

Conference Report on Vienna Postgraduate Symposium “War in Ukraine: Ethical, Theological and Historical Reflections”

OLHA UHRYN*

This report takes a detailed and thorough look at the symposium regarding the ongoing war in Ukraine, held at the Faculty of Catholic Theology of the University of Vienna on 13-17 February 2023. Its main focus lies on the presenting views and responses of the religious leaders in Ukraine to the ethical dilemmas and challenges caused by Russia’s war of aggression (2014-present), and attempts at reconciliation and peacebuilding. Besides discussing the statements of the leaders of Christian Churches the report also raises an issue of the involvement of representatives of Muslim communities in the war actions, which underlines the interreligious aspect of the symposium.

Even though Russia’s war against Ukraine started nine years ago, a full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022, shook the world with new strength and made it reflect on the aggressive military course of the Russian Federation again. Its consequences on the Ukrainians, their culture and religious life as well as on the global geopolitical issues became a topic of multiple political and academic discussions. The Faculty of Catholic Theology of the University of Vienna condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine as an act of aggression and expressed its solidarity with the people of Ukraine.¹ As a sign of support, on 13-17 February 2023 the Faculty organized a symposium for young scholars entitled “*War in Ukraine: Ethical, Theological and Historical Reflections*”; attended by twenty-seven speakers of mostly Ukrainian origin, who came to Vienna from different countries, such as Germany, Poland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland, Scotland, the United States, and Ukraine, with some participating online.²

* Olha Uhryn, university assistant at the Department of Theology and History of the Eastern Churches, Faculty of Catholic Theology, University of Vienna, Schenkenstraße 8-10/Zi. 046, 1010 Wien, olha.uhryn@univie.ac.at

¹ Statement of the Faculty of Catholic Theology of the University of Vienna in view of the Russian Federation’s attacks on Ukraine (German), (25.Feb.2022), <https://ktf.univie.ac.at/en/news-and-events/more/news/statement-of-the-faculty-of-catholic-theology-of-the-university-of-vienna-in-view-of-the-russian-fed/>, accessed June 12, 2023.

² <https://ktf4ukraine.univie.ac.at/>, accessed June 12, 2023.

The symposium was financially sponsored among others by the City of Vienna, the organization “Renovabis”, the Liechtenstein-based foundation “Zusammenleben”, the “Österreichische Forschungsgesellschaft”, and other various institutions of the faculty.

The event aimed to look at the war from an interdisciplinary perspective, including theology, ethics, and history. Short presentations followed by a critical discussion and were combined into ten larger thematic groupings:

- New perspectives on the concept of “Just War”?
- Historical look at geopolitical contexts;
- The “Russian World” ideology;
- Ukrainian identity shaping and the discourse of war;
- Perceptions of war in Western Europe;
- Women and gendered political rhetoric;
- Occupations of Crimea and the role of Muslims in the struggle for Ukrainian statehood;
- Culture in times of war;
- State-confessional relations;
- Peacemaking potentials of religious actors.

Noreen van Elk, postdoctoral assistant from the Institute of Social Ethics, on behalf of the hosts and organizers, addressed and welcomed all distinguished speakers and honourable guests. She outlined that the event was intended to serve as a safe space for analysis and reflection, exchange of ideas and knowledge, but also for inspiring encounters and networking: “We aimed to strengthen the academic interdisciplinary debate on the war of aggression against Ukraine. The symposium should offer an occasion to reflect on the challenges associated with the war and its containment by reconciling theological research, historical accounts, and philosophical-ethical questions with the current situation in Ukraine.” Andrea Lehner-Hartmann, dean of the faculty of Catholic Theology, wished all participants a fruitful conference and stressed the role of this event for the University of Vienna.

The theoretical foundations of the concept of just war and just peace were discussed on the first day of the symposium. The first speaker, Andriy Tretiak of the Ukrainian Catholic University, explored the concept of war in the teachings of Christian theologians. He pointed out the necessity of actualization of existing paradigms on this matter in

light of modern military challenges and aspirations for justice. Tretiak mentioned the predominantly pacifist statements of Pope Francis, who is questioning the relevance of the doctrine of just war, in particular in his latest encyclical “Fratelli Tutti”, and repeatedly brings out the topic of reconciliation between Russians and Ukrainians, who are surviving under constant fire from Russia. Whilst Pope’s remarks on the war might be well-intentioned, they create tension with the non-pacifist teaching of the Catholic Church.

Pavlo Smytsnyuk from the Department of Religion at Princeton University, former Director of the Institute of Ecumenical Studies in Lviv, pursued the topic of the ambiguous role played by Pope Francis and the Holy See in responding to the war. Smytsnyuk highlighted three reasons for the Vatican’s more cautious positioning: tensions within Catholic social teaching on issues of war and peace, Vatican neutrality, and Pope Francis’ clerical style. The Vatican is using neutrality as an “indispensable tool for mediation between warring parties”, explained the Ukrainian scholar. A visit by the pope to the war zone would change the neutral position. In contrast, Constantinople feels “more involved” and expressly supports the Ukrainian side.³

Dmytro Bondarenko, PhD student at the University of Szeged, analysed in his paper on Tuesday, February 14, the geopolitical struggle in Central and Eastern Europe during the Russian-Ukrainian war. He described the recent actions of the Russian Federation, which aimed to violate the balance of power in the international community.

Paulina Byzdra-Kusz, Research Fellow of the University of Lublin, pointed out that the escalation of the war in February 2022 has brought strong solidarity from Central and Eastern Europe towards the Ukrainian people, and many neighbouring countries have taken in refugees and have sent, and continue to send, aid to Ukraine. Concerning the present situation, she outlined the idea of a federation of Poland and Ukraine in the correspondence of the Greek Catholic priest, Prelate Tyt Vojnarovskyy, from the inner circle of Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky, with the Polish diplomat Jan Stanisław Łoś representing historical figures who worked to prevent escalation of the conflict between Poles and Ukrainians.

³ Pavlo Smytsnyuk, “Ukrainekrieg: Vatikan und Konstantinopel agieren unterschiedlich”//Kathpress, (21.Febr.2023) <https://www.kathpress.at/goto/meldung/2237255/ukrainekrieg-vatikan-und-konstantinopel-agieren-unterschiedlich>, accessed June 12, 2023.

Volodymyr Shelukhin, Lecturer at the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, shared with the audience his views on the origins of the modern Russian imperialist thought: the idea of the “triune people” as a unified entity of three Slavic “tribes”: Ukrainians (*malorosy*), Moscovitians (*velykorosy*) and Belarusians. The concept was rooted in some ideas that were introduced in the Kyivan Synopsis (1674) that was published with the blessing of Innokentii Gizel, Archimandrite of Pechersk Lavra (monastery) in Kyiv.

Nadiia Volik, Assoc. Professor at Ternopil National Pedagogical University, presented the Russian national idea of “Moscow as the Third Rome” and its transformation into the concept of the “Russian world” (*Russkii mir*) in the XXI century.

The third session on Tuesday with the title “Ukrainian Identity Shaping and the Discourse of War” focused on the role of visual discourse, popular culture, and mythology in the current war of aggression against Ukraine. Alina Mozolevska, Visiting Professor at the Centre for Border Studies at Saarland University, showed how images and visual culture function as a way of collective coping with the trauma of war. She furthermore explained, how visual discourse and visual culture are inter-related with narratives of victimhood and victory as well as of enmity and friendship. The second speaker, Oleksandra Filonenko, elaborated on the analogy between J.R.R. Tolkien’s “Mythology for England”, Which he developed in the context of the First World War, and how mythological images and narratives from Tolkien’s work feature in the context of the current war in Ukraine. Filonenko highlighted how in popular culture Russians are depicted as orcs and Russia as Mordor. The Tolkenian discourse helps Ukrainians to create a “mythology for Ukraine” and is a cultural way of explaining the world and dealing with the current situation.

Roman Sigov from the Catholic University of Louvain emphasized in his presentation “Europeans Lost in Translation” that understanding of events in Ukraine among Europeans on different levels can be often falsified or distorted. Another problem is in relation to the image of Orthodox spirituality so often represented by the Russian Orthodox Church, which is presently often associated with the theology of war. At the same time, he highlighted the potential within Orthodoxy in Ukraine and the current religious environment of the country regarding the possibility of a transformation into a perverted religiosity.

Iuliia Korniiichuk, Visiting Lecturer at the University of Warsaw, investigated the challenges Russia's war against Ukraine poses to relations between European institutions and religious organizations. She recalled that due to the return of religion into the public sphere, European institutions declared a course for the formation of "open, transparent, and regular dialogue" with religious entities. The war, however, outlined several layers of issues and gaps in current EU politics on religion.

The last panel on Tuesday was dedicated to gender aspects. Joanna Stepaniuk, Assoc. Professor at Stefan Batory Academy of Applied Sciences, presented to the audience the results of her sociological study on the integration processes of Ukrainian female migrants in Warsaw. She discussed the sociocultural status of Ukrainian women and their children in light of positive relations with Polish society.

Mariana Myrosh from the Catholic University of Leuven gave a brief overview of the representation of Ukraine as a woman. According to her, this metaphorization was used by Russia for the implementation of its narrative of imperialism, whereby the relationship between the metropolis (Russia) and the colony (Ukraine) is perceived in the metaphorical form of patriarchal marriage. Therefore, a colony is female and should be under the jurisdiction of the male metropolis.

The third day of the symposium was devoted to the theme of Crimea and the development of the concept of colonial memory in Ukraine. Gulnara Abdulaeva, historian and TV presenter on the Crimean Tatar channel "ATR", discussed the period between the annexation in 1783 and 2014, describing the colonial strategy of the Russian Empire towards the indigenous population of Crimea – the Tatars. After the subordination of the Khanate of Crimea to Russia and the political and religious repressions, many Tatars were forced to leave their land. Abdulaeva emphasized the disastrous consequences of the deportation of the Crimean Tatars on May 17-18, 1944, carried out by the Soviet army. Elmira Ablyalimova from the "Institute for Strategic Studies Crimea", described the goals of the Institute's work, which deals with the cultural heritage of the peninsula. The example of the Khan's Palace in Bakhchisarai Ablyalimova showed the decline and destruction of cultural objects in Crimea after its annexation in 2014. The measures and policies of the actual occupation authorities on the Crimean Peninsula have to be unmasked as humanitarian destruction, destruction of identity, and toponymic repression.

Andrii Zhyvachivskyi, PhD candidate at Tadeusz Manteuffel Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences, referred to historical examples of joint warfare waged by Ukrainian Christians and Muslims. Unlike the representatives of traditional historiography, who look mostly into confrontations between the Crimean Khanate, the Ottoman Empire and the Cossacks, he recalled numerous examples of joint military campaigns by Crimean Tatars and Ukrainians: Ostafiy Dashkovych, Dmytro Bayda-Vyshnevetsky, the union between Bohdan Khmelnytsky and Khan Islam III Gery in 1648, etc. The presence of military units consisting of Crimean Tatars and Muslims (Noman Çelebicihan Battalion, Sheikh Mansur Battalion, and “Turan” battalion) in the Armed Forces of Ukraine since 2014 shows that military cooperation between Crimean Tatars and Ukrainians has continued into the present era.

Oleksandra Terentyeva, PhD student at Innsbruck University, focused on the politics of memory created by post-revolutionary governments and war-affected civil society in Ukraine. In this context, she outlined the processes of decolonization in the country.

The keynote speaker of the symposium, founder and director of the Center for Civil Liberties, which received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2022, Oleksandra Matviichuk, held an online lecture on “*Impunity Breeds War Crimes. How to Fight It?*”. In the face of a full-scale invasion, Ukraine has turned to the international community for support in its struggle for democracy, freedom, and basic human rights. Matviichuk addressed the audience with a request not to distance themselves from the genocide that is unfolding on the territory of Ukraine: “I would like to give you the names of the victims, not just dry statistics because we are documenting not just war crimes, we are documenting human pain.”⁴ She summarized her lecture with an appeal to the world to change the way of dealing with human rights violations and war crimes committed by Russians and to establish an international tribunal, to achieve justice and peace.

On the fourth day of the symposium, the speakers discussed the Ukrainian culture during the war and the measures taken to prevent its destruction. Iryna Hnidyk, Assoc. Professor at the National Polytechnic

⁴ Oleksandra Matviichuk, “Impunity breeds War Crimes. How to fight it?”, a lecture held on February 15, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m342PqWkwE4>, accessed June 12, 2023. See also: idem, “Friedensnobelpreisträgerin: Russische Kriegsverbrechen schon jetzt ahnden!”//Der Standard, 26 March 2023, <https://www.der-standard.at/story/2000144883974/friedensnobelpreistraegerinmatviichuk-russische-kriegsverbrechen-schon-jetzt-ahnden>, accessed June 12, 2023.

University of Lviv, described the current situation with a metaphor that the preservation of culture during the war can be compared to a beating heart. While the heart beats, the person stays alive. The culture of a nation plays a similar role for its existence. Hnidyk presented different aspects of culture: intangible and material culture, museums, libraries, art, national identity, and national memory. She also reported on the state initiative whose goal is to document the crimes of the Russian army in the cultural sphere.⁵

Olesya Lloyd-Mayer, PhD student at the University of Lutsk, described the phenomenon of sacralization of Ukrainian soldiers and military objects. She brought numerous examples of images where Christian and military motifs from Russia's war against Ukraine are mingled, such as three kings in military clothes. During the discussion, it was pointed out that such tendencies are justified under the current circumstances, but they remain a matter of taste.

Yaryna Zakalska, Research Fellow at the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, pointed out anthropological and folklore aspects of religiousness in times of crisis, in particular the role of prayer during the war. The tradition of all-Ukrainian praying has become widespread: at a predetermined time (mostly in the evening, but not necessarily) people from different parts of Ukraine pray: for peace in Ukraine, for soldiers who are in particularly difficult places at the front lines, for prisoners, wounded, etc.

Tetiana Kutsyr, researcher at the Ethnology Institute of Lviv, dealt with questions of the national identity during the war based on the example of Ukrainian traditional embroidery. She mentioned an increased interest in embroidery and new military trends in traditional pattern images.

The next four presentations addressed the state-confessional relations and the impact of the war on religious communities. Mechyslav Yanauer, PhD student at the National Pedagogical Dragomanov University, stressed that state-confessional relations have been an integral part of the system of relations for any society. They are formed because of the existence of close material and spiritual ties in society and are constantly

⁵ Tetiana Varha, "Porushennia prav lyudyny na dostup do kulturnoi spadshchyny pid chas rosiys'koi agresii proty Ukrainy" ["Violation of human rights to access to cultural heritage during the Russian aggression against Ukraine"], *Analitychno-porivnial'ne pravo*navstvo, no. 5 (2023): 104-108, <https://doi.org/10.24144/2788-6018.2023.05.16>.

in interconnection. As far as Ukrainian society is multi-ethnic and multi-confessional, the relationship between state authorities and religious organizations has always been quite important.

According to Oleksandra Kovalenko, member of the Ukrainian Association of Religious Studies, out of 2,100 registered religious communities in Crimea, about 900 have been banned and expelled since 2014. In addition to Roman and Greek Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, non-denominational evangelical communities, and Muslims have been particularly affected. Besides Kovalenko brought examples of the killings and kidnappings of priests and pastors in terms of the forced implementation of the Russian legislation on the occupied territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

Further information on this topic was provided by Maksym Vasin, Executive Director of the Institute for Religious Freedom. He stressed, that Russia has been justifying the armed attack on Ukraine with the motives of "protecting" the faithful of the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian-speaking residents of the eastern and southern regions. However, the documented Russian war crimes indicate that the Kremlin's true intention was not the protection of Moscow-affiliated orthodoxy. The true goal of Russia, as stated in the speeches and actions of Russian President Vladimir Putin is the destruction of Ukraine (1) as a sovereign state; (2) as a nation with a distinct language, culture, and religious diversity; (3) as a democratic society focused on European integration, democracy and the rule of law. For these imperial ambitions, Russia continues to destroy the civilian structure of entire cities (schools, hospitals, food storage facilities, railway stations, etc.), the cultural and spiritual heritage of Ukraine, and attack manifestations of Ukrainian identity within the occupied territories.

Anton Tarasyuk, a philosopher from Donetsk, presented at the symposium the first volume of his English-language documentary project "Living the War", which is aimed, among others, at Western readers and contains memories of Kyiv residents about the first days of the Russian invasion.⁶

One of the participants in this project is the well-known Ukrainian historian, Natalia Yakovenko.

⁶ Living the War, <https://livingthewar.media/>, accessed June 12, 2023.

The last session of the symposium raised questions regarding the peace-making potential of prominent religious actors. Patrice Hrimle from Mariupol State University provided detailed insight into the position of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople regarding the war in Ukraine. She mentioned that Patriarch Bartholomew was one of the first religious and public figures to condemn Russian military terrorism in Ukraine in 2014 referring to the Easter Epistle on 20 April 2014, as well as his statement on 6 April 2022.

Kateryna Budz, Combe Trust Fellow at the University of Edinburgh, analysed the responses of the Ukrainian-Greek Catholic Church to the Russo-Ukrainian War. The escalation of the ongoing war since 24 February 2022 demonstrated the high involvement of the UGCC in the war efforts, ranging from introducing war-related litanies in the liturgy to clergy's appeals and actions to support the Ukrainian army and displaced people. Few, if any, would doubt that Ukraine's struggle against the invader is a just war, also in light of the Catholic teaching. Therefore, many Greek Catholics find it difficult to understand Pope Francis's reconciliation narrative, seeing it as a lack of support from the Apostolic See.

Tetiana Kalenychenko, Director of the "European Centre for Strategic Analytics", based in Kyiv, highlighted the ethical perspectives of religious leaders in Ukraine. Not only Orthodox clergy but other Christian denominations and non-Christian religious organizations create those opportunities for the future rebuilding of the identity of Ukrainians, a re-thinking of a national strategy, and stitching together the social landscape. However, all these good goals for society require from the religious communities themselves readiness for difficult topics, a complex perception of events rather than a black-and-white vision, as well as sufficient theological justification.

In summarizing the results of the symposium after the final session on 17 February, Professor of Church History Thomas Prügl pointed out three important areas that emerged over the various sessions.⁷ First, reflections on the nature of war, which includes not only the necessity of a new concept of a just war and a just peace but also the experience of the ongoing war as a transforming reality for politics, society, and religion. Second, the role of communication and consent building during the war.

⁷ Österreich: Friedensnobel-Preisträgerin sprach über Kriegsleid//Vatican News, 3. Mar. 2023, <https://www.vaticannews.va/de/kirche/news/2023-03/oesterreich-uni-wien-ukraine-krieg-symposium-friedensnobelpreis.html>, accessed June 12, 2023.

The way how Ukrainians cope with the war, especially on social media, through images, literature, and folklore, generates a common narrative, based on shared values and hopes. It manifests a unitedness and optimism of the “Maidan Generation” and a “new” Ukraine. Third, the symposium highlighted the role of religion and religious communities, which play a paramount role in strengthening Ukrainian resilience, but also in providing ethical guidance through dark times. Prof. Prügl thanked the participants for their revealing papers. The main result was indeed to help people outside Ukraine to see the war with the eyes of objects of military aggression.

Thomas Mark Németh, Priest of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church and Professor for Eastern Christian Studies, emphasized in his closing remarks that the Vienna symposium has provided an important platform for an interdisciplinary exchange of ideas. As an academic discipline, theology, in particular, could contribute to promoting discourse on religious and ethical dimensions of this war and take into account the role of churches and other religious organizations in a free and democratic society but also enable critical reflection within these institutions. Instead of insisting on perpetual privileges, the churches have to conceive of themselves and their mission as part of a civil public, as Tetiana Kalenychenko pointed out. The study of Russia’s war against Ukraine, as Pavlo Smytsnyuk suggested, is now at an initial stage. Thus, the symposium was a good start for further interdisciplinary approaches and for creating a network among young Ukrainian and European scholars, and therefore a good investment for the future. The conference proceedings will be published in 2024.