

## **Memory of the Ongoing War in Modern Ukrainian Poetry**

The presented article analyzes selected modern poetic texts about the Russian-Ukrainian war of 2022–2023. It was observed that such poetry appears instantly as a kind of artistic reflection and fixation of the new war reality. It is about different genres and topics: *trench lyrics and poetic reporting from the front, refugee poetry, story of a survivor / victim, philosophical meditation and other genres* – in traditional rhyming or free verse. Most often, the authors post such poetry on social networks, often not only poets themselves, but also ordinary users record videos with these texts and upload the content to Tik Tok or YouTube (sometimes such video texts gain thousands of views and become “viral”). It is also an established practice when a poetic text becomes a song, and then a hit. Ukrainian war poetry is not only a text, but also media content, which determines its high popularity and recognition. From this point of view, the poetic works of well-known Ukrainian poets – Viktoria Amelina, Ihor Astapenko, Tania Vlasova, Lesia Horova, Borys Humeniuk, Svitlana Didukh-Romanenko, Halyna Kruk, Anna Maligon, Oksana Stomina, Natalka Slobodianiuk, Tetiana Yarovitsyna – were included for analysis.

Modern Ukrainian war poetry can be conditionally divided into several thematic layers. First of all, it is about the depiction of the *actual war* as a battlefield between Russian occupiers and Ukrainian defenders (frontline sketches, portraits of Ukrainian defenders, commemoration of the fallen soldiers). Also, an important part of poetic texts is *a reflection of war reality*, which is now everyday life for civilian Ukrainians (occupied and de-occupied territories of Ukraine, missiles-bomb terror of peaceful towns and villages, psychosomatics of war, when no one anywhere in Ukraine can feel completely safe). *Voices of Ukrainian forced migrants* are also an important poetic testimony of tragedy of the ukrainian war. The analysed texts, representing war poetry, formed a whole layer of the national and universal

archive. They correlate with the collective memory of Ukrainian people, strengthen its individual moments, highlight the names of heroes, form a kind of poetic monument to all those who suffered from the actual war in Ukraine.

**Keywords:** memory, archive, memorial, trauma, war, Ukraine.

## 1. Interpreting the war

In her comprehensive research of the nature of trauma, C. Caruth suggests that the study of catastrophic experience “[...] provides access to a new type of historical events, to emergence of a history of disaster, which requires a shift in understanding, as well as unprecedented actions and reactions” (Caruth 2022: 14). At the same time, such studies express a general understanding of the “[...] place (mechanism?) of historical memory” (Caruth 2022: 13), which contributes to transformation of trauma into its own “monument”/ “place of memory”/ “memorial”. Modern Ukrainian poetry about the war can be considered as such a mechanism that transforms the catastrophic reliving of the Russian full-scale invasion into the plane of verbal proclamation. Poetic texts about the war in 2022–2023 appear instantly as a kind of artistic reflection and fixation of the new military reality. There are different genre and thematic planes: trench lyrics and poetic report from the front line, refugee poetry, story of a survivor / victim, philosophical meditation and other genres in traditional rhyming or *verlibre*. Most authors publish such poetry in social networks, often not only the poets themselves, but also ordinary users record videos with these texts and post content in Tik Tok or YouTube (sometimes such video texts gain thousands of views, and become “viral”). It is also a usual practice when a poetic text becomes a song, and then a hit. Ukrainian war poetry is not only a text, but also media content, which determines its high popularity and recognisability. This poetic art not only facilitates the wording of trauma (first of all the trauma of reliving the war and the trauma of forced displacement), but also carefully notes individual memorial fragments that complete step by step the pages of national archive. Primarily, it is about the fame – military glory of fallen heroes, reflected in art as a three-component structure: “[...] outstanding actions, their memory, and memory of descendants” (Assmann 2014: 45). The term *fame* refers mainly to memory as a structure capable to keep

important information for descendants. It is about a national myth, which brings national heroes to the fore. These are victorious personalities, soldiers who defended their Motherland, contributed their lives for it. *Fame* is an integral part of the cultural archive of every nation, because the memory of national heroes is carefully preserved and transferred from a generation to next generation.

The cluster of memory of those who did not return from the battlefield, giving their lives for the Motherland, correlates with the cluster of memory of innocent victims among civilian population and creates a mosaic canvas of the tragedy that the Ukrainian people are experiencing in “live” mode, because modern tools of observation and video recording make it possible to see the Russian-Ukrainian war “live”, which creates its own paradox of modern world, which is powerless to stop the unprecedented bloodshed in the middle of Europe. At the same time, the episodes of this terrible war, engraved in particular in modern Ukrainian poetry, have already become fragments of history, created new sections of the national and universal archive. These texts do not always are published as books, like the last poetry collection “People with Verbs” by Kateryna Kalytko (Kalytko, 2022), which partly became a reflection of the full-scale Russian invasion. Many poetic texts of this war become a kind of media performance, and belong to mass culture. This is just a simple form of poetry that fits easily into music and can be recited from the stage. Today, only a small part of these poems is translated into English, so it is primarily addressed to the domestic Ukrainian audience, but it does not testify its self-isolation, but the immanent essence. Today, the poetic Ukrainian content in the social media like Tik Tok, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Telegram is practically unavailable to foreign users who do not know the Cyrillic alphabet. This huge scope of texts is displayed on queries in Cyrillic, conveying such keywords in the Ukrainian language as “war of aggression”, “full-scale Russian invasion”, “missile strikes”, “occupation”, “terror of civilian population”, “refugees”, etc. (these are Ukrainian words in their Cyrillic writing). For example, there is a large number of groups on Facebook where anyone can post their poetic texts in Ukrainian: “Українська поезія і проза” group (290 thousand followers), “Вірші (поезія, лірика), проза” group (14 thousand followers), “УКРАЇНСЬКА ПОЕЗІЯ ДЛЯ ВСІХ” (13 thousand followers) etc. At the same time, there are extremely popular Ukrainian poets Serhii Zhadan, Pavlo Vyshebababa, Tania Vlasova, Anastasia Dmytruk, Artem Polezhaka, who

publish their own poetic texts in their personal accounts on Facebook or Tik Tok, perform their works in concerts, where the visitors record videos and share them in social networks. There is, of course, no single platform or single hashtag for such poetic texts of war. Their existence in the media space is quite often chaotic, unsystematic, intertwined with other important posts, personal blogs, live broadcasts from the places of Russian terrorist attacks or simply from the front line. Such situation corresponds to the existence of a country experiencing the catastrophe of a full-scale invasion, provoked and justified by nothing but the imperial ambitions of the Putin regime. Modern Ukrainian war poetry is one of the faces of Ukraine today, because it fully reflects the entire range of emotions and feelings of ordinary Ukrainian people.

The poetic vision of the Russian-Ukrainian war (2014–2022) in modern Ukrainian poetry has already become the object of research by Ukrainian literary experts, namely O. Derkachova (Derkachova 2017), Yu. Kovaliv (Kovaliv 2022), B. Pastukh (Pastukh 2016), Ya. Polishchuk (Polishchuk 2016), O. Pukhonska (Pukhonska 2022), but an infinite number of poetic texts published after 24 February 2022, certainly need further research. Therefore, the task of present research consists in the analysis of the newest Ukrainian poetry, which is already a war memorial and preserves in particular the memory of a soldier, “contributes to the glory of this person among the contemporaries and tarnishes the name for descendants” (Assmann 2014: 45), and also records the survival experience of peaceful people and reveals the memories of refugees. From this point of view, it is possible to talk about poetic reflection of modern Ukrainian authors Viktoria Amelina, Ihor Astapenko, Pavlo Vyshebababa, Tania Vlasova, Liudmyla Horova, Borys Humeniuk, Svitlana Didukh-Romanenko, Galyna Kruk, Anna Maligon, Oksana Stomina, Natalka Slobodianuk, Tetiana Yarovitsyna. Poetry of these authors were selected in accordance with several criteria. First, these are the texts of mass literature, which have a certain media coverage and *popularity*. For example, the poem “Enemy” (“Враже”) by Liudmyla Horova became a song and a kind of anthem of the heroic struggle of Ukrainian people against the full-scale Russian war of aggression in February 2022; the titles of poetic texts “Headquarters” (“Штаб”) by Ihor Astapenko (Yasinovskii 2022), “Just don’t write to me about the war (for my daughter)” (“Тільки не пиши мені про війну (доньці)”) by Pavlo Vyshebababa (Vyshebababa 2022) and “I’m not a cyborg” (“Я не кіборг”) by Tania Vlasova (PROSTO VANIOK 2022) are

listed in hundreds of videos in social media Tik Tok and YouTube from both amateurs and professional performers. Further, an important selection reason was also the fact that it is mostly about poetic voices that sounded after 2022.

## **2. When guns talk, the muses cannot be silent**

“The Maidan, the war changed the vector of Ukrainian poetry. In fact, there is no poet who did not refer to this topic. If earlier the war was a symbol of an abstract struggle, a duel of emotions and feelings, now it acquires other connotations” (Derkachova 2017: 17), even in 2017 O. Derkachova noted significant changes that have taken place in Ukrainian poetry after the historically significant events of 2013–2014. It is noteworthy that in her studies at that time, the researcher refers to the military-political situation in Ukraine by the term “(non)war”, because the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of the Russian Federation in the east of Ukraine remained “unnoticed” by the civilized world for a long time or was presented as an “internal civil conflict” due to the hybrid information technologies used by Moscow. The situation changed after 24 February 2022, when Putin regime launched a direct military invasion into Ukraine. It was no longer possible to “disguise” such a war of aggression against the Ukrainian state with the inappropriate term “special action”, which was invented by Putin regime to hide its own crimes once again. Therefore, the (non)war in Ukraine, which began in 2014, lost its ghostly invisibility due to local limitations and reached the scale of global tragedy, because the world sincerely hoped that wars in Europe would end with the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is the newest cluster of memory, which recorded the events of 2022–2023 not only in the national, but also in the global archive.

The formation of each national archive is obviously not a linear process. History gravitates around tragic events, compacting its canvas, which is formed not only due to professional observers. Thus, the memory of the Russian-Ukrainian war in Ukraine is also constructed by means of art. Of course, visual practice comes to the fore, because photo and video recording, and artistic representation of the tragic military reality in general happens instantly and does not require additional comments – everything is clear without words. However, the need to reflect on events remains one of the basic human needs. Therefore, modern Ukrainian war poetry takes on such a

role: it simultaneously records certain event, and reflects on it, talks about trauma.

Modern Ukrainian war poetry can be conditionally divided into several thematic layers. Primarily, it is about depiction of the actual war as a battlefield between Russian occupiers and Ukrainian defenders (frontline sketches, portraits of Ukrainian defenders, commemoration of fallen soldiers). Also, an important layer of poetic texts is reflection of the war reality, which is now everyday life for civilian Ukrainians (occupied and de-occupied territories of Ukraine, missile-bomb terror of peaceful towns and villages, psychosomatics of war, when no one anywhere in Ukraine can feel completely safe). The voices of Ukrainian forced migrants are also an important poetic testimony about the tragedy of the big war. This traumatic experience completely unknown previously, recoded in the language of art, can be defined as refugee poetry, when the authors write about the painful loss of their native home and the equally painful loss of identity abroad due to forced displacement. The presented research will cover the three mentioned directions in order to outline as broadly as possible those fragments of collective memory that complete the newest archive of resistance to the Russian full-scale invasion in Ukraine.

### **3. Fame as poetic memorial to the Ukrainian military**

Fame, the term used by A. Assmann (Assmann 2014), is the most plastic when talking about military achievements of those people who defended or defend their native country. It is about preserving memorable names and events for future generations, so fame is always associated with a particular memorial. In this research, we apply the term fame to the poetry of war, the best examples of which will also become a kind of verbal monument for descendants. This discourse is generally not new for Ukrainian literature. In our national archive, we have formed images of a warrior-rebel, a warrior-avenger, a warrior-rescuer, and a warrior-defender of our native country, which very organically capture collective memories and in some way are similar to the model of *oral stories*.

Tradition of Ukrainian heroic poetry (epic poetry), which has formed the frame of fame, dates back more than a century. Difficult time of the Liberation War 1648–1654 led by Bohdan Khmelnytskyi is powerfully disclosed from this point of view. Unavoidable are both author and anonym

texts that have become folk songs today and reflect historical realities, in particular, the victory of defenders of Ukraine. For example, “The Cossack Went over the Danube” by Simeon Polotsky or “Here Zaporizhzhia Hetman laid his bones” by Kasian Sakovych (many of such poems were included in *Marsove pole* Edition, edited by Valery Shevchuk (Marsove pole, 2004)); as well as folk songs “Oi na hori ta zhentsi zhnut” (Oh, on the mountain, reapers are reaping), “Scho za holos u dolyni” (What is a voice in the valley), “Oi slavnyi horod a Vydmedivka a vsima storonamy” (Oh, glorious city Vydmedivka and all sides). “Virsh na herb Voiska Zaporozhskoho” (Poem on the Coat of Arms of Zaporizhzhia Army) from the chronicle of Hadiach Colonel Hryhorii Hrabianka, which describes the history of the Cossacks from the time of its origin until 1709, also belongs to the same time. This work also describes in detail the first coat of arms of the Ukrainian Cossacks – a Cossack knight with a musket on shoulder, who guards his native land. The poem became a kind of a military anthem after the Ukrainian church leader, scientist, writer, composer and theologian Dmytro Tuptalo wrote the music for it. Today, this Cossack’s anthem has got new life in Ukraine: Chorea Kozacka band performs it under the name “Viiska Zaporizkoho voin znamenytyi” (Famous Defender of Zaporizhia Troops) (Chorea Kozacka 2017).

The closest in time and in spirit to the poetic texts of the ongoing war is the poetry of Ukrainian Sich Riflemen (the time of the World War I and the liberation battles in Ukraine in 1918–1921) – Petro Karmanskyi, Levko Lepkyi, Hryhorii Trukh, Stepan Charnetskyi and other poets. Many of these works became songs and gained widespread popularity. Thus, the poem “Oi u luzi chervona kalyna” (Oh, red viburnum in meadow) by Stepan Charnetskyi actually became a national song, another undeclared national anthem of Ukraine. At the beginning of Russian full-scale invasion in the sieged Kyiv, the well-known Ukrainian singer Andrii Khlyvniuk performed this song and posted a video on YouTube (Khlyvniuk 2022), which caused a powerful moral uplift among Ukrainians and at the same time caused the exit of “Chervona Kalyna” beyond the purely Ukrainian locus, making it popular all over the world. In the same year 2022, the cult band Pink Floyd recorded a cover version of this song called “Hey, Hey, Rise Up!” (Pink Floyd 2022). The symbol of red viburnum, which personified Ukraine and its stoicism, desire for freedom and independence, passed from the memory of Ukrainian

people to the general civilization archive, and became a universal symbol of strength of spirit and indomitability.

In the review of poetic texts of 20<sup>th</sup> century about the military glory, we can also mention poems written by Ukrainian Soviet writers during the occupation and liberation of Ukraine from Nazi forces in 1941–1943 – Mykola Bazhan, Andrii Malyshko, Maksym Rylskyi, Volodymyr Sosiura, Pavlo Tychyna. However, such poetry marked by canons of socialist realism, where portraits of communist dictators Lenin and Stalin appeared next to images of the Motherland and its defenders, did not get used among Ukrainian people, but became one of testimonies of the trials that fallen to their fate.

The full-scale war of aggression in February 2022, which was not declared by Russian Federation, led to an unprecedented rise of Ukrainian identity, which almost instantly initiated a new poetic discourse. Professor of Kyiv University Yu. Kovaliv explains this phenomenon as follows: “Powerful rise of mobile genre-generic formation is caused by appearance after 24 February of a passionarian psychotype, who feeding of historical and ethno-mental memory is motivated to make a historically justified resistance against Moscow aggressor and defends his home, his family, his land, human and national dignity. He became the main lyrical hero of modern poetry, among the authors of which there are many soldiers of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, Local Defence, hospitalists, volunteers, as well as exiles and eyewitnesses of the national trial on the verge of life and death due to heroic act and through suffering” (Kovaliv 2022).

#### **4. “Germination” of war / “germination” into war**

The new military reality shocks and changes the usual picture of well-being and prosperity to the opposite. Familiar words acquire new meanings and senses. In a moment, ordinary people find themselves in the trenches, kill enemies, sustain injuries and may die defending their homeland. Such a modification of peaceful reality, emergence of war in it, is recorded by well-known Ukrainian poet Halyna Kruk, whose war poems were published in Dublin last year in English translation. It is about collective anthology “INVASION. Ukrainian Poems about the War” (INVASION 2022), which includes the works of fifty-five authors of different generations, representing all regions of Ukraine. In one of his poems, Kruk writes: “cross like a rhyme,



fire, cool down, stop / cash of sounds and letters scattered from the first BUK<sup>62</sup> / learned the names of plants upon shelling – Peony<sup>63</sup> and Tulip<sup>64</sup> / Hyacinth<sup>65</sup> and Carnation,<sup>66</sup> / deadly like a viper” (Kruk 2022). Obviously, a fighter who is not named by the poet is very young, because his yesterday’s school or university experience correlates with what he saw and heard on the battlefield, where quite possibly he found himself for the first time. The fear of crossfire is imposed on the recently acquired knowledge of cross rhyming, which may indicate a warrior’s profession. The fighter has to learn the names of plants in a new way, putting completely different connotations into the names of beautiful spring flowers. This dissonance cannot be understood or put into some logical paradigm, and in fact into the essence of war. The poem ends with a tragic statement of death of the unnamed fighter: “flying like birds, missiles land in the fields, / in the football fields of the schools with a pungent smell of grass / the golden ball of sun sees who the yesterday’s boy / still hits for his own, but already outside the game” (Kruk 2022). The author also imposes paradigm of school life on this final scene, outlines the deadly essence of military confrontation and at the same time its senselessness not only for the nature, but also in general for the state of all things on the Earth. Assumption about young age of the unknown defender of homeland, as it can be made first, Kruk confirms in final lines, calling her hero “yesterday’s boy”. The author describes the picture of war with emphasized detachment – like a video recorder deprived of emotional perception – with the help of short,

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<sup>62</sup> BUK (translated from Russian language “beech”, deciduous tree) is a Soviet self-propelled anti-aircraft missile system designed to combat manoeuvring aerodynamic targets (cruise missiles, guided bombs, airplanes, helicopters, UAVs, etc.).

<sup>63</sup> Peon (translated from Russian language “peony”, a flowering plant) is a Soviet 203-mm self-propelled gun designed to suppress the rear, destroy especially important objects and means of nuclear attack in a tactical depth at a distance of up to 47 km.

<sup>64</sup> Tulpan (translated from Russian as “tulip”, flowering plant) is a Soviet self-propelled mortar of 240 mm calibre, designed to destroy the most fortified fortifications, capable of firing ultra-low-power tactical nuclear munitions. The Russians used it during the storming of Luhansk airport (2014) and during the storming of the Azovstal plant during the battles for Mariupol (2022).

<sup>65</sup> Hyacinth (translated from the Russian language “hyacinth”, a flowering plant) is a Soviet 152-mm self-propelled gun designed to suppress and destroy the means of a nuclear attack, defeat the control bodies, rear areas, manpower and combat equipment of the enemy.

<sup>66</sup> Gvozdika (translated from the Russian language “carnation”, flowering plant) is a Soviet 122-mm self-propelled artillery installation based on the MT-LB chassis, which is designed for the destruction of manpower, artillery batteries, pillboxes, as well as for ensuring passages in minefields and field fences.

fragmentary sentences, like gunshots. This way of depicting emphasizes the tragic nature of what is depicted, visualizes the bloody sacrifices paid by Ukrainian people for their own freedom.

In the first months of the full-scale invasion of Russian troops into Ukraine, thousands of Ukrainians voluntarily expressed their desire to defend the Motherland, and there were kilometre long queues of volunteers at the conscription centres. Ordinary Ukrainians who never studied military affairs wanted to join the Armed Forces of Ukraine. At first, the regular army could not accommodate all those who wanted, so numerous TrO (Local Defence Units)<sup>67</sup> and volunteer battalions<sup>68</sup> were formed, which also actively opposed the enemy. This all-Ukrainian resistance to Russian invaders is often the subject matter of artistic reflection. Thus, a famous Ukrainian poet Ihor Astapenko in his poem “Headquarters” depicts the TrO defenders – ordinary guys who voluntarily stood up to defend the Motherland. Stylistics of the poem, when the author deliberately writes all words with a small letter, brings it closer to graffiti or note in a messenger, deprived of the formalities of spelling, which only states facts and events and retranslates information about them further. In the proscenium of the work there are five men – sania, andriukha, siryi, ivan and a lyrical hero, on whose behalf the poetic narrative unfolds. Astapenko, although he uses the descriptiveness that is bordering on the everyday description, actually unfolds his work on a metaphorical plane: “sania has never seen the sea. / never in his life. just imagine!” ; “andriukha constantly sighs heavily. / looks into his kalash.<sup>69</sup> / he devoted his whole life to a plant and, god willing, has experience. / now there is no plant. broken down. / andriukha has two small ones at home. / metal rings in his ears. i hear him. i’m used to it.”; “siryi has a red prima in his mouth. he smokes two packs a day. / i see how fear comes out of his lungs with snow-white smoke.” (Astapenko 2022). With help of such simple, but semantically comprehensive characteristics, the author conveys to the reader the simple idea that before him are not heroes, but ordinary guys who came from a peaceful life to war. Some of them feel fear, some are angry, and some are afraid to admit to their

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<sup>67</sup> Local Defence Units (TrO) are a separate type of forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, which are responsible for organization, preparation and execution of territorial defence tasks.

<sup>68</sup> Volunteer battalion is a military or police, sometimes paramilitary formation, joining which is on a voluntary basis. The first volunteer battalions in Ukraine were formed in 2014 in response to Russian aggression.

<sup>69</sup> Kalash - Kalashnikov machine gun (abbreviated AK), automatic carbine, the most common small arms in the world.

peers that they are writing poems, because “who needs them now? / they will, for God sake, still call him a poet. i don’t like it. / who are you going to pick up and spit poetry in the face now?” (Astapenko 2022). These ordinary men make up the “headquarters” of Local Defence – the decision-making centre. Namely they, but not politicians, who decide the fate of their own country.

Tania Vlasova, speaking on behalf of ordinary soldiers of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, asserts a similar opinion in her poem: “I am not a cyborg – I am a history teacher. / read a lot about wars. / There are thousands of people like me here. / And they really want to be free” (Vlasova 2022). Both works outline an important cluster of national memory: the newest war in Ukraine has a nationwide character, almost everyone wants to join the defence of the home land. This is evidenced by large number of videos made with the words of both mentioned works: in YouTube and Tik Tok social networks, upon the request “headquarters” and “I am not a cyborg”, there are many videos recorded with the works of Astapenko and Vlasova – both by professional actors, and ordinary users of social networks, mainly schoolchildren and students. Both works imitate a monologue, written while preserving peculiarities of oral speech, addresses to an unknown addressee, which makes them as easy as possible to perceive and which can be interpreted as a kind of poetic message to future generations, who hundreds of years later will read and decode these texts in a new way.

A notable feature of the big war in Ukraine is also the large number of women among soldiers of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, and among volunteer battalions, and of course, among hospitalists and volunteers. A Ukrainian woman goes to war to defend her home land side by side with her man. Natalia Slobodianiuk records this important collective memory in her poem: “Crystal queen / walks in armour. / The Queen from the City of Lviv / is now at war. // Someone with flowers, someone on holiday / and full life without limits. / And she with a machine gun / in whirlwind of fires” (Slobodianiuk 2016). The author uses metaphors, which are typical for Ukrainian folklore, imitates language of a folk song. At the same time, Slobodianiuk’s poem is composed on a combination of incompatibles (“crystal / armour”, “war / holiday”, “flowers / machine gun”), where everything leads reader to the main antithesis: a woman who should give life is forced to take it away in war; a fragile woman (“the crystal queen”) takes weapon to protect and defend her home land from invaders. A frontline poet Borys Humeniuk, who has been defending Ukraine since 2014 from the time

of hybrid war in Crimea and Donbas, reveals the theme of femininity in war in a completely different way. If Slobodianiuk writes poetic about Ukrainian defender woman, talks about her courage and bravery, Humeniuk, after many years at the front, is not ready to accept death of a female soldier on the battlefield. In his poem “Somehow it’s easier when men die” the poet writes: “It’s unnatural when girls die / Neither a glass nor a cigarette saves / If you listen, you can hear / How in complete silence above the coffin / The souls of unborn children sob” (Humeniuk 2018: 83). Humeniuk, who is deprived of lyricism in his maximally realistic, naturalistic texts about the war, in some way softens the general tone of narrative in this poem. This atypical weakness of a warrior, who has seen many deaths, indicates formation of a new narrative for Ukrainian literature describing a woman in war (military femininity). Such a story contains a certain contradiction, because a military woman, destined to give birth and to continue existence of human race, takes part in battles and brings death to invaders. It seems to deny the ontological basis of existence, but it fits into paradigm of sacred duty to protect the home land. Thus, the modern Ukrainian war poetry outlines a titanic shift in collective mind, when society is just getting used to accept military women, and sometimes it is not ready to say goodbye to established stereotypes.

## **5. War instead of peaceful life: experience of survival**

A powerful layer of collective memory of Ukrainians about big war was reflected in poetry, the authors of which describe catastrophic changes in peaceful life after 24 February 2022. According to official UN statistics (as of 9 March 2023), 8 173 Ukrainian civilian people died during Russian full-scale invasion in Ukraine and 13 620 were wounded. The cause of death of majority of civilians (94%) were explosive weapons with a large area of damage. Another 6% were killed by mines and explosive devices. It is still unknown how many Ukrainians died in actually completely destroyed Severodonetsk, Lysychansk, Popasna and other settlements in eastern and southern Ukraine. Also, the number of people were killed in Mariupol, which Russians razed to the ground in March–May 2022, is unknown; it is likely that the number of victims among civilian population there is more than 20 000 people. All Ukrainians, without exception, have become hostages of Putin regime, when even in the rear regions of Ukraine one cannot feel safe,

because one of the goals of invaders is to terrorize civilian population through mass missiles and bomb attacks.

Viktoria Amelina, a Ukrainian writer who died in result of a missiles attack on Kramatorsk on 27 June 2023, described this situation of tragic doom in her poem: “happy day of remembrance and reconciliation / air alert / go to shelter, Ukrainians / everyone else can continue / to talk / never again” (Amelina 2022). The author appealed to the civilized world, which gave guarantees to protect Ukraine during nuclear disarmament, but even failed to protect peaceful cities and villages from missile strikes. Situation described in the poem is a reality for many Ukrainians today, when the time they can get down to shelter is equal to the life saved. The probability of hitting civilians is very high. Sometimes one gets the impression that killing civilians in Ukraine with high-precision missiles, the cost of which is millions of dollars, is a special extra-task of genocide, which is systematically carried out by Putin regime. Unfortunately, the writer herself did not have time and opportunity to go down to bomb shelter, so what she wrote a year ago can be interpreted today as a prescient prediction of her own fate. “Air alarm throughout the country,” wrote Amelina in her other poem. – It’s as if every time they lead us to the shooting / All of us / And they aim at only one / Mostly at the one who is at the edge / Today it is not you, / all clear” (Amelina 2022). The poet outlined irrational fear that was born in Ukrainian society with the sounds of air-raid sirens, and the memory of which will obviously be stored at the genetic level and will be transferred from generation to generation. The threat of physical destruction, hopelessness and doom – the feelings of many Ukrainians, which Amelina writes without fail, became fateful for her, outlined her tragic fate. The author herself became the one “who is at the edge”, the next among the innocent victims of Putin’s terrorist regime.

War is all pervading. You cannot hide from it. In his poem “Truth in war”, Ihor Astapenko reinterprets the well-known ancient words in *vino veritas*: the truth is not in wine, but in weapons, in permanent conflict. Obviously, humanity has not learned the tragic lessons of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has not learned to avoid military conflicts and prevent wars. The poet states, using irony: “everything but war does not exist, everything is war. / even the war itself also went to war / death screams at her back: ‘I will catch you’” (Astapenko 2022). However, death catches up, unfortunately, not only to those who go to the front line, because quite often civilian population is under

gun: “the children who became angels did not have time to become people / will children of this war have time to become parents? / and who will free dreams from explosions and sirens? / who will drag the memory with lists of names // of people of whom left only their names? / spring comes to the country through green corridors. / it goes in a camouflage uniform with a rifle on shoulder. / lets birds move their keys into the morning sky” (Astapenko 2022). From perspective of post-war future, the poet reflects on the fate of a survivor, a person who survived horrors of occupation, bombing, forced evacuation, forced displacement. No one can predict for sure how the war will affect generation of those who are now children, how adults, traumatized by many losses and horrors of wartime, will eventually feel. The new military reality distorts human life and destroys nature. Astapenko conveys this with help of a poignant metaphor: his spring does not come to Ukraine with the traditional gifts of greenery and warmth, but sneaks into Ukraine through a green corridor dressed in camouflage, with weapons ready for use.

A well-known Ukrainian poet Anna Malihon in her poem “Bird (A bird flew through a green corridor)” describes an apocalyptic picture of the spring 2022 (the poem was included in the English translation into the already mentioned anthology “INVASION. Ukrainian Poems about the War”). The poet does not give her characters any names, does not name specific cities when she writes what she saw and heard during evacuation from Ukraine. Instead, the poet makes generalizations, uses metaphors and symbols. This gives “Bird” a universal sound. The reader understands that terrible events in the green corridor, through which Ukrainians tried to leave the territories occupied by Russians, could have happened anywhere – in Bucha, and in Kherson, and in Mariupol: “There were three of them and no one succeeded – / because of anger, they snatched away the earrings from her ears – / Madonna with a bandaged head / feeds her son from a bottle / Milk is gone / but they are alive” (Malihon 2022). The author reproduces the traditional idea of a Ukrainian refugee as a mother who saves her children. With this topic “Bird” proves an intermedial connection with the famous painting by Marina Solomennikova “Ukrainian Madonna”, which has got considerable popularity not only within the Ukrainian, but also within the global community, and also has an interesting intermedial history.

Andras Fjoldes, a well-known Hungarian photographer, was in Kyiv during the first days of the full-scale invasion and recorded what he saw. It was he who took the photo of Tetiana Blyzniak, a young mother with a baby

in her arms, who was hiding in the capital's subway during the air raid. Fjoldesh published the photo in Instagram and called it "Madonna from the Kyiv subway". Later, this picture was share by many news media, thereby testifying the tragic dimension that Ukrainian society experienced during the Russian war. It was the picture that inspired Maryna Solomennikova, an artist from Dnipro, to paint her own work. The fact that the icon was redrawn from Solomennikova's painting and placed in one of the temples of Naples is also surprising, where the network of Kyiv subway looks golden and creates a kind of nimbus around the head of the depicted mother. Malihon interprets the image of Ukrainian Madonna in her own way. Her character becomes a refugee, a seeker of temporary asylum. The lyrical character of her poetry turns into an invisible bird that flies away from her home land through a green corridor, carrying "in its beak a few foreign words / a few twigs for a new nest" (Malihon 2022).

The apocalyptic pictures of destroyed homes, abandoned pets, bombed roads and blown up bridges are impressive because such a situation could happen in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the middle of Europe. However, quite often the paths to salvation, the so called green corridors, turned into the paths of death. Numerous cases are known when Russian military fired on civilian convoys moving to western borders of Ukraine along a predetermined route. For example, on the Zhytomyr highway (M06), near Kyiv, Russian military shot 10 vehicles from their positions from 4 to 25 March 2022, in result of shootings 13 people were killed.<sup>70</sup> The poet writes about this, in particular, noting that "the green corridor turns into red" (Malihon 2022).

The grief of seeing the plundered homeland is immeasurable, the pain of thousands of murdered people cannot be expressed in words. Conscience refuses to accept new and new victims of the undeclared Russian war in Ukraine, the goal of which is a banal annexation of new territories. The pain is replaced by hatred against occupiers, who violated the basic right of people to live peacefully in their own country. This is how rage is born in the collective subconscious, which comes to the light in numerous memes, poems, songs, the meaning of which boils down to wishing death for enemies. A whole layer of modern Ukrainian folklore (Internetlore) is being formed, when the names of the authors are sometimes lost, and the most distinct memes or texts live their own lives. One of the most notable works of this

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<sup>70</sup> The identities of Russian war criminals were proved.

type is Lesia Horova's incantation poem "Enemy", which became a folk song performed by Anky Kreyda.<sup>71</sup> In her work, Horova imitates the language of a folk incantation, an ancient curse aimed at depriving enemy of force and calling for death. Such a curse could often be extended to close relatives of enemy – parents, wife, children: "I sow in your eyes, I sow against the night / It happens so to you, enemy, as the Witch says! / How many seeds of rye have fallen in the earth / So many times you, enemy, will be killed!" (Horova 2022). "Enemy" is built on repetitions, reproducing an ancient ritual formula, according to which curse should be told three times, less often seven times in a row. Magic of proto-Ukrainians was closely related to the calendar agricultural cycle, so Horova begins her text with conditional sowing, when everything, even a curse, must be nurtured and grown in order to reap a rich and generous harvest. At the same time, the ancient magic had to acquire a finished verbal formula, which was also built according to a clear script, according to which a word, a spoken curse, had to be confirmed. According to this tradition, Horova writes: "My word is sticky, my word is strong / [...] It will be like the Witch says!" (Horova 2022). Next to the Witch, who orders death of enemy, the author places all the female characters of the family – girl, wife, mother, child: and all the women of the family, led by the Witch, curse the enemy.

Horova shared in an interview that she wrote the poem "Enemy" in the dark days of modern Ukrainian history, when after deoccupation of Kyiv region the terrible truth about the atrocities of occupiers in Bucha, Irpin, Borodianka, Gostomel, Moshchun, Mila, Stoianka and other towns and villages was revealed where Russian military tortured and killed civilian population for almost two months. The poem was created as a type of act of psychotherapy. Talking about negative emotions during the war resonated with many Ukrainians, especially since Horova talks on behalf of all Ukrainian women. This is how magical frame of a witch's curse to death expands to an unprecedented scale, reaches a national sound and meaning.

The song "Enemy" has got more than 18 million views on YouTube within one year, which indicates not the bloodthirstiness of Ukrainians, but their despair and hopelessness, which are compensated by rage and other negative emotions. Instinct of self-preservation is configured in such a way that when a living being is tried to be killed, it is able to release previously

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<sup>71</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cdEEffF7\\_rU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cdEEffF7_rU).



hidden resources to avoid death. Such resource for many Ukrainians, who cannot join the armed resistance against occupiers, became either donates<sup>72</sup> or verbal curses towards invaders, which was embodied in the latest creativity, in particular in Internetlore. From this point of view, Horova's work "Enemy" actualizes an ancient folklore genre, combines modern Ukrainians with their ancestors, who dug by the power of a verbal order, by the power of a curse, gave them a magical meaning.

## **5. Painful loss of home and own identity in refugee poetry**

Forced migration of Ukrainians after Russian full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022 also manifested itself in contemporary Ukrainian art. Refugee poetry, which appeared mainly during the last year, eloquently testifies to the crimes of Putin regime in Ukraine and at the same time complements the national archive, adding to it the voices of those who were deprived of their homes by Russian invasion. It is about a narrative created by authors who, because of the war, were forced to leave Ukraine, sometimes from the temporary occupied territories, and have now found temporary shelter abroad. This narrative is a "message that carries trauma as a sign" (Papadopoulos, 2023: 311) and consists mainly of feminine texts, since the majority of Ukrainian refugees are women who took their children away. The dimension of such poetic reflection today is actually immeasurable, it is impossible to read and count all the poems, because there are a lot of them in various social networks and new instruments appear every day. This state of affairs is due to the number of refugees who left Ukraine after 24 February 2022. In December 2022, Dmytro Lubinets, the Human Rights Commissioner of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine (Parliament), reported that more than 14.5 million Ukrainians had left Ukraine since the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion. Currently, we can talk about the most remarkable texts of already known masters of words, which reflect what millions of Ukrainian refugees feel.

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<sup>72</sup> "Donate" is today in Ukraine a voluntary monetary donation for armaments or other needs of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

Cluster of suffering due to the loss of home, parting with family and friends comes to the foreground in refugee poetry. It is important for a seeker of shelter, as well as for a warrior or a survivor of a missile attack, to talk and record his own memories of forced displacement. Quite often, there was almost no time for meetings and evacuation itself. “We were told: Take only the most valuable!” – Svitlana Didukh-Romanenko, a famous Ukrainian poet temporarily living in Lithuania, shares memorable moments of her own evacuation. – “And we took our children away. / However, all the children are now ours. / Column ‘Temporary exit’ / In the customs declaration of war” (Didukh-Romanenko 2022). Didukh-Romanenko outlines the main reason that drove many forced migrants – wish to take their children to a safe place. The parental instinct, basic for a person, forced many in the first days of the war to move to the western borders of Ukraine. Photos and videos of kilometre-long queues of Ukrainian refugees that gathered on the Polish, Slovak, Hungarian and Romanian borders were all over the news in February 2022.

House that had to be left is perceived as a threatened space. House has lost its main connotation of “shelter”, “safe place”. Anna Malihon, who is currently in France, states: “Our home is a shot boat” (Malihon 2022). And this metaphor very precise characterizes the state of affairs: a boat in which a hole appeared in result of a missile hit is doomed and can no longer fulfill its main purpose. Situation of existential impasse, when it is impossible to go back, because sometimes the physical home doesn’t exist, is intensified by destruction of personal boundaries, loss of natural functioning and disruption of usual way of life. It is not only about the loss of a home, but also about painful loss of own identity, because a refugee loses all his previous experience, education, skills and habits along with his home and the homeland, and is forced to undergo adaptation in a new and unfamiliar society. Tetiana Yarovitsyna, who is currently in Belgium, writes about such a painful experience of parting with her native home and trying to settle in someone else’s. The poet writes about a refugee, a woman who found herself abroad with no prospects of returning home in near future. She is well aware of the problems faced by a forced migrant: “You don’t sleep at night, but in the day your heart is squeezed / you descend into yourself as if into a mine / to extract something useful / it’s the hundredth day that the war has been going on / and we have forgotten how to live and enjoy / your soul is a drop of light / fragile” (Yarovitsyna 2022). The quoted poem is entitled “100+”,

referring to the hundred days of the war, which fundamentally changed life, dividing it into “before” and “after”.

Quite often, refugees can certify residence in two spaces at the same time. Physically, they are in Lithuania or Poland, Austria or France, but mentally and spiritually they continue to live in Ukraine, when the day begins and ends with news from their native country. Every day, forced migrants contact home through all possible messengers to hear the voices of relatives and friends, to make sure that they are relatively safe. Oksana Stomina,<sup>73</sup> a poet who miraculously managed to escape from occupied Mariupol on 16 March 2022 and went to Germany, talks about lost home, which is equal to a lost identity, about an existential situation of hopelessness, which can be described as “nowhere”, in her poetic work: “I have recently been everywhere and I am nowhere / Stubbornly and relentlessly / Wherever I find myself, the war goes on, it breathes behind my back / It scratches my heart, whispers dreams of inevitable. / Wherever I find myself, I am always in Kharkiv and Bucha... // There is too much sulphur and iron in me now. / My universe is in my sad thoughts. My home is a suitcase / My function is to hate the damn gang forever. / Where is my happiness and my husband, I don’t even know... / Vainly I hide sadness and tiredness from myself and from people. / Wherever I come, I’m nowhere, and I want to go home” (Stomina 2022). Oksana Stomina is waiting for her husband, a soldier of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, to return from Russian captivity. He was one of the defenders of Azovstal in Mariupol. Currently, the woman has no contact with him. His fate is unknown.

Among the forced war refugees, there is no one who does not dream of returning home. Even if the house itself in its physical dimensions is no longer there, even if the reality of post-war Ukraine will look like the destroyed post war Europe, all refugees seek to be in their native space for at least an hour. Love for the home country is an irrational feeling that cannot be logically interpreted or explained in clear categories, but at the same time, it is so powerful that it is impossible to ignore it. Everyone feels nostalgia away from home, and it is the flip side of the already mentioned love. Such feelings and emotions can be traced in almost all poetic texts of Ukrainian refugees: each of the poets dreams of returning home, visualizes this picture

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<sup>73</sup> <https://donbas24.news/news/oksana-stomina-cerez-svoyi-virsi-ta-spogadi-znaiomit-nimciv-z-mariupolem>.

of the future. “When the roads will lead home”, Svitlana Didukh-Romanenko foresees the unknown tomorrow in her poetic text. “And will merge with the familiar roads / And arms will be opened from both sides, / Finally / You will take off fatigue like an old backpack, / In which day and night you carried worldwide, / Dad’s smile, / Mom’s warm look, / An old pear that supported the roof, / First love and true love, / And something that no one can tell” (Didukh-Romanenko 2022). The way home is similar to the epic “Odyssey”, when in order to get home, the lyrical character must go through a series of initiations, endure numerous trials, and must not lose family values and memories, and the belief in her own return. The desire to go back, to feel how the fatigue of a foreign country finally falls off the shoulders, like an old backpack, is a thematic layer inherent in the refugee poetry.

## **7. New memory map**

The actual war in Ukraine, in fact, in the middle of Europe, turned into a tragedy for Ukrainian people, into catastrophe of a global scale, witnessed collapse of civilizational values, the inability to forestall the invading interests of the former empire in its desperate desire to seize neighbouring territories. Once again, this war provoked an unprecedented resistance of Ukrainian people, which was fully reflected in art, particularly in poetry. Thanks to modern technology, power of the Internet and social networks, the latest poetic texts of war immediately become interactive. War poems appear in virtual space and live as separate texts independent of their authors. Quite often, modern Ukrainian war poetry is close to folklore, can be set to music and become a hit, in fact a folk song (example “Enemy” by Lesya Horova & “Angy Kreida” band, 18 million of views). Quite often, ordinary users of social networks recite some poetry about the war on camera or edit videos with thematic lines and upload such videos to Tik Tok or YouTube. Sometimes such videos become “viral”, turn into flash mobs (“Headquarters” by Ihor Astapenko, “I am not a cyborg” by Tania Vlasova). Poems of war are instantly translated into foreign languages along with reports from the front and eyewitness stories from places of Russian terrorist attacks (unfortunately, terror of civilian population has already become a hallmark of this war, in particular, when I am writing this article, another tragedy has happened again

in Romny town).<sup>74</sup> Thus, poems “Headquarters” by Ihor Astapenko, “Enemy” by Lesia Horova, “Bird” by Anna Malihon have been translated into many foreign languages, included into domestic and foreign anthologies. Therefore, modern Ukrainian war poetry does not really need a paper embodiment. Book representation is sometimes replaced by a virtual one, when a poetic text exists at the level typical for an oral story, embodies collective memory of the pain and suffering brought to Ukraine by Russian invaders.

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<sup>74</sup> [https://lb.ua/society/2023/08/23/571377\\_rosiyskiy\\_shahed\\_vluchiv\\_shkolu.html](https://lb.ua/society/2023/08/23/571377_rosiyskiy_shahed_vluchiv_shkolu.html).

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## **Сећање на савремени рат у модерној украјинској поезији**

У представљеном чланку анализирају се одабрани модерни поетски текстови о руско-украјинском рату 2022–2023. Примећујемо да се таква поезија моментално јавља као својеврсна уметничка рефлексција и фиксација нове ратне стварности. Говоримо о различитим жанровима и темама: рововска лирика и поетско извештавање са фронта, избегличка поезија, прича о преживелом/жртви, филозофска медитација и други жанрови – у традиционалном римовању или слободном стиху. Такву поезију аутори најчешће објављују на друштвеним мрежама, и то не само песници, већ врло често и обични корисници снимају видео снимке са овим текстовима и постављају садржај на Тик-Ток или Јутјуб (понекад такви видео текстови добију хиљаде прегледа и постају „вирални“). Такође је устаљена пракса када поетски текст постане песма, па хит. Украјинска ратна поезија није само текст, већ и медијски садржај, што одређује њену високу популарност и препознатљивост. Са ове тачке гледишта, поетски радови познатих украјинских песника – Викторије Амелине, Ихора Астапенка, Тање Власове, Лесје Хорове, Бориса Гумењука, Свитлане Дидух-Романенко, Галине Крук, Ане Малигон, Оксане Стомине, Наталке Слободјанук, Тетјане Јаровичине – укључени су у анализу.

Модерна украјинска ратна поезија условно се може поделити на неколико тематских слојева. Пре свега, реч је о приказу стварног рата као бојног поља између руских окупатора и украјинских бранилаца (фронтоске скице, портрети украјинских бранилаца, помен палима). Такође, значајан корпус поетских текстова је одраз ратне стварности, која је данас свакодневница за цивилне Украјинце (окупиране и деокупиране територије Украјине, ракетно-бомбашки терор мирних градова и села, психосоматика рата, када се нико нигде у Украјини не може осећати потпуно безбедно). Гласови украјинских присилних миграната су такође важно поетско сведочанство о трагедији рата. Анализирани текстови, репрезентативни за ратну поезију, чинили су читав слој

националног и универзалног архива. Они су у корелацији са колективним памћењем украјинског народа, јачају његове појединачне тренутке, извлаче на површину имена хероја, чине својеврсни поетски споменик свима који су страдали у актуелном рату у Украјини.

**Кључне речи:** сећање, спомен обележје, поезија, траума, рат, Украјина.

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