also got forlorn.                              |
| А ми тую червону калину    | But we will come to our Red                    |
| підіймемо,                 | Kalyna                                         |
| А ми нашу славу Україну,   | And we'll lift her up                          |
| гей-гей, розвеселимо!      | We'll cheer up glorious Ukraina                |
| (Boombox, Oi u Luzi)       | Hey-hey, and we will rise up! ... <sup>2</sup> |



The original folk melody of the song dates back to the time of the Cossacks' upheavals in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This version was first recorded in 1875 by the Ukrainian historian and ethnographer Volodymyr Antonovych and folklorist Mykhailo Drahomanov. The old motif received a new interpretation and was performed to the public in 'The Sun of Ruin' staged by Stepan Charnetsky in 1914. The song was placed at the end of the play that narrated the attempts of Hetman Petro Doroshenko to unite Ukraine. Charnetsky modernized the musical motif and overlaid it with the transformed words from another folk song 'Rozlylysia kruti berezhechky' ('The steep banks overflowed'). This new version of the song gained popularity due to the Ukrainian Sich Riflemen (Ukrainian Legion) that was one of the first regular military units of the Ukrainian People's Army in the First World War. Since then, the song has become the symbol of independence of the Ukrainian army forces. Throughout its long history, it has acquired many features that contributed to its success. First, the marching rhythm yields to the group singing (either by a professional choir or a military unit) in accord with the unified soldiers' parade. The lyricism of the folk motif naturally combines with the statement of masculinity and the air of freedom. Second, its catchy tune is easy to vocalize without any special vocal skills; you could hear it sung by a child,<sup>3</sup> as well as crooned by an adult. Third, the lyrics of the song create the recognizable imagery, which goes deeply into the Ukrainian culture, or even more widely into the Slavic cultures. Viburnum (*Kalina*), a shrub with red berry clusters, has been a recurrent image in the Ukrainian folklore for centuries. It has various meanings, among which central is the symbolism of national history and traditions. Its clusters signify unity in plurality, so the family stands out as the carrier of the culture and its roots. Since viburnum can be the metonymy of Ukraine itself, its red berries are associated with the mother's care and protection. The white blossoms can suggest the beauty of a young girl, and red viburnum can also stand for passionate love. The significance of the song 'Oh, the Red Viburnum in the Meadow' is related to a soldier on the battlefield, as its berries resemble the drops of blood spilt in battles. Therefore,

it suggests the warrior spirit with which to defend the freedom of the homeland and to revitalize its glorious history, to fight off the enemies and strengthen the Ukrainian spirit.

Since the beginning of the Russian invasion, the song has become the symbol of Ukrainian resistance and of the will to defend the land. Since Khlyvniuk's performance, it has acquired the added significance of the world's solidarity with Ukraine and inside the country. After the first wartime video, there have been dozens, if not hundreds, of performances and remixes, among which worth mentioning are<sup>4</sup>:

- Video flash mob from the Ukrainian singers and artistic personalities, among which were Jamala, Olya Polyakova, Nastia Kamenskykh, Natalia Mohylevska, Pavlo Zibrov, and many others. Released on 2 April 2022;
- A Ukrainian bard singer living in New York, Voll Deineko, translated all five verses into English and recorded 'Red Kalyna Blues' on 2 May 2022;
- A South African musician, The Kiffness, made an army remix of the song with the Khlyvnyuk's video. Released on 3 May 2022;
- Ukrainian girl-group *Mirami*. Released on 15 July 2022;
- *Haydamaky* band and Tonia Matvienko with the soundtrack of the film *The Red*. The video was released on 16 November 2023.

The first military anthem of modern Ukraine was performed by many musicians (opera performance in Vilnius, in Georgia, Prime Orchestra in Poland, etc.) on stage, on TV, on the Internet, and translated into many languages (English, Polish, Serbian, Georgian, etc.). However, probably one of the most vigorous and impactful rendering was Pink Floyd's video clip 'Hey Hey Rise Up' (released on 7 April 2022) in support of Ukraine, featuring Khlyvnyuk's vocal track. The video opens with another recording of 'Oi u luzi chervona kalyna' by the Vervovka Ukrainian Folk Choir. The lyricism and inspiration of the ethnic interpretation with its minor harmony and folk music mode grows into the marching

rhythms that signal the determination of resistance. The video sequence represents one of the first video documents of the war with the frames of the tanks moving, explosions and ruins that alternate with the images of the human pain, of people fleeing the war, going down into shelters, men woefully separating from their children taken by their mothers to the safety of foreign lands. The colour scheme is dominated by the yellow and blue of the Ukrainian flag. Despite the distress of the disaster afflicting Ukraine, the video ends on the high note of the future victory inscribed in the last line “We’ll cheer up glorious Ukraina // Hey-hey, and we will rise!” and the images of several children crooning the song. The mighty message of the whole composition fulfills several tasks – it shows real Ukraine of the time and demonstrates the beauty of its music, it evokes empathy; it claims the power to resist, and it manifests the solidarity of the (music) world with Ukraine. Besides almost 13 million views of the song, the project raised about £500,000 that were used for humanitarian aid. This became one of the brilliant examples of the mission of culture in the modern world.

The other song of the war morale type – ‘Bakhmut Fortress’ – created by the famous Ukrainian rock-pop band *Antytila* manifests a robust combatant spirit, inscribed not only in its lyrics and music, but also in the circumstances of the recording of the video. The band spent three days close to the battlefield along with the real military, not actors, performing their artillery tasks. It became possible with the permission of the Ukrainian Armed Forces Command and presumably ordered by the government of Ukraine at the time when the Ukrainian Armed Forces most needed ideological support. As is known, Bakhmut acquired the fame of the stronghold of Ukrainian resilience for many months until it was taken over by the Russian Army in May 2023. The battle of Bakhmut became one of the major battles in the Russo-Ukrainian war. Despite the propagandistic function of the song and the video, it possesses significant artistic value and produces vigorous incentive to fight.

In the song we hear a soldier on the battlefield who does the fighting “routine” along with the mates that have formed the brotherhood, and addresses the beloved ones left behind under his protection. With the help of a seemingly casual interchange between the fellows during the fight he avoids the pathetic mood: “Here is my shoulder, / I am beside, brother / Here they push forward – the plague / Here comes from the flank, a new phase.”<sup>5</sup> The recitative and whispering voice of the verse stands in a dynamic and emotional contrast with the chorus in which the singer addresses his mother who (it is especially seen in the English translation) turns into the image of the Motherland.

|                               |                             |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Стіни горять в бою            | Walls burn in battle        |
| Мамо, а я стою                | Mom, I'm standing           |
| Мамо, а я в строю             | Mom, I'm in the ranks       |
| Нене, я борюсь                | Motherland, I'm fighting!   |
| Знищу і повернусь             | I will overcome and return! |
| (Antytila, Fortetsia Bakhmut) |                             |

In relation to the name of the city – Bakhmut –, the authors create alliteration with the repeated ‘t-d’ sounds in many words, that produce the beat rhythm and articulate the soldier’s toughness, strength, will, and anger necessary for the struggle against the invader.

|                               |                                    |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Фортеця Бахмут                | Bakhmut Fortress,                  |
| Всі молитви наші тут          | All our prayers are here.          |
| І сердець сталевий Дух        | And the Spirit of steel hearts,    |
| І Герої незламних Крут        | And the heroes of the indomitable  |
| З неба нам сил дають          | Krut,                              |
| Волю, вогонь і лють           | They give us strength from heaven, |
| (Antytila, Fortetsia Bakhmut) | Liberty, fire and fury!            |

The inspirational effect of the words and the music is enhanced by the music video. We can see an army unit at work. The idea of the video narrative is that quotes from the song are written on the shells and launched to the enemy’s positions to destroy, literally and metaphorically, by means of words. Since the

release on February 10, 2023, the music video has gained over 24 million views.

Our following choice for the category of the war morale song might seem unexpected because of its lyrical tonality, but it is a good example of the potential of rap music. On August 1, 2022, a Ukrainian rap artist, SKOFKA, released a music video ‘Chuty Himn’ (‘Hear the Hymn’). The track is dedicated to the artist’s friend, Valentyn Konovodov, who was killed in the war, defending the country. In the recitative rhythm characteristic of rap music, the singer rises above the destructive reality of the present moment to glorify the perseverance of the people in their rightful fight for their home. The framing verses introducing and ending the song with the melodious cadence of folk motifs are based on the counterpoint of peaceful tranquility and the threat encroaching with the sound and smoke coming from the shooting weapons:

|                                                                         |                                                                              |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| В небі чистому чути грім                                                | Thunder is heard in the clear                                                |
| В небі свист, але чути гімн                                             | sky                                                                          |
| В небі чистому мутний дим                                               | Something is whistling but we                                                |
| Горить ліс, але чути гімн                                               | hear the hymn                                                                |
|                                                                         | Cloudy smoke is in the clear                                                 |
|                                                                         | sky                                                                          |
|                                                                         | The forest is burning but we                                                 |
| За нами правда, значить вистоїм ми ваші вистріли                        | hear the hymn                                                                |
| За нами правда, а її ніяк не пристрелить                                |                                                                              |
| За нами правда, значить визволим село ми за селом                       | The truth is behind us, it means we will weather your shots!                 |
| За нами правда, значить ми з долин повиганяєм зло. (SKOFKA, Chuty Hymn) | The truth is behind us, and it can’t be shot!                                |
|                                                                         | The truth is behind us, it means we will liberate village after village!     |
|                                                                         | The truth is behind us, it means from the valleys we’ll drive away the evil! |

The central verses rap out the enumeration of the reasons to fight, among which is the protection of the home landscapes,

culture and faith and retaliation for the cities that have already suffered the occupation or shelling. The visual part of the clip supplements its emotion illustrating the lyrics with the images of the blue sky and diverse Ukrainian landscapes covered with smoke or destroyed by explosions and the images of the military performing fighting tasks.

Another old song, 'We Were Born in a Great Hour,' could be considered a remarkable example of a war morale song. Written in 1929 by Oles Babiy (lyrics) and Omelian Nyzhankivskyi (music) and adopted as 'The March of Ukrainian Nationalists' in 1932, it was brought back to the public space in 2017 in the project led by Oleh Skrypka as 'Marsh Novoi Armii' ('March of the New Army'), with the help of several prominent Ukrainian artists. In 2017, the war in Donbass was already in full swing, and there had been many people who volunteered into the army. The song became a dedication to those who gave their life for freedom and a call to arms. Its mood was intensified with the insertion of 'The Prayer of a Ukrainian Nationalist' – a prose text addressed to Ukraine, a prayer for strength in fight and glorification of the motherland and its heroes. It is in these lines that we first hear the well-known salutation 'Slava Ukraini! – Heroyam slava!' ('Glory to Ukraine! – Glory to Heroes!'). Babiy's lyrics beat the march rhythm per se, still, with the music, it is possible for soldiers to step uniformly in parade. After the first video released on December 6, 2017, on the Day of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, followed the second one. The Anthem accompanied the Independence Day parade in Kyiv, and the respective video featuring the marching military units captioned with English subtitles was presented on March 31, 2022.

The first months of the war were also marked by the surge of satirical propagandistic songs aimed to deploy laughter in struggle against the terror, and to boost the war morale, Ukrainian effervescent humour being an age-old traditional tool of vanquishing the harsh reality. One of such songs, 'Bayraktar,' appeared just a few days after the invasion. Its author, Taras Borovok, a professional soldier who was made redundant from the army fifteen years before the war and continued his career as a

screenwriter and TV producer, volunteered back to the military forces on February 24, 2022. He was aware of the mobilizational power of propaganda and its role during a confrontation. So, when he received the task to create something about Bayraktar, an unmanned combat aerial vehicle produced in Turkey, the song was born very fast. It produced an immediate effect on the audience, since Bayraktars became one of the first symbols of Ukrainian resilience in the first months of the war. Borovok says in his interview to *Radio Svoboda*: “It has the function of comforting, entertainment and at the same time, it draws people’s attention to the official informational media, in particular, of our military” (Ratsybarska). The lyrics are based on derogatory humour targeted against the enemy; they inspire hope in the invincibility and strength increased by the mighty weapon:

|                             |                                             |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| Прийшли окупанти до нас в   | The occupiers came to us in                 |
| Україну                     | Ukraine                                     |
| Форма новенька, воєнні      | The uniform’s new and the                   |
| машини                      | vehicles                                    |
| Та трохи поплавився їх      | But their inventory got a bit               |
| інвентар                    | melted                                      |
| Bayraktar                   | Bayraktar                                   |
| Bayraktar                   | Bayraktar                                   |
| Російські танкісти          | Russian tankers hid in the bushes           |
| сховались в кущі            | To slurp the shchi <sup>6</sup> with a shoe |
| Щоб лаптьом посьорбати      | But the broth in the shchi                  |
| довбані щі                  | overheated                                  |
| Та трохи у щях перегрівся   | Bayraktar                                   |
| навар                       | Bayraktar                                   |
| Bayraktar                   | Rams rushed towards us from the             |
| Bayraktar                   | east                                        |
| Зі сходу припхались до нас  | To “restore their great country”            |
| барани                      | The best shepherd of sheep flocks           |
| Для “васстановлення великай | Bayraktar                                   |
| страни”                     |                                             |
| Найкращий пастух            |                                             |
| баранячих отар              |                                             |
| Bayraktar (Taras Borovok)   |                                             |

The song is targeted at the audience inside the country, that is why it is one of few examples of videos without English subtitles. Besides, it is based on the easily recognizable marks of Russian culture, incorporated in slang, pun, and distorted Russian words, that makes it quite challenging for translation. Anyway, ‘Bayraktar’ does not only glorify the weapon, does not only elicit pride for the Ukrainian army, but it also manifests the national idea. The song went viral in the media, the number- of visualizations on YouTube and other platforms grew amazingly fast, despite its simple musical form and unsophisticated content. Its melody is unchanging, and it resembles plain folk motifs easy to remember. Its rhythm and energy emphasize the fighting spirit. The arrangement is not rich; the author uses cyclical melodies and simple instruments, which carry over the entertaining character of the whole song. The visuals are aligned with the music, and the lyrics show the destruction of the Russian weapons. Consequently, the song ‘Bayraktar’ is one of the overt examples of jingoistic propaganda, that ironically ridicules the enemy, boosts the patriotic spirit and the war morale. It responded successfully to the momentum and picked the general mood, which becomes even more obvious in comparison with the other “weapon” song, ‘HIMARS,’ written half a year later that did not get close to the ‘Bayraktar’s popularity.

Similar modality and functionality of mocking jingoism were characteristic of the series of song projects steered by the honoured artist of Ukraine, Oleksandr Ponomariov, in collaboration with the other well-known Ukrainian artists Mykhailo Khoma, Taras Topolya (*Antytila* frontman), Yevhen Koshovyi, Petro Chorny and others. The first song, ‘Ukraina Peremozhe’ (‘Ukraine Will Win’), released on 18 April, 2022, humorously referenced some victorious events in the war, where the army and civilians demonstrated their power of resistance: the legendary military pilot “Kyivan Ghost,” the drowned Russian ship, the so-called “tractor troops” of the Romany people who stole the Russian tank, the bees, dogs, and other animals as “bio warriors,” the continuous Ukrainian attacks at the Russian occupied military airport in Chornobaivka. The song is aligned with the related video recordings. Some of these episodes



were made up as and became part of the new Ukrainian wartime mythology. The dashing tonality of the song, its quasi-folk spirit, and the repeated lines of the chorus perfectly correspond to the triumphant drive that is supposed to suppress the fear and spur the morale:

|                         |                                  |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Горить, палає техніка   | The enemy's equipment is         |
| ворожа                  | burning, burning bright          |
| Рідна Україна переможе! | Our motherland Ukraine will win! |
| (Oleksandr Ponomariiov) |                                  |

As the war progresses, the minor key tonality is creeping more and more into Ponomariiov's songs. The next one, written in August of 2022, 'Na Zemli, v Povitri i na Mori' ('On the Ground, in the Air and at Sea') is still slightly minor, while the next ones – 'Hei, Sokoly' ('Hei, Falcon-Guys,' released on March 1, 2023) and 'Temna Nichka' ('The Dark Night,' released on April 18, 2024) substantially lower the tonality, grow in seriousness, use folk motifs, and become more interesting, with greater musical variations.

## Conclusions

The most important role of the war morale songs is consolidation of society and demonstration of national unity. This is achieved, in several instances, through reference to the military songs of the past, that in the previous periods went along with the Ukrainian struggle for independence. If music evokes bodily response, then their marching rhythm leads to the mobilization of physical and mental resources. Besides, the uniting power of many songs is stipulated by the markers of national identification, such as the traditional folk symbol of red viburnum, or a reference to the glorious past of Cossack battles, the inheritance of the power of Slavic gods and land itself that gives stamina and determination, or the folk musical motifs, this potent tool of subconscious suggestions. The songs draw upon the traditional Ukrainian myths and folklore and create a new mythology in their turn. The songs of mocking jingoism rely

on the genuine Ukrainian tradition of folk humour that helps to overcome any disaster, amplifying the resilience mode. Some of the war morale songs are unavoidably produced as propaganda assets, which instantly go viral on various media platforms and reach large audiences. They aim to inspire the combatant spirit and evoke the will to engage in the warfare. However, the true cultural product will obviously have a personal inspirational element, that is why we can speak here about the convergence of the individual creative incentive and the social request. As we can see, most of the war morale songs were created during the first year of the war. Therefore, we leave open the question of how long the war morale can be sustained before people return to their usual routine, how long people are able to live with the tension of existential duty, and how long the state is able to maintain that tension. Still, we must admit that other categories of war songs hold much greater sustainability, probably because of their minor tonality, although they are not inferior in terms of expressivity and affect. We mean here the soldiers' songs and the patriotic songs, that will become the subject matter of our future research.

The multimodality of music videos allows the listener to follow the message provided by the modes of lyrics, music, video, performance or rather create a new message out of the multiplicity of its modes. Then the whole becomes a sophisticated unity, in which all the media are aligned. The mocking jingoism of 'Ridna Ukraina Peremozhe' is achieved by the harmony of the recognizable comic episodes of the war, the singers' bravura, the musical motifs of Ukrainian dances, and the lyrics. Even Khlyvnyuk's seemingly simple video accumulates meanings by the choice of location (the sacred place in the heart of Kyiv), the singer's positioning (in the military uniform with a machine gun) and the a capella singing (as the act of intimacy). All these elements create an effect of personal address to every Ukrainian, employ the marks of the shared knowledge, thus uniting the people of the country and boosting their resilience against the terror of war.

As mentioned before, in this article we focused on one specific category of popular war songs. Other categories include

soldiers' songs, patriotic songs, songs of women and war, anti-war songs, songs of wounds and losses, and quite a new category, the songs of cities. We leave them for future analysis. The choice of the category of war moral songs did not allow us to trace the changes in the moods and modalities that the songs underwent through the two war years. We assume that the combatant spirit has been gradually replaced by greater lyricism and sadness. If, at the beginning of the conflict, the songs of war articulated the patriotic and war morale, and the immense power to defend the land, with the passing of time, they show how people and the society have changed throughout the war, moving from despair and distress to the more reserved need for struggle for the sake of returning to a peaceful life.

### Notes:

---

<sup>1</sup> The whole list of songs that we suggest for consideration can be found in the *YouTube Video Resources* section at the end of this article.

<sup>2</sup> The English translation is taken from the YouTube page of a Ukrainian bard-singer in New York, Voll Deineko, who recorded it under the title 'Red Kalyna Blues.' All the other English translations belong to Oksana Starshova.

<sup>3</sup> The video with a little boy, Leo, from the Lviv region singing presumably on the stairs of his house went viral in the media (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cIJiM1jKyOE>, accessed 28 July 2024)

<sup>4</sup> We will not refer, here, to the performances produced before the full-scale invasion, such as, e.g. the audio recording of Choir 'Homin' (hubbub) released in 2013, etc.

<sup>5</sup> The English translation is taken from the YouTube page of the music video.

<sup>6</sup> Shchi is a traditional soup in Russia, very lean due to its ingredients, especially in comparison with the vegetable variety in Ukrainian borsch.

### Works Cited

Adams, William Lee. "Ukraine's alyona alyona and Jerry Heil: 'Teresa & Maria' Is a Reminder that Who We Become Is Our Responsibility." *Wiwibloggs*, 24 Jan. 2024.

- <https://wiwibloggs.com/2024/01/22/ukraines-alyona-alyona-and-jerry-heil-teresa-maria-is-a-reminder-that-who-we-become-is-our-responsibility/279264/>.
- Clark, Janine Natalya. "Music, Resilience and 'Soundscaping': Some Reflections on the War in Ukraine." *Cultural Sociology*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2024, pp. 150-170.
- Dutchak, Violetta. "Vid Musyky Maidanu do Myzyky Viiny: Ukrainsky Fenomen" [From the Music of Maydan to the Music of War: Ukrainian Phenomenon], *The Russian-Ukrainian War (2014–2022): Historical, Political, Cultural-Educational, Religious, Economic, and Legal Aspects*. Baltija Publishing, 2022, pp. 716-725.
- Howlett, Marnie. "Nation-Building from (below) the Grassroots: Everyday Nationalism in Ukraine's Bomb Shelters." *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2023, pp. 63-69.
- Kot, Svitlana, Alina Mozolevska, Olha Polishchuk, and Yuliya Stodolinska. "The Discursive Power of Digital Popular Art during the Russo-Ukrainian War: Re/Shaping Visual Narratives." *Arts*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2024, pp. 1-53. <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts13010038>.
- Kress, Gunther. "Multimodal Discourse Analysis." *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, edited by Gee James Paul and Michael Handford. Routledge, 2012, pp. 35–50.
- Moore, Allan F. Introduction. *Analyzing Popular Music*. Cambridge UP, 2003, pp. 1-15.
- Mullen, John. "Beyond the Question of Morale: Popular Song in the First World War." *Popular Song in the First World War: An International Perspective*, edited by John Mullen. Routledge, 2019, pp. 1-15.
- O'Halloran, Key L. "Multimodal Discourse Analysis." *Continuum Companion to Discourse Analysis*, edited by Hyland Ken and Brian Paltridge. Continuum International Publishing, 2011, pp. 120–37.
- Press-Barnathan, Galia. "Thinking About the Role of Popular Culture in International Conflicts." *International Studies Review*, vol. 19, no. 2, June 2017, pp. 166–184.

- Ratsybarska, Yuliia. “‘Ya Kaifuui vid Toho, Scho Robliu. A Orky Boiatsia’ – Avtor Hita ‘Bairaktar’ Taras Borovok” [‘I enjoy what I do. And the orcs are afraid’ – The Author of the Hit ‘Bairaktar’ Taras Borovok], *Radio Svoboda*, 22 July 2022, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/taras-borovok-muzykant/31954848.html>.
- Ruble, Blair Aldridge. *The Arts of War: Ukrainian Artists Confront Russia, Year One*. E-book ed., ibidem Press, 2023.
- Simmel, George. “Psychological and Ethnological Studies on Music.” *The Routledge Reader on the Sociology of Music*, edited by John Shepherd and Kyle Devine, Routledge, 2015, pp. 35-42.
- Spencer, Herbert. “The Origin and Function of Music.” *The Routledge Reader on the Sociology of Music*, edited by John Shepherd and Kyle Devine. Routledge, 2015, pp. 27-34.
- Tukova, Iryna. “Art Music and War: Ukrainian Case 2022.” *Musicologica Brunensia*, vol. 58, no. 2, 2023, pp. 193-204.

### **YouTube Video Resources**

- Antytyla. ‘Fortetsia Bakhmut,’ 10 Feb. 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OmqlVrUXsTQ>. Accessed 29 Apr. 2024.
- Antytyla. ‘Polamani,’ 14 June 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vc452muMCPc>. Accessed 5 July 2024.
- Boombox. ‘Oi u luzi chervona kalyna,’ 4 Mar. 2022, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WvqjORQPB\\_Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WvqjORQPB_Y). Accessed 28 May 2024.
- Haydamaky band and Tonia Matvienko. ‘Oi u luzi chervona kalyna,’ 16 Nov. 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KGn1u-6WNs8>. Accessed 28 May 2024.
- KOLA. ‘Ukraino – My Syl’a,’ 6 Mar. 2022, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-SF51ij\\_kJE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-SF51ij_kJE). Accessed 13 May 2024.

- ‘Marsh Novoi Armii’ with Ukrainian subtitles, 31 Mar. 2022,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n3FTIfcQINM>. Accessed 1 May 2024.
- Max Barskih. ‘Bude Vesna,’ Mar. 5 2022,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RMO0xQdnfBI>. Accessed 13 May 2024.
- Mirami. ‘Oi u luzi chervona kalyna,’ 15 July 2022,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hdE4cCbH0Lw>. Accessed 28 May 2024.
- Oleh Skrypka. ‘Marsh Novoi Armii,’ 6 Dec. 2017,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3VtifYNafXE>. Accessed 1 May 2024.
- Oleg Skrypka. ‘Nomad,’ 14 Mar. 2024,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NcHaysqp6Qo>. Accessed 13 May 2024.
- Oleksandr Ponomariov, M. Khoma, T.Topolia, Ye. Koshovyi, Yu. Tkach, P. Chornyi. ‘Ukraina Peremozhe,’ 18 Apr. 2022,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fRuiEv3JRDQ>. Accessed 8 May 2024.
- Oleksandr Ponomariov, M. Khoma, T.Topolia, Yu. Gorbunov. ‘Na Zemli, v Povitri i na Mori,’ 19 Aug. 2022,  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WTMRCX\\_GqKg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WTMRCX_GqKg). Accessed 25 Apr. 2024.
- Oleksandr Ponomariov, M. Khoma. ‘Hei, Sokoly,’ 1 Mar. 2023,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RpM3tp9fe3E>. Accessed 25 Apr. 2024.
- Oleksandr Ponomariov, M. Khoma, T.Topolia ‘Temna Nichka,’ 18 Apr. 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IprmaX2WKBw>. Accessed 25 Apr. 2024.
- Pink Floyd. ‘Hey Hey Rise Up,’ 7 Apr. 2022,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=saEpkcViId4>. Accessed 28 May 2024.
- SKOFKA. ‘Chuty Himn,’ 1 Aug. 2022,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ia50r3fa67s>. Accessed 1 May 2024.

- Taras Borovok. 'Bayraktar,' 8 Mar. 2022,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IqknJUC2RnU>. Accessed 8 May 2024.
- The Kiffness. 'Oi u luzi chervona kalyna,' 21 July 2022,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3hnjL987tDc>. Accessed 28 May 2024.
- Ukrainian artists' video flash mob: 'Oi u luzi chervona kalyna,' 2 Apr. 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sHq2cToZTjU>. Accessed 28 May 2024.
- Voll Deineko. 'Red Kalyna Blues,' 2 May 2022,  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nr\\_jRx8adfk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nr_jRx8adfk). Accessed 28 May 2024.