

TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE OF UKRAINIAN CULTURE IN WARTIME: MILITARY REALITIES AND THE LEGACY OF NATIONAL MEMORY

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Abstract. The theme of traumatic experience in Ukrainian culture and its impact on society has come to the forefront in the context of Ukraine's recent history. Events of the 20th and 21st centuries have shaped a distinctive structure of collective memory that demands reflection. This study examines the phenomenon of cultural trauma caused by the Russian-Ukrainian war and its influence on the current state and future development of national identity. The war brings to the surface both historical experiences of violence and repression and contemporary expressions of cultural resistance, integrating them into a single field of collective experience. In this process, culture functions as a space of memory where experience is transmitted, critically re-evaluated, and transformed into new identity narratives, becoming a cultural resource for the consolidation of society. *Purpose.* To analyze the specific character of the traumatic experience of Ukrainian culture formed at the intersection of today's wartime realities and historically rooted traumas of national memory. *Methods.* The methodological framework of the study is based on cultural and interdisciplinary approaches: the concept of cultural trauma, studies of collective memory, discourse analysis and interpretation of cultural narratives, as well as interpretation of historical-cultural texts and comparative analysis. *Results.* The research demonstrates that Ukrainian culture is undergoing an active transformation driven by the experience of war: the role of documentary practices, history, and public commemorative actions is growing; new artworks addressing contemporary wartime themes

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are emerging; there is a stronger trend toward re-evaluating the Soviet legacy and integrating national traditions into the global context. Traumatic experience proves to be not only a destructive factor but also a catalyst for creative processes, opening opportunities for cultural consolidation. The study classifies the main manifestations of cultural trauma (resentment, experience of famine, inferiority complex, provincialism, Russification, cultural emigration) within the context of current wartime realities. *Practical implications.* The proposed typology can be used in developing humanitarian and cultural policies, cultural therapy, and the design of educational practices and programs aimed at overcoming collective traumas. *Conclusions.* Traumatic experience emerges as a coherent cultural narrative that helps overcome trauma through its symbolic processing, while also creating the foundation for a resilient identity oriented toward freedom, dignity, and historical justice. The study proves that culture, in wartime conditions, fulfills therapeutic, integrative, and prognostic functions, setting new horizons for the development of Ukrainian society.

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of traumatic experience occupies a central place in contemporary cultural and social-humanities research. In international scholarship, the concept of cultural trauma is defined as a process through which a community undergoes an event that leaves a profound imprint on its collective identity and is subsequently reproduced within cultural narratives. As has been observed, «cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways» [2, p. 3]. In the Ukrainian context, traumatic experience encompasses both historical dimensions (colonial legacies, famine, political repression, and Russification) and the more recent challenges of twenty-first-century military aggression. As contemporary Ukrainian scholars note, «the traumatic experience endured by Ukrainian society as a result of Russia's military aggression has reawakened memories of injustices suffered in various historical periods and thereby laid the groundwork for representing Ukrainians as an eternally victimized people» [1, p. 223].

The full-scale war launched against Ukraine in 2022 has served as a catalyst for the actualization of cultural traumas. It has not only revived the experiences of past generations but also generated new forms of collective memory. Consequently, it is essential to develop a typology of traumatic experience in Ukrainian culture in order to identify the mechanisms through which it shapes identity, public sentiment, and cultural strategies of resistance. War, as a sociocultural phenomenon, has always constituted one of the most traumatic experiences for any society: it destroys established ways of life, leaves deep scars in collective memory, creates new symbolic codes, and reshapes conceptions of identity. Today Ukraine confronts a situation in which war is no longer a distant backdrop to history but a defining reality that permeates culture, art, language, and commemorative rituals. As Ukrainian researchers emphasize, «modern Ukrainian society is facing increasing difficulties during the war; stress caused by extreme life events has a significant negative impact on mental health, hinders social activity, constitutes a major risk factor for psychosomatic disorders, and serves as a leading cause of disadaptation» [3, p. 63]. This reality is not only traumatic but also opens new horizons for cultural self-reflection, compelling Ukrainian society to reconsider its past and to create new meanings for the future.

For a nation that has repeatedly been subjected to aggression and totalitarian violence throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the phenomenon of cultural trauma acquires particular significance. The Russian-Ukrainian war, ongoing since 2014 and dramatically intensified after the full-scale invasion of 2022, challenges not only Ukraine's political and economic systems but also the spiritual and cultural foundations of the nation. The war foregrounds urgent questions: What does Ukrainian culture signify in wartime? How does it represent traumatic experience? How do historical layers of memory resonate with the present? The legacy of the Holodomor, Soviet repressions, the Second World War, the Chernobyl disaster, the Maidan protests, and the annexation of Crimea together provide a complex backdrop against which current events acquire new meanings. Contemporary warfare is thus not isolated from the past but interwoven with it, forming a new stratum of national memory. The present war simultaneously generates profound trauma: urban destruction, the forced displacement of millions, the loss of loved ones,

daily encounters with death and uncertainty and stimulates an intense birth of new cultural forms. Literature, music, cinema, theatre, and the visual arts respond rapidly to unfolding events, producing not only artistic works but also documentary testimony. A phenomenon of «frontline art» emerges, both literally – volunteer theatrical and musical initiatives at the front – and metaphorically, through texts and images that give voice to witnesses of war.

Contemporary Ukrainian culture, under wartime conditions, is undergoing an intensive transformation. It not only processes painful experiences of loss and violence but also creates new models of national memory capable of uniting society. Cultural practices, artistic production, literature, and media and public spaces serve as instruments for comprehending wartime realities and as channels for transmitting collective trauma. Equally significant is the dialogue between past and present: memories of the Holodomor, the Second World War, Soviet repressions, and Chornobyl resonate with the current experience of war, generating a multilayered structure of the national narrative. The Russian-Ukrainian war also raises fundamental questions about the nature of cultural memory and its ability not only to preserve but also to reinterpret traumatic experience. Theoretical approaches to cultural trauma, particularly the concepts advanced by Jeffrey C. Alexander [2] and Jan Assmann [4], reveal how events that traumatize a collective acquire symbolic form and become foundational to identity. In Ukraine this process unfolds in open confrontation with the imperial discourse that for centuries sought to marginalize or devalue Ukrainian cultural heritage. The present wartime reality underscores not only the need for preservation but also the creation of new forms of representing memory that meet the existential demands of society.

Within this context, art – ranging from literature and cinema to music, theatre, and visual practices – plays a pivotal role. It serves as a medium for communicating traumatic experience, provides a space for collective witnessing, and fosters the formation of new cultural solidarities. Creative responses to the war function not only as artistic testimony of the epoch but also as a therapeutic instrument, helping society to endure trauma and transform it into a resource for the future. For example, contemporary Ukrainian literature produces works in which the daily experience of war is intertwined with reflection on historical memory. Documentary writing and

reportage prose capture the immediate impressions of eyewitnesses, while imaginative literature seeks ways to transform pain into symbols capable of conveying universal meanings. In cinema, there is a marked growth of interest in the genre of war documentary, which functions both as a means of preserving memory and as an instrument of international communication. Music and theatre likewise actively integrate motifs of wartime symbolism, conveying simultaneously the emotions of mourning and resistance.

At the same time, Ukrainian culture faces the challenge of integrating its traumatic experience into a global context. On the one hand, the war renders Ukraine visible to the world and amplifies its cultural voice; on the other, it is crucial to avoid reducing this experience to the singular image of a «nation-victim». The Ukrainian cultural encounter with trauma is inherently dual: it is, on the one hand, the consequence of aggression and violence that threaten the nation's very existence; on the other, it becomes a source of solidarity, renewed creativity, and a re-evaluation of historical heritage. This paradox – trauma as both destructive and consolidating – demands comprehensive scholarly inquiry employing interdisciplinary approaches that combine cultural studies, history, sociology, psychology, and art history. The aim of this chapter is to trace the interaction of the historical legacy of traumatic experience with the contemporary challenges of wartime and to develop a scholarly typology of this phenomenon. It examines how wartime realities are reflected in cultural practices, how trauma is processed symbolically, and which mechanisms secure the continuity of national memory. Particular emphasis is placed on the interplay between past and present and on the role of culture as the arena in which trauma acquires meaning and is transformed into a resource for societal consolidation. This study seeks to identify those cultural strategies that enable Ukrainian society to preserve its identity while simultaneously shaping a new vision of the future.

2. Historical Clusters of Traumatic Experience in Ukrainian Culture

The phenomenon of trauma in Ukrainian culture cannot be understood outside its historical context. For centuries, Ukraine has endured systemic challenges stemming from colonial subjugation, military catastrophes, political repression, and profound social upheavals. These experiences created distinct clusters of cultural trauma that continue to shape both

collective memory and contemporary cultural practices. They function as symbolic codes, historical narratives, and artistic images that are repeatedly reactivated in different phases of national development.

The full-scale war launched by Putin's Russia in 2022 became a powerful catalyst for the renewed articulation of these cultural traumas. It has not only revived the experiences of previous generations but also produced new forms of collective memory. Hence, a key scholarly task is to develop a typology of traumatic experience in Ukrainian culture in order to reveal the mechanisms through which it influences identity, public sentiment, and the cultural strategies of resistance. In this context, the notion of resentment emerges as a significant form of cultural memory. Within the Nietzschean tradition, resentment designates an emotional-psychological state of collective humiliation that transforms into feelings of grievance, the desire for revenge, and a sense of moral superiority over the «other» [18]. In the socio-cultural debates of the twentieth century, the concept gained particular resonance through the work of Max Scheler, who interpreted resentment as a collective phenomenon generated by prolonged inequality and oppression [20]. In the Ukrainian case, resentment is rooted in a long history of statelessness and the dominance of imperial discourses. It manifests in cultural texts as a persistent return to past traumas – from colonial indignities to Soviet Russification.

In nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature, this sensibility is unmistakable in the poetry of Taras Shevchenko, who persistently voiced resentment as a reaction to the humiliation of «Little Russians» within the Russian Empire. Works such as «The Caucasus» and «To the Dead, the Living, and the Unborn...» are texts of resistance, shaped by the experience of colonial injustice [21]. Ivan Franko, in his 1903 essay *What Is Progress?*, emphasized that the Ukrainian intelligentsia remained in a state of resentment due to the systematic absence of political and cultural agency [22]. During the Soviet era, resentment emerged among generations of Ukrainian intellectuals who endured the repressions of the 1930s, including the so-called «Executed Renaissance». Literature of this period often bore a dual character: outwardly conformist texts coexisted with inner resistance encoded in metaphor [10]. In the contemporary period – especially after 2014 and again in 2022–2023 – resentment has reappeared as a response to Russian aggression, but in a transformed mode: it has

shifted from a passive sense of grievance and humiliation toward active cultural resistance. This transformation is evident in the works of present-day writers. Ukrainian poet Serhiy Zhadan, for example, in «HOW FIRE DESCENDS: New and Selected Poems» (2016–2022), commemorates the suffering of his compatriots under Russian imperialism and mourns their deaths, «circumscribed by the silence that accompanies them». In her 2020 collection «Your Ad Could Be Here», Oksana Zabuzhko reflects on the elusiveness of truth in the current moment, guiding readers from the triumph of the Orange Revolution to personal victories over nepotism and sibling rivalry, and prompting meditation on alternative historical trajectories. In her essays, Zabuzhko underscores the deep cultural dimension of Ukrainian collective resentment, observing that «a nation long denied the right to exist carries within itself an archive of humiliations that erupts in moments of crisis» [14]. Contemporary music and visual art likewise move from the imagery of a «humiliated» people toward representations of an empowered subject capable of resistance.

A closer look at Ukrainian history reveals that these dynamics are inseparable from the country's colonial and imperial legacy. Ukrainian culture developed under the constant pressure of powerful empires – Polish-Lithuanian, Russian, Austro-Hungarian, and later Soviet. Colonial policies entailed not only economic and political exploitation but also cultural assimilation: the suppression of the Ukrainian language (for instance, the Valuev Circular of 1863, which curtailed the publication of many Ukrainian-language books, and the Ems Ukaz of 1876, which sought to eliminate Ukrainian from the cultural sphere), the denigration of national history, and the forced incorporation of Ukrainian identity into the «greater Russian» or «pan-imperial» narrative. By prohibiting Ukrainian-language education and publishing, the Russian Empire deliberately constrained cultural development [5]. This experience became inscribed in cultural memory as a trauma of lacking a legitimate space for self-expression. Yet resistance to assimilation itself became a powerful cultural trigger, inspiring robust creative responses – from the poetry of Shevchenko to the activities of the Galician literary group the «Ruthenian Trinity» (1833–1837), the Prosvita Society (founded 1868) that countered anti-Ukrainian currents in cultural life, and the modernist Ukrainian writers and artists of the early twentieth century. Among the most prominent figures were Lesia Ukrainka, Mykola

Kotsiubynsky, Olha Kobylianska, and visual artists such as Oleksandr Bohomazov and Alexandra Exter.

Centuries of incorporation into foreign state formations produced deep layers of cultural-identitarian trauma. Colonial practices included the systematic suppression of language, literary censorship, and the exploitation of natural resources and peasant labor. Under Austro-Hungarian rule, despite the relative autonomy of Galicia, Ukrainians suffered social and political discrimination, prompting mass emigration and fostering a «culture of survival» [6]. The Soviet period presented an even more severe ordeal, above all through forced collectivization and the Holodomor (1932–1933), which operated as an imperial project of subjugation, destroying peasant culture and undermining national memory. In literature, the Holodomor is memorialized through powerful testimonies. Ulas Samchuk's novel «Maria» depicts the famine as both an act of physical extermination and an archetype of Ukrainian cultural vulnerability to external violence [11]. Vasyl Barka's «The Yellow Prince» likewise conveys the profound trauma, focusing on the psychology of survival and the moral trials of human existence [12]. In the poetry and prose of Lina Kostenko [13] and Oksana Zabuzhko [14], the Holodomor remains a «cultural wound» that continues to shape Ukrainian identity. Visual art of the Ukrainian diaspora also preserves images of famine. Painter Mykola Bidniak created historical canvases depicting key national tragedies, while battle artist and Ukrainian National Republic officer Leonid Perfetsky produced historical sketches of events such as «The Capture of the Kyiv Arsenal» and «The Battle of Kruty», as well as an illustrated edition of Kotliarevsky's «Aeneid», in which the heroes appear as soldiers of Ukrainian military formations in full uniform and armament.

The Holodomor has increasingly appeared in contemporary cinema. Based on Barka's novella «The Yellow Prince», Oles Yanchuk's «Famine-33» (1991) became the first feature film to expose the Stalinist crime of creating an artificial famine. The historical drama «Mr. Jones» (2019), also known as «Gareth Jones or The Price of Truth, transports viewers to 1933, following a young British reporter's attempt to reveal the reality of the Soviet «utopia». The documentary «Bread Guillotine» (2008), produced for the 75th anniversary of the famine, reconstructs the causes, progression, and scale of this catastrophe. Anna Hin's «Millstones» (2008)

recounts events in Kharkiv region through eyewitness testimonies and archival sources. «The Unknown Famine» (1983), created by the Ukrainian diaspora in Canada and directed by Taras Hukalo, draws on interviews with survivors and researchers [15]. These films, among many others, integrate the tragedy into a global cultural discourse, framing the Holodomor as an emblematic crime of totalitarianism.

These past events were anchored in commemorative practices and became a crucial factor in shaping cultural memory. They include the National Museum of the Holodomor-Genocide in Kyiv as well as numerous monuments in Ukraine and in the diaspora (notably in Washington, Winnipeg, and Warsaw). The annual «Light a Candle» campaign has evolved into a ritual of cultural remembrance, embedding the traumatic experience in public consciousness. This demonstrates that the Holodomor has become an archetype of cultural memory, forming a paradigm of vulnerability and survival that remains inscribed in the collective consciousness of Ukrainians. Contemporary scholars note that «in 1932–1933 the Stalinist regime perpetrated an ethnic genocide of the Ukrainian people, manifested in the physical destruction of the ethnic group, the dismantling of systemic bonds within the nation, and the forced assimilation of surviving Ukrainians into other ethnic communities on territories settled by Russians and Belarusians» [17, p. 104]. The trauma of famine is not merely a historical episode; it is continually reproduced in contemporary narratives – for example, during the war of 2022–2023, when blockades, deportations, and the deliberate creation of humanitarian crises by the Russian army have been perceived through the prism of Holodomor memory. Thus, the famine trauma constitutes one of the key dimensions of Ukrainian cultural memory, reproduced through literature, art, commemorative practices, and educational discourse. In the present conditions of war, this trauma is reactivated, serving as a moral argument in the global understanding of Russian aggression as a continuation of genocidal policy.

The Holodomor claimed millions of lives and left a deep wound in the collective consciousness. It was not only a humanitarian catastrophe but also a deliberate act of destroying the Ukrainian peasantry – the foundation of national culture. «The catastrophic decision of the Soviet Union to force peasants to relinquish their land and enter collective farms; the eviction of «kulaks», the more prosperous peasants, from their homes; subsequent

policy changes – these measures, ultimately for which Joseph Stalin was responsible, brought the country to the brink of starvation... By the spring of 1932 the peasants of Ukraine began to starve... As the famine spread, a campaign of slander and repression was launched against Ukrainian intellectuals, professors, museum curators, writers, artists, priests, theologians, civil servants, and bureaucrats... Together these two policies – the Holodomor in the winter and spring of 1933 and the repression of the Ukrainian intellectual and political class in the following months – led to the Sovietization of Ukraine, the destruction of the Ukrainian national idea, and the neutralization of any Ukrainian challenge to Soviet unity» [7, p. XXVII]. Simultaneously, policies of Russification and control over artistic production through socialist realism were enforced. An additional dimension was the mass Soviet repression of the intelligentsia – the so-called «Executed Renaissance», when entire generations of artists and thinkers were annihilated or silenced. As a contemporary Ukrainian scholar observes, the representatives of this «Executed Renaissance» of the late 1920s and 1930s became hostages of the Stalinist regime – used as instruments of ideological legitimation for its anti-popular internal policies as propagators of Marxism-Leninism, particularly its Stalinist version. Yet they also introduced into scholarly discourse, on the basis of Ukrainian philosophical terminology, a broad range of significant topics and problems. Among these, the philosophy of culture occupied an important place: although generally tasked with the elaboration and popularization of Marxism-Leninism, it was simultaneously shaped by the achievements of foreign, above all Western European, philosophy of culture and modern thought [10, p. 3]. Within culture, this experience was transformed into the symbolism of a lost voice, a broken tradition, and disrupted historical continuity.

From the late twentieth century onward, active processes of recovering the memory of those repressed became a vital step toward overcoming trauma. Yet the colonial-imperial legacy persists: postcolonial scholars emphasize internal contradictions and a sense of inferiority that continue to affect Ukraine's self-identification and cultural policy, generating sharp confrontations between state-sponsored Soviet and Western approaches to literary studies [8]. «As is often the case with former colonial administrators, the Kyiv elites felt a strong inferiority complex in comparison with their

Russian counterparts and initially followed models developed in Russia to address their own political, social, and cultural challenges. It took them some time to realize that Russian models did not work in Ukraine. Ukraine was different... The Ukrainian scene at the turn of the twenty-first century remained as pluralistic as it had been after independence. If anything, it became even more diverse. Eventually, all political forces were forced to accept the reality that Russian political solutions generally did not work in Ukraine. President Kuchma explained why this happened in a book published in 2004... Its title was telling: *Ukraine Is Not Russia*» [9, pp. 326–327]. The restoration of national memory, the decolonization of toponymy, and the re-evaluation of the literary and artistic canon represent attempts to overcome this trauma. Today Ukrainian museums, memorial centers, and documentary projects («Babyn Yar», «The Voice of Prip'yat», «National Museum of the Revolution of Dignity», among others) serve as key sites for reflecting on and reconstructing national memory, laying the groundwork for healing.

Another enduring challenge for Ukrainian culture has been the complex of inferiority and provincialism imposed by imperial policy over centuries. The formation of an image of Ukrainian culture as «insufficiently self-sufficient» generated a sense of inferiority expressed in the urge to «catch up» with Western or Russian models. Provincialism – an imposed sense of second-rate status – long impeded the formation of a fully realized national cultural subjectivity. Russification and cultural emigration also left deep marks. Russification, as an assimilation policy, led to the erosion of much linguistic and cultural identity. At the same time, successive waves of cultural emigration (nineteenth–twentieth centuries) created a phenomenon of «double existence» for Ukrainian culture: partly in the homeland, partly in exile. This experience of rupture was traumatic but also became a source of intellectual and artistic vitality. As the contemporary scholar Mykola Riabchuk notes, «Ukrainian culture of the last two decades has effectively performed a deconstructive function, exposing the limitations of both colonial and anti-colonial perspectives and opposing them with a more open and freer approach that Professor Marko Pavlyshyn calls «postcolonial» [19, p. 12]. Overall, the systematic policy of Russification pursued first by the imperial and later the Soviet authorities aimed to eradicate the Ukrainian language as the foundation of identity and to push Ukrainian cultural

space to the periphery of the imperial or Soviet «center». Parallel to this, waves of emigration driven by political persecution, economic hardship, and the impossibility of creative self-realization under totalitarian censorship played a major role in shaping cultural discontinuities.

Several waves of Ukrainian emigration can be distinguished. The first (late nineteenth – early twentieth century) was caused primarily by economic factors and the search for freedom of national life, establishing cultural communities in Canada, the United States, and Brazil. The second (1920s–1930s) followed the defeat of the struggle for independence and Bolshevik terror, driving thousands of scholars and cultural figures to Prague, Warsaw, and Berlin. The third (after World War II) consisted of «displaced persons» who formed vibrant cultural milieus in Germany, the U.S., and Canada, producing literary journals, running theaters, and advancing Ukrainian studies. «This wave of emigration was political in nature, and its representatives were characterized by steadfast anti-Soviet sentiments» [28]. The fourth (1970s–1980s) involved the political emigration of dissidents. Among its most prominent figures was Ivan Bahrianyi (real surname Lozoviagin), who devoted his life to works condemning Soviet rule and calling for freedom. A striking example is his novel «Tiger Trappers» (1943–1944). In his memoirs Bahrianyi wrote: «I need not invent anything. Life thronged in my soul and burst forth like Niagara. I loved the country about which I wrote as my second homeland, though I came to it as a captive... All these people were those with whom I could share the joy of conversations in my mother tongue in a distant foreign land while still a prisoner. These people will never fade from my memory...» [27]. The Ukrainian diaspora worked energetically abroad, creating cultural centers in the United States and Western Europe that preserved continuity of tradition under Soviet censorship. Yet the outflow of Ukrainian intellectual heritage did not end with these four waves; sadly, a fifth migration crisis has now been added, triggered by the Russian–Ukrainian war. Citizens of Ukraine have left en masse for Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Germany, and other countries in search of safety.

Continuing the examination of historical clusters of traumatic experience in Ukrainian culture, it is essential to note that the period of the Second World War and the narratives of occupation brought a dual ordeal: the struggle against Nazi occupation and the repressive Soviet policies.

Millions of victims, mass deportations, the Holocaust, and the destruction of cities and villages became part of the collective experience. Soviet official discourse entrenched a simplified memory model – the heroism of the «Great Patriotic War» – that displaced alternative interpretations and silenced complex topics such as the activities of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) or the tragedy of the civilian population. «The Soviet authorities often called these nationalists «Banderites»... Eventually the term came to denote anyone who fought in the ranks of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), controlled by followers of Bandera. The UPA fought behind Soviet lines, disrupting Red Army communications and attacking units far from the front. The Soviet regime also faced a new ideological threat – radical nationalism represented by a well-organized political structure with its own partisan military force, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army. Full incorporation of these territories – including their economic, social, and cultural integration into Soviet Ukraine and the USSR – would take decades. Moscow still had to pacify these regions, driving the nationalist uprising underground and then destroying it – a process that lasted into the 1950s. To become fully Soviet, these lands had to undergo collectivization and industrialization, and their youth had to be trained in the fundamentals of Soviet Marxism. The Soviet Union used the Ukrainian card not only to legitimize possession of the region but also to Sovietize it» [8, pp. 280–288]. In the post-Soviet era these traumatic narratives reemerged in the public sphere, now in the form of a pluralism of memories often accompanied by sharp social debates.

At the end of the twentieth century Ukraine faced another tragedy – the Chernobyl nuclear disaster (1986), which became a true civilizational trauma. This accident was a unique event in world history: a technological catastrophe that evolved into a cultural and civilizational trauma. It generated the image of the «exclusion zone» as a symbol of desolation, danger, and, at the same time, a space of remembrance. Chernobyl entered literature, cinema, and visual art as a metaphor for a destroyed home, a lost homeland, and a technological utopia turned tragedy.

The Chernobyl disaster is the subject of numerous films, including «Chernobyl. Chronicle of Difficult Weeks» (shot in Pripyat in the summer of 1986); «Chernobyl: The Final Warning» (1991), a joint American-British-Soviet production directed by Anthony Page; the Ukrainian film «Aurora» (2006) by Oksana Bayrak; and many others. Among literary works, one

may note Ivan Drach's poem *Chernobyl Madonna* (1987), in which the author explores the tragedy of the nuclear accident. In music, the tragedy is reflected in Mikael Tariverdiev's symphony «Chernobyl» (1988) and in songs such as Skryabin's «Chornobyl Forever» and Taras Petrynenko's «Chernobyl Zone». Thus, the Chernobyl tragedy became for Ukrainian culture yet another reminder of the vulnerability of human existence and of the necessity to preserve memory even of «uncomfortable» catastrophes.

The early twenty-first century introduced new challenges to Ukraine's traumatic landscape: the Orange Revolution, the Revolution of Dignity, the annexation of Crimea, and the war in the Donbas. These events were not only political turning points but also profound cultural shocks. The Maidan uprisings opened new forms of public memory – from the symbolism of the «Heavenly Hundred» to new memorial practices. The war in eastern Ukraine and Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 have integrated all previous historical traumas into a single global experience. Today's events resonate with the past: famine and deportations echo in the experiences of refugees and destroyed cities, while the Soviet repressive legacy continues to be mirrored in contemporary crimes against Ukraine's civilian population.

The historical clusters of traumatic experience in Ukrainian culture thus form a multilayered memory in which colonial practices, famines, wars, repressions, and catastrophes appear not as isolated episodes but as interconnected segments of a single historical narrative. They create a distinctive «mnemonic matrix» that shapes contemporary cultural responses to war and determines the ways national identity is comprehended. In this sense, Ukraine's present wartime reality is not unprecedented but rather continues a line of historical traumas, while simultaneously offering opportunities for their reinterpretation and integration into a shared cultural space.

3. Wartime Modernity as a New Dimension of Cultural Trauma

The current Russian-Ukrainian war has profoundly affected every sphere of Ukrainian society. It has altered not only political and social realities but has also become a powerful catalyst of cultural transformation. The everyday experience of war generates new forms of traumatic encounter that are immediately reflected in art, literature, and public practices of remembrance. War is therefore not only a tragedy and a catastrophe;

it is also a critical moment of cultural re-evaluation that opens a new dimension in the development of national identity.

In present circumstances, the daily reality of war has, however paradoxical it may sound, become a cultural experience for Ukrainians. Unlike historical traumas that eventually retreat into the archives of memory, today's war is lived «here and now», in a mode of direct presence. Daily reports of shelling, casualties, and destruction transform trauma into an element of ordinary life. Culturally, this entails constant coexistence with danger, which becomes part of collective experience. This unbroken continuity creates a heightened sensitivity to language, images, and symbols that convey not only fear and pain but also strength and resistance. Within this context, art functions not merely as testimony but also as a form of therapy.

Since 24 February 2022, Ukrainian art has assumed an explicitly documentary character. Literature, film, photography, and theatre have become forms of witnessing: they record the experience of war, give voice to victims and eyewitnesses, and communicate the reality of aggression to the world. Contemporary Ukrainian works – war diaries, reportage prose, documentary cinema, and visual art projects – serve not only as aesthetic testimony but also as instruments of social healing. The literary genre of war diaries and reportorial prose has notably expanded. A striking example is Oksana Zabuzhko's novel *The Museum of Abandoned Secrets*, which spans the lives of three generations from autumn 1943 to spring 2004. Its opening pages depict «the era of UPA military action and Stalin's policy, the period of the Sixtiers, the time of independence, perestroika, and the turbulent 1990s; all events indeed occurred with various people» [29, p. 822]. Another example is Serhiy Zhadan's novel «Internat» (*The Orphanage*, 2017) [30], which narrates three winter days in 2015 in the life of a schoolteacher in war-torn Donbas. As a contemporary Ukrainian scholar notes, «Christian virtues, actualized in S. Zhadan's poetry collections on the war, have shaped a new imagery in his verse: refugees, a chaplain, images of lovers. Depicting the number of civilian victims, the author seeks to overcome in Ukrainians the «orphanage syndrome» – the sense of the East's separateness from the rest of the country. Zhadan's poems about the war in Ukraine present, above all, a didactic meaning of resolving the Ukrainian conflict so as to preclude its recurrence in the future» [31, p. 5].

Current visual art likewise reflects devastation and loss through photography and installation. As Olena Hrozovska writes in the preface to Alla Horska's «History of Ukrainian Art». «Today's great war has reactivated the experience of the Sixtiers, and the figure of Alla Horska embodies this historical connection. Her biography, full of dramatic events, resonates painfully with the present: during her lifetime – bans and dismantling of works, expulsion from the Artists' Union, KGB persecution, and eventually brutal murder; today – her mosaic panels in Mariupol have been destroyed by Russian occupiers. The evil that caused Horska's death went unpunished after the collapse of the USSR and, stronger and more insolent, has unleashed a new war in Europe» [32]. Another representative of the «Boychukist» school was Mykhailo Boychuk's student Ivan Lypkivskyi, whose family history was closely bound to the Ukrainian national revival and proved tragic: every member suffered persecution and repression by Soviet authorities, especially during the Stalinist terror. In his article «Ukrainian Avant-Garde», Ya. Kravchenko notes that after the declassification of SBU archives in Kharkiv, investigators recorded that «a group of Kyiv chauvinists, united around the Galician professor M. Boychuk, held active anti-Soviet (Ukrainian nationalist) sentiments». Boychuk's best students and loyal friends, under pressure and physical torture, provided the testimonies required by the GPU–NKVD... Ivan Lypkivskyi stated: «Russification of the state and administrative apparatus in Ukraine is underway... all policy is aimed at repressing Ukrainian national cadres. Conscious Ukrainians are all arrested and exiled... it is our duty to resist this situation...» Only in the late 1980s did the terrible truth become known about the tens of thousands executed in the cellars of the Kyiv NKVD prison (1937-1941) and about the mass graves of these victims in Bykivnia. It is evident that in the Bykivnia forest near Kyiv one must seek the unmarked graves of Mykhailo Boychuk and his students [33].

Among contemporary Ukrainian visual artists, Oleg Shuplyak stands out. Of his many genres, the series most relevant here is «War» (2022). Notable canvases from this cycle include «Evil Will Be Destroyed! 5.04.2022» – an allegory of evil and destroyed Russian military equipment marked with «Z», inverted «V», and «O»; «Gods», portraying Ukrainian soldiers; and «We Shall Overcome! 09.03.2022». His series «Eyes of War» (2022–2023) [34] further develops these themes. Overall, Shuplyak's Double Visions series

includes more than fifty works displayed permanently in the «Illusorium» at the DeJa Vu Museum of Illusions in Berlin, as well as in the exhibitions «Ukrainian Cosmos» and «Double Visions» held daily in Berezhany Castle.

Visual art projects dedicated to Chernobyl, the Holodomor, and the current war thus open new ways of speaking about trauma through the language of symbols, installations, and performance. At the same time, art performs a therapeutic function: it helps society endure trauma, provides symbolic forms for pain, and makes it possible to articulate what everyday language struggles to express. The memory of trauma becomes the foundation for a new identity that integrates historical experience with present challenges, fostering solidarity and resistance to external aggression.

Amid wartime modernity new symbols and cultural codes emerge. The war has produced an entire system of new symbols that have rapidly become embedded in national culture: «Bayraktar», the «Ghost of Kyiv», images of soldiers and volunteers, even songs and visual memes – all have entered the collective imagination. The symbolism of ruins – destroyed cities, schools, theatres – acquires metaphorical meaning, signifying not only loss but also resilience. Cultural codes of the wartime era thus combine the tragic and the heroic, creating a unique narrative of resistance. Contemporary Ukrainian practices illustrate a shift away from a state of «victim-memory», long dominant in Ukrainian culture: from a «culture of suffering» to a culture of dignity (as exemplified by artistic and civic practices associated with the Revolution of Dignity); from traumatic memory to the memory of active resistance (the figure of the defender, soldier, volunteer); from the image of a «destroyed Ukraine» to the narrative of «Ukraine as a subject of history», capable of shaping its own vision of the future.

A distinctive feature of wartime modernity is the trauma of loss and of dispersion. This is evidenced by the massive displacement of people: millions of Ukrainians have been forced to become internally displaced persons or to emigrate abroad. This gives rise to a new form of cultural trauma – the trauma of scattering. The loss of home, the rupture of social and cultural ties, and the need to adapt in foreign environments create particular experiences already reflected in the work of writers, musicians, and diaspora artists. In this way, war trauma is transformed into a global Ukrainian experience that transcends state borders.

Public practices of remembrance have become an essential component

of the contemporary cultural landscape. Examples include spontaneous memorials at sites of civilian deaths, street murals, volunteer museums, and digital archives – all forms of collective engagement with tragedy. They not only preserve memory but also integrate society around shared grief. Simultaneously, active de-Russification of memory space is underway: street renaming, removal of Soviet monuments, and the creation of new toponyms honoring contemporary heroes. The war thus directly shapes a new map of cultural memory.

Wartime modernity has also internationalized the Ukrainian experience of trauma and brought Ukrainian culture onto the global stage. Owing to worldwide attention to the war, Ukrainian works of art, literature, and documentary production have achieved unprecedented international circulation. Ukrainian trauma is increasingly understood in a global context – as an experience of struggle for freedom, dignity, and survival. This is both an opportunity and a challenge: on the one hand, integration into the global cultural discourse; on the other, the risk of reducing the Ukrainian voice to that of a mere «nation-victim». It is therefore crucial to cultivate a narrative not only of suffering but also of strength, resistance, and creative renewal. Within this context Ukrainian culture possesses both the perspective and the resources for the future. The evidence shows that culture not only preserves the memory of the past but also constitutes a strategic resource for the future. In education, this entails integrating themes of memory and trauma into curricula; in politics, it means recognizing culture of memory as an element of national security capable of countering information warfare and historical manipulation; in the creative sphere, it transforms trauma into a source of new artistic forms and genres that connect Ukraine to the global cultural context.

In sum, contemporary Ukrainian culture is a space where society preserves, interprets, and transforms traumatic experience. Through art, literature, cinema, and civic practice, the transition from victim-memory to subject-memory unfolds. This process helps overcome resentment and shapes national identity on the basis of dignity and solidarity. Culture thus not only records trauma but also converts it into a strategic resource for future development.

4. Traumatic Memory and Strategies of Overcoming

The problem of traumatic memory is central to understanding the cultural dynamics of contemporary Ukraine. Historical clusters of trauma, intensified by the ongoing war, create a complex and multilayered mnemonic matrix that simultaneously performs integrative and destructive functions. On the one hand, the memory of past tragedies and current losses serves as a foundation for national solidarity and cultural self-identification. On the other, it carries the danger of a «fixation on trauma», in which society risks becoming locked within a narrative of suffering. Reflection on strategies for working through traumatic experience is therefore vital for Ukrainian culture. Overcoming traumatic memory does not mean erasure or forgetting. Rather, it involves transforming painful recollections into an experience that can be comprehended and integrated, so that the past no longer governs the present. At both the individual and collective levels, the combination of psychological support, cultural initiatives, and public dialogue is crucial to turning the memory of trauma into a source of strength and awareness.

One of the leading strategies is symbolization, whereby the experience of war and suffering is transfigured into artistic images, rituals, and narratives. Art plays a decisive role in this process: it provides a language for expressing what resists direct articulation. Through literary texts, theatrical performances, cinema, and music, society gains the possibility not only to register trauma but also to reinterpret it. Symbolic processing transforms individual pain into a collective experience, thereby opening a path toward healing. Symbolic processing converts a painful, often unassimilated experience into images, rituals, texts, or other forms that confer meaning. When direct speech is impossible or too painful, symbols act as a «language» that allows one to speak about trauma indirectly. This helps integrate memories into one's personal history and mitigates feelings of chaos and powerlessness. Key directions of such work include: Rituals and ceremonies. Traditional rites of farewell, memorial services, and shared days of remembrance provide a sense of closure and communal support. New rituals emerging in response to present tragedies – moments of silence, candlelight vigils, or the creation of «walls of memory» – offer spaces for collective empathy. Artistic practices. Literature, poetry, and drama convey complex emotions through metaphor and imagery. Visual art – painting,

sculpture, installations – creates tangible symbols of pain and hope that invite interaction: touching, walking through an installation, leaving a personal mark. Music and dance enable expression of trauma at a bodily level, when words fail. Sites and spaces of memory. Memorials, museums, and “living” memory spaces such as gardens, alleys, or murals become meeting points of personal and collective experience, helping individuals to grieve while preserving memory for future generations. Language and narrative. Symbolic images in language – metaphors, folktales, myths – help articulate what is hard to describe literally. Personal storytelling through diaries, oral histories, or podcasts transforms fragmented recollections into coherent narratives. Collective forms of mutual aid – art-therapy workshops, group performances, testimonial theatre – allow people to process trauma together and to experience the support of others. Such symbols are born communally, becoming signs of unity and resistance. Symbolic processing does not erase memories or deny the reality of loss; rather, it converts traumatic experience into a story that can be told, shared, and passed on without destructive pain. Through symbols, personal suffering becomes part of a wider cultural context in which compassion, support, and hope for healing are possible.

Equally important are practices of collective remembrance. Memorial events such as the erection of monuments or the commemoration of victims on designated calendar dates create a shared space of memory. The ritualization of traumatic events provides structure and protects against fragmentation and chaos. As a modern researcher notes «the social role of ritual lies in the activation of stereotypical experience, common cultural and individual values, the semiosis of reality, and the strengthening of intra-collective ties within the context of continuity and development, thus constructing and constituting social and interpersonal relations» [35, pp. 63–64]. In Ukraine, new commemorative practices connected to the war – «walls of memory», light-installation actions in cities, and digital memorial spaces – are particularly significant, enabling both personal participation and collective consolidation.

Another essential strategy is the intellectual engagement with trauma. Integrating the topic of war and historical catastrophes into school and university curricula, developing interdisciplinary research, and creating new museums and archives move traumatic experience into the realm of

knowledge. Scholarly interpretation does not imply the rationalization or suppression of emotion; rather, it provides tools for preservation and transmission. In this way, trauma gains a legitimate place in collective memory and becomes part of the national historical discourse.

Equally noteworthy are therapeutic practices of artistic and psychological impact, which acquire special significance under present wartime conditions. Psychological counseling, art therapy, and participation in creative workshops or collaborative art projects help individuals work through personal trauma. On a cultural scale, these practices create a «safe space» in which experiences can be reflected upon in dialogue with others. Contemporary Ukrainian culture actively fosters such initiatives – from volunteer projects involving displaced persons to international exhibitions presenting the war experience in artistic form.

Ukrainian scholars are also advancing interdisciplinary research on traumatic experience. Focusing on the contemporary philosophy of psychiatry, they highlight post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and emphasize the value of a phenomenological approach. «This method, centered on subjective experience, is key to understanding patients' inner worlds. It allows for detailed analysis of the impact of traumatic events on consciousness, perception of reality, and self-identification, thereby deepening our understanding of PTSD. Such a perspective is particularly relevant for Ukrainian psychiatry in light of the challenges posed by Russia's ongoing military aggression» [24, pp. 46, 48]. As these researchers argue, combining phenomenological methods «with standard psychiatric diagnostics in Ukraine enables a more comprehensive and accurate assessment of PTSD, anxiety, depression, and other war-related conditions» [25, p. 127].

A further strategic imperative is balancing memory with a forward-looking orientation. To prevent the repetition of tragedies, Ukrainian identity cannot be reduced solely to the image of a “nation-victim.” Contemporary culture therefore cultivates narratives of strength and resistance embodied in heroes-defenders, volunteers, and active citizens. From modern literature and cinema to visual art and music, these narratives have become powerful instruments of civic resilience. Literary works – both documentary and fictional – depict soldiers and defenders of the state; war reportage and frontline memoirs become bestsellers and sources of

inspiration, complementing traumatic memory with constructive images that open perspectives for development.

Ukrainian filmmakers create both feature and documentary works that portray war and loss, providing spaces for empathy and public dialogue. For instance, the documentary «Porcelain War» (2024), directed by Slava Leontyev and Brendan Bell, offers a wide-angle view of the war, Ukraine, and human life in wartime. The film «Atlantis» (2020) by Valentyn Vasyanovych employs a distinct cinematic language to symbolize inner emptiness and to envision the future of the Donbas, while exploring the PTSD experienced by many veterans.

Music likewise reflects these shifts. Popular songs dedicated to defenders quickly become folk anthems of support. Over the past year and a half, Ukrainian music has undergone profound transformation, with a surge of patriotic songs and videos expressing the nation's resilience. Examples include Antytila's video «Fortress» – Bakhmut; rapper YARMAK's Ukrainian-language version of «My Country», accompanied by a video featuring wartime footage; and Bez Obmezhen's «To the Heroes», which interweaves stirring national imagery with scenes of collective ordeal. These works have become important contributions to the country's cultural heritage.

In today's wartime reality, volunteers emerge as potent symbols of mutual aid. «Volunteering is more than mere assistance. It is a tangible contribution to social development and support for those in need. To be a volunteer is an honor, granting the opportunity to change lives and make the world a better place» [26]. Contemporary artists and illustrators create posters and comics portraying volunteers as modern guardian angels. Documentaries and photographic projects capture the everyday efforts of those who raise funds, deliver supplies, and help displaced persons. Theatrical productions often combine volunteers' testimonies with artistic reimagining, highlighting the collective strength of society.

Civic engagement also finds expression in urban initiatives – from city-wall murals to public-space performances demonstrating Ukrainians' readiness to shape their own environment. Literary festivals, music markets, and charity fairs become platforms for fundraising and spreading ideas of mutual support. Social media likewise serves as a site of cultural resistance: memes, video poetry, and short animations

rapidly circulate messages of solidarity. Through these diverse practices, Ukrainian culture not only reflects war and crisis but actively constructs a collective narrative of strength, endurance, and resilience. It imparts meaning to daily efforts, enables society to perceive itself as the subject of its own history, and inspires the ongoing struggle for freedom and future development.

5. Conclusions

The historical clusters of traumatic experience in Ukrainian culture form a multilayered memory in which colonial practices, famines, wars, repressions, and catastrophes appear not as isolated episodes but as interrelated segments of a single historical narrative. They constitute a distinctive «mnemonic matrix» that shapes contemporary cultural responses to war and informs the understanding of national identity. In this sense, the present wartime reality in Ukraine is not unprecedented; rather, it continues a lineage of historical traumas while offering opportunities for their reinterpretation and integration into a shared cultural space.

Today's war generates a new dimension of cultural trauma, marked by immediacy, global visibility, and intense representation. It produces new symbols and cultural codes that unite experiences of pain and resistance, loss and renewal. This trauma is simultaneously a challenge and a resource: it destroys, yet it also opens possibilities for societal consolidation, the creation of new forms of memory, and integration into the global cultural sphere. The current wartime moment thus becomes a point of intersection between past traumas and future hopes, a key factor in shaping modern Ukrainian identity.

Traumatic memory in Ukrainian culture is a multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be reduced to an experience of suffering alone. Its transformation is possible through comprehensive strategies: symbolic processing, commemorative rituals, educational and scholarly practices, therapeutic artistic initiatives, and the cultivation of positive narratives of the future. The war presents Ukrainian culture with the possibility of converting trauma into a resource of solidarity, creativity, and resilience. The capacity to integrate trauma into national memory without losing a forward-looking perspective is essential for the development of a mature and robust identity.

Analysis of Ukraine's traumatic experience in the context of war demonstrates both its deep historical continuity and its distinctly contemporary manifestations. Ukrainian culture emerges as a field of constant engagement with trauma – from colonial and imperial domination and Soviet repressions to Chornobyl, the Maidan uprisings, and the current Russian-Ukrainian war. These events form unique clusters of national memory that create a «matrix of experience», in which past and present interact within a multidimensional cultural space.

The present war has become a point of concentration for these historical traumas: the memory of famine resonates with modern urban blockades; the deportation and execution of civilians echo Soviet practices of violence; the destruction of cultural monuments recalls colonial policies of eradicating Ukrainian heritage. At the same time, the war has opened new horizons for cultural creativity. Literature, visual art, music, theatre, and media respond swiftly to current events, transforming pain into symbols of solidarity, resistance, and dignity. New cultural codes are emerging – from the image of the defender to the symbolism of ruins as emblems of resilience.

A key conclusion is that traumatic experience is not confined to suffering or loss. It becomes a source of social cohesion, generates new forms of collective memory, and enables integration into the global cultural context. Ukrainian culture presents itself not as a «culture of victimhood», but as a culture of strength, capable of converting tragedy into a resource for growth. This is evident in practices of commemoration, educational and scholarly initiatives, and in the international resonance of the Ukrainian artistic voice. Equally significant is the therapeutic dimension of working through trauma. Symbolic and artistic practices provide a language for articulating pain; rituals of remembrance impose structure on chaotic experience; and the educational – scholarly sphere integrates this experience into the broader historical narrative. In this way, trauma is not merely preserved but also overcome, allowing society to avoid the «trap of the past» while safeguarding memory as a vital element of national identity.

In summary, several key conclusions emerge. Ukrainian culture bears a profoundly traumatized history, yet this very history has forged its capacity for resistance, renewal, and reinterpretation. The current war integrates past traumas into a new cultural experience, revitalizes historical memory, and generates new symbols that unite society. Mechanisms of overcoming

trauma are complex, combining symbolic processing, commemorative rituals, educational and scholarly engagement, and therapeutic practices. Trauma itself becomes a resource of identity: it strengthens national solidarity, fuels creativity, and shapes the image of Ukraine as a culture of strength and freedom. The future of Ukrainian culture depends on its ability to balance memory with forward-looking development – retaining the lessons of the past without reducing itself to the image of a «nation-victim».

Thus, the traumatic experience of Ukrainian culture in wartime is not merely a history of pain but also a history of spiritual endurance, creative mobilization, and the capacity for renewal. The transformation of trauma into a foundation for identity constitutes the strength of contemporary Ukrainian culture, which today not only defends itself but also sets new directions for society and its future.

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