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Warring Memory: Exhibiting the Russo-Ukrainian War in Ukraine's National Museums

Valentyna Kharkhun (iD)

Nizhyn Mykola Gogol State University, Ukraine; Tallinn University, Estonia
Email: vkharkhun@gmail.com

Abstract

This article analyzes four war-themed exhibitions in Ukraine's two leading national museums and studies their role in documenting, interpreting, and exhibiting the Russo-Ukrainian war. This research intends to prove that since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, museums have been conceptualizing the war through narratives of suffering and sacrifice, grounding tangible historical authenticity through the display of items such as war trophies and personal belongings. The narrative of suffering tends to be based on the opposition of "we" and "they," where "we" focuses on civilian torment and resurrection as the main metaphor of physical and spiritual survival, and "they" are predominantly depicted as the military enemy, creating strong anti-Russian and anti-Soviet tendencies. The martyrdom narrative of sacrifice focuses on Ukraine's (fallen) defenders, whose image is created by deep personalization, nationalization, and heroization. This article argues that musealization of the Russo-Ukrainian war exemplifies and represents "warring memory," which is predetermined and justified by active engagement in an ongoing war while performing the functions of testimony, resilience, and mourning.

Keywords: warring memory; musealization; Russo-Ukrainian war; museum narratives

1. Introduction

Following its beginning in 2014, the Russo-Ukrainian war[1] quickly became a prominent subject for museum exhibitions. The Museum of ATO, a part of the Dmytro Yavornytsky National Historical Museum of Dnipro, established in 2016, is recognized as the first to have represented this war in a permanent exhibition. Since then, a few Kyiv-based museums have consistently prepared war-themed temporary exhibitions and almost every regional history and local lore museum has had sections dedicated to the war on permanent display (UINP 2021). Additionally, there are many amateur museums exclusively devoted to the war topic (Kharkhun 2024). Thus, even before the full-scale invasion of 2022, the Russo-Ukrainian war was already a widely and significantly represented topic in various museums throughout Ukraine, testifying to the totality of war musealization.[2]

Responding to this phenomenon, on December 6–7, 2021, the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance (UINR) and its partners organized a workshop on the musealization of war. Workshop attendees, influenced by war rhetoric, described museums as "'warriors' in the information battlefield," noting they "are called upon to find all possible tools for establishing a dialogue in society, to refute the manipulative accusations of hostile propaganda" (UINP 2021). Moreover, some suggested that such workshops for museum officials "can be compared to military training on the training ground" (Maidan Museum 2021). At the workshop, Anton Drobovych, who was the

head of UINR, distinguished three main tasks for war memorialization: to recognize that the war is ongoing, and that any exhibition will therefore be incomplete; to acknowledge that the purpose of war musealization is to seek historical truth about a complex, heated history; and to realize that every museum exhibition can serve as a basis for transitional justice (UINP 2021). Museums provide this transitional justice by documenting evidence of massive human right violations by the Russians during the collection of artifacts from the ongoing war. With such evidence, appeals can be made for international recognition of these crimes against humanity for prosecution.

These theoretical reflections about "warriors" and the "battlefield" were severely tested by the reality of the full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022. Less than three months later, in May, a few Ukrainian museums began presenting their war-themed exhibitions to the nation and the international public. Their collection and display of war artifacts from freshly de-occupied, yet still precariously dangerous Ukrainian territories was seen as a gesture of resistance to Russian propaganda. It was also a means to "normalize" the everyday life of the empty museums without putting permanent exhibitions on display, as artifacts had by then been moved to safety.

This article analyzes the role of Ukraine's leading museums – the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in WWII and the National Museum of the History of Ukraine (the War Museum and the History Museum, respectively[3]) – in documenting, interpreting, and exhibiting the current war since the full-scale invasion. It focuses on the experiences of curators in collecting war artifacts and creating war exhibitions functioning as educational resources, evidence for transitional justice, and as places for mourning. Besides content analyses of the narratives, I will discuss the main images, language, and communicative approaches used in establishing these narratives and in delivering them to the public. This article argues that musealization of the Russo-Ukrainian war exemplifies and represents "warring memory," which is predetermined and justified by active engagement in an ongoing war while performing the roles of testimony, resilience, and mourning.

In offering this argument, my research sits alongside previous analyses; portrayals of the war in Ukrainian museums have been discussed in domestic and international media (Higgins 2023; Kuz 2023), while Ukrainian scholars have discussed the activities of Ukrainian museums since Russia's full-scale invasion of that country (Burakov and Pytliovana 2023; Ivanysko et al. 2024; Muravska and Hnidyk 2023; Prykhod'ko 2022; Zhurunova 2022). Polish scholar Elżbieta Olzacka has been studying the role museums held before 2022 in creating a national community in wartime Ukraine and the functioning of a "museum front" in the digital era (Olzacka 2019, 2021, 2023). In her most recent article, she discusses the development of Ukrainian cultural policy in the context of Russian aggression against Ukraine (Olzacka 2024).

My article differs from this research, however, as it aims to discuss "post-2022" musealization of war in Ukraine's national museums, whose latest exhibitions have not yet been researched. This article therefore provides the first comprehensive comparative analyses of four exhibitions and their influence in portraying the current war. More importantly, this research introduces the concept of "warring memory," which contributes to the larger theoretical discussion about this specific memory during warfare.

This article draws upon personal observations and analyses of exhibitions. In an effort to prove that museum exhibitions providing detailed representations of the current war are exemplifying warring memory, I refer to Clifford Geertz's (1973) ethnographic method of "thick description" to analyze composition, design, and textual elements of the exhibitions, along with the choice of artifacts by the curators. Both museums were visited multiple times in May and June of 2024: during my first visits I attempted to perceive the exhibitions alone and examine to what extent they might be readable for an audience without the benefit of a guided tour. During my second visits, I asked for private tours of the exhibitions by museum professionals and curators. While on the tours, I conducted 3–4-hour long interviews while we observed the exhibitions together. The interview with Milena Chorna, cofounder and head of the Ukrainian Museum Association, provided me with information about the creation, general ideas and structural specific of the exhibition *Ukraine: Crucifixion*, and more importantly, the prominent role held by director of the War Museum in

completing this exhibition and his skills in building a museum team. The guided tours and interviews with Iuri Savchuk, director of the War Museum, and Anton Bohdalov, department head of the history of independent Ukraine and curator of war-themed exhibitions with the History Museum, provided me with substantial and exclusive information about the field work conducted during active warfare, the challenges encountered with selecting and collecting war-related objects, and more pointedly, the narratives they intended to implement into their exhibitions. Observations of these exhibitions with their creators provided me an opportunity to compare my experiences alone with the exhibitions with the guidelines and interpretations of exhibitions provided by the curators. During my third and final visits to the museums I again observed the exhibitions alone to examine whether my perception had changed since my first visits and conversations with curators. Additionally, I meticulously analyzed media coverage related to the exhibitions to better understand the scale of media coverage, resonance and audience feedback.

The article begins with an overview of various modes for representing WWI and WWII as well as later conflicts in museums and argues that they cannot be used as a productive framework for studying war musealization during wartime. It further introduces and theorizes the concept of "warring memory" and its main characteristics and functionality. Section 3 describes the exceptional practices being used by curators in collecting war artifacts and creating war-themed exhibitions.

Sections 4 and 5 provide detailed descriptions of four exhibitions in chronological order and in two thematic groups. *Ukraine: Crucifixion*, held at the War Museum, and *The Invasion: Kyiv Shot*, held at the History Museum, represent the first group with the topic of Russian atrocities during the first months of the full-scale war upon occupied territories. *Azovstal: New Meanings*, held at the History Museum, and *Aidar: 10 Years*, held at the War Museum, represent the second group with the narrative of Ukraine's (fallen) soldiers. Finally, in section 5, I will provide a comprehensive analysis of museum war narratives and the crucial images and specific language being utilized in producing these exhibitions, including the figures of the "enemy," "victim," and "hero." More importantly, I will conclude by demonstrating how musealization of war exemplifies "warring memory."

2. Warring Memory: Conceptualizing War during Ongoing War

War museums and the musealization of war generally date back to 1917 to 1918, when initial attempts to represent WWI began to occur in museums (Wellington 2017; Winter 2013). As a specific genre, war museums began developing even more intensively after WWII. Ana Cento Bull and Hans Lauge Hansen have distinguished three ethno-political modes of war remembering – antagonistic, cosmopolitan and agonistic – with a dividing line between them revolving around the moral concepts of "good and evil" (Cento Bull and Hansen 2016; Cento Bull et al. 2018). An antagonistic mode of remembering applies these moral concepts into a distinctive form of heroes and villains and portrays them within canonical versions of history. This view predominated until the 1980s and then made a resurgence again in the 2000s during the rise of right-wing populist movements in Europe (Berger et al. 2018; Cento Bull and Hansen 2016; Echternkamp and Jaeger 2019).

A cosmopolitan mode of remembrance deconstructs the opposition between heroes and villains while focusing on the passive and innocent victims and their suffering. This concept made its appearance in the 1980s, after the Holocaust had been widely recognized as being the most pervasive event in the context of WWII, and the human rights movement began to play a more visible role globally. It is linked to the emergence of transnational forms of belonging, a new type of universalism and saw a focal shift from celebrative and heroic images of the war, to one portrayed by human suffering (Berger et al. 2018; Cento Bull and Hansen 2016; Cento Bull et al. 2018). Accordingly with other scholars, such as Clelia Pozzi (2013), Cento Bull and Hansen criticized cosmopolitan memory for its inability in preventing the rise of Europe's right-wing movements and

consequential reinforcement of an antagonistic mode, that resulted in re-imagining territories in exclusionary terms, as well as building symbolic boundaries between "us" and "them."

Researchers proposed to develop a different, more fitting and effective mode of remembrance – an agonistic, which "re-politicizes the binary categories of 'good and evil,' and by doing so, re-politicizes the relationship of the present society to the past" (Cento Bull et al. 2018, 4). An agonistic mode would be reflexive, dialogic, and multi-perspectivist, unlike a cosmopolitan mode, with a specific stress on remembering particular historical contexts and sociopolitical struggles (Cento Bull and Hansen 2016). Using Cento Bull's and Hansen's conceptualization, members of research project UNREST examined how the three modes of remembering outlined above are applied in European museums memorializing WWI and WWII. They arrived at a conclusion that contemporary war museums attempt to underpin narratives of reconciliation and Europeanization (Berger et al. 2018, 115) and as such, a majority of them prioritize a cosmopolitan approach in their exhibitions or a mix of cosmopolitanism and antagonism (Cento Bull et al. 2018, 3). They also testify that even despite experimentalism, curator interventions and new technologies, which provide new possibilities and prospectives in war memorialization, war museums are still struggling to accommodate conflicting voices and to manage an emotionally charged memory.

These modes and dynamics of remembering wars were developed during a growing chronological distancing from WWI and WWII, when common understanding and reconciliation were both possible, peacemaking was prioritized, and when it was politically beneficial to construct a new political and economic entity, such as the EU in the case of WWII. In the new memorial environment, museums have become important sites of negotiation about the official historical narrative, and thus they contribute to memorial diplomacy. Memorialization of other more recent conflicts occurring after WWII, such as the Israeli-Palestinian war, the Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict, the Yugoslav Wars, the Falklands War and the "Troubles" of Northern Ireland, to mention a few, reveals other challenges when managing a contested past in museums, particularly in timing (recent or decades ago) and locality (conflicts within the country or between two countries).

Unlike contemporary memorialization of WWI and WWII created by subsequent generations, contemporaries who are actively bearing witness, are immediately involved or personally affected by the conflicts and in many cases have an authoritative voice and control for the representations of those violent events. Some play important roles in creating memorial institutions and exhibitions, while others might apply their experiences in judging how accurate the representation of events were that they witnessed or participated in. For instance, Yonatan Mendel and Alexa Rose Steinberg (2011) demonstrated how Israeli and Palestinian museum directors, with opposing backgrounds of being an intelligence officer and a prisoner, contributed to the creation of diametrically opposed and conflicted narratives. Magdalena Lorenc (2019) spoke of the roles played by relatives of fallen soldiers in initiating and managing museums devoted to the Armenian losses in the Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict. Yet, Jenna Pitchford-Hyde and Katy Parry (2025) revealed how veterans might be unsatisfied by museum narratives not including their combatant experiences and views of how violent events should have been exhibited.

The modalities, discourses and aesthetic aspects for representing "living experiences" as well as a contextual contemporality for some (un)resolved conflicts fully testifies to the predominance of an antagonistic mode of remembrance, thus memorialization of such conflicts is politically controversial, contested and instrumentalized to reenforce nationalistic feelings. Mendel and Steinberg analyzed how Israeli and Palestinian museums represented the same image of a prisoner in two conflicting interpretations as terrorist and combatant respectively and how they contributed to the escalation of the ongoing conflict with little or no room for negotiation and reconciliation. Lorenc described how museums commemorating fallen Armenian soldiers produce strong anti--Azerbaijani sentiment. Ljiljana Radonić (2024) discussed how Croatia uses the memory about the Homeland war to focus on national suffering and strengthening Croatian nationalism. Karine Bigand (2017) showed how different museums managing content about the "Troubles" of Northern Ireland tried to produce more multi-perspective and inclusive narratives and then how many of

them failed to implement this agenda. Zoran Vučkovac (2021) claimed that local activism and artistic interventions could change the prevalence of ethno-nationalist discourse on memory in Bosnia and Hercegovina which is coupled with international capital in denying commemorative practices for minority groups. The last two examples demonstrate that memory actors, memorial spaces and methods for developing cosmopolitan or other reconciliatory strategies exist; however, there are many policy-related obstacles, that slow down or make such developments impossible.

Memorialization of recent local conflicts shows that the closer chronological distances to the violent events and their unresolved consequences the stronger is antagonistic response. While the memorialization of world wars in Europe tends to build transnational bridges and discuss the necessity of mutual understanding and reconciliation, memorialization of local conflicts is still far away from this cosmopolitan agenda, follows current political demands, prioritizes nationalistic sentiments and focuses on issues that in many cases divide rather than unite.

Memorialization of WWI and WWII, as well as more recent conflicts, defines an image of the *past* (in the case of Israeli-Palestinian war, the "continuing past") while Ukraine contends with its memory of the *present*, attempting to memorialize the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war. The Ukrainian case is special because this memory is being created concurrently with the devastating war, and it is this context which is crucial to how this memory is defined and what functions it performs. The circumstances for developing an exhibitable memory during warfare are unprecedented. Museums professionals are endangering themselves to visit newly de-occupied regions with the aim of collecting war artifacts; museum staffs within the occupied regions are documenting Russia's war crimes under the threat of being caught and tortured; mothers who have lost their sons to the war are creating exhibitions and collecting money to support Ukraine's army; active combatants are taking leave when possible to participate in the opening ceremonies of exhibitions devoted to their regiments and are then immediately returning for the front – these are only a few extreme examples of Ukraine's everyday museum environment.

To analyze the Ukrainian case, I introduce the concept of "warring memory," a type of memory that is predetermined and justified by active engagement in an ongoing war while fulfilling the roles of testimony, resilience, and mourning. To some extent warring memory has similar characteristics of both antagonistic and cosmopolitan memories discussed above. As antagonistic memory, warring memory is linked to the dominance of the territorial nation-state; it provides clear distinctions between good and evil, as it determines and personalizes the enemy forces as well as dehumanizes them. In other words, this memory also fights for liberation: we remember the war in a way that will deliver us to the victory. Similar to cosmopolitan memory, warring memory moves away from celebratory, glorifying, or nostalgic narratives and focuses on human suffering and human rights violations with the urgent aims of documenting atrocities and providing evidence of war crimes committed by the Russian Army in Ukraine for a domestic and international audience.

And yet, despite these similarities, I argue that warring memory is a distinctively different phenomenon. Rooted in the ongoing war and predetermined by how the war develops, this is a memory we are actively incepting, or being influenced by – a "real-time memorialization" that is in the process of solidification, but is felt and experienced as fixed. Simultaneousness to warfare defines the "incompleteness" of warring memory which performs as a working laboratory in testing tropes, images, and narratives about the current war, as well as progresses to working-out exemplary versions of war representation. This laboratory with its still uncompleted, in-progress master-narrative does not delineate boundaries and limits, providing a certain freedom of war representation, promoting active meaning-making and boosting the search for the powerful forms of expressing testimony, resilience and mourning. Another feature of "real-time memorialization" is that of immediate responses to war events with effective storytelling in communicating the lived experiences. This memorialization is emotionally affected honoring defender sacrifices, while appealing to shared empathy and searching for military aid. Implementing such memorialization, museums play an important role as mediators of national honor and pain domestically, and as a soft power in cultural diplomacy internationally.

Warring memory performs war-determined roles testifying to Russia's violence and crimes against humanity, resilience to Russia's invasion in the form of an active duty "cultural front," and mourning for fallen soldiers and civilians. The multidirectional and multi-layered nature of these roles causes obvious tensions: from one prospective, warring memory can be perceived as politicized, weaponized, instrumentalized and one-sided; however, from another prospective, an empathy-evoking call for solidarity, understanding and support. Nevertheless, both prospectives work for the same cause: allowing for military and spiritual mobilization, enhancing solidarity, increasing self-identification, and strengthening national belonging.

Warring memory is characterized by an overwhelming prevalence of authenticity that museums embody in recreating a "feeling of the war" and making the war experience palpable for visitors. In this case authenticity has the minimum two main dimensions revealed through materiality and creativity. The former destines that war-related objects from front line and de-occupied territories in masse are momentarily turned into museum artifacts that speak for themselves. The latter relates to how curators presented and framed objects in certain war narratives. This authentication (Varutti 2018) or construction of an "authentic reality" powerfully serves to deliver the main messages about the devasting war.

Despite a visible role of state institutions, a bottom-up agency plays a major role in creating a collaborative memorial environment shaping warring memory as a grassroots societal project. Museum professionals, amateur memorial activists, active combatants, volunteers and relatives of fallen soldiers are major groups contributing to the development of warring memory. The number and variety of memorial agents as well as an impressive range of exhibitions they produce testifies to the nation-wide type of warring memory which exemplifies how society resists, fights with misleading news and struggles for existence. Ukraine's memorialization of war leaves an impression that the entire population is directly involved in meaning-making while preforming the roles of creators, memorial facilitators, as well as an active audience that contributes to the creation of a war narrative by visiting exhibitions and commemorative rituals, and participating in discussions on memory issues.

3. Exhibiting the Russo-Ukrainian War in Kyiv Museums Before 2022

Both of the national museums in Kyiv examined here contributed to musealization of the war prior to 2022. In December 2014, the History Museum launched the exhibition "For Ukraine, for its Freedom" dedicated to the soldiers of the Kyiv Cossack Regiment. In September through November 2015, the museum opened an exhibition of artifacts related to the war in Eastern Ukraine which operated within the program of "Art Biennale." On December 8, 2015, the History Museum launched the exhibition *War Stories.* Instead of focusing on the war as a political and military event, the curators decided to examine the war through portraits of the combatants from many regiments fighting at the frontline (Bohdalov et al. 2016). The exhibition provided pictures and written biographies of the (fallen) soldiers as well as their personal belongings, reflecting that ordinary people were fighting in the war (Korovainy 2015). Additionally, through the many pictures and textual captions, the exhibition portrayed the most well-known battles, such as Donetsk airport, Debaltseve, Pisky, and Shyrokyne, and thus created a war geography.

Before the full-scale invasion, the War Museum had already launched 13 exhibitions about the Russo-Ukrainian war. As early as July 2014, heavy armed vehicles captured by the Ukrainian military in the regions of Luhansk, Sloviansk, and Debaltseve had been exhibited on the premises of the War Museum, which Olzacka argues was intended to present evidence of the participation of the Russian Federation in the armed conflict and to illustrate the scale of war operations (2021, 1032). The exhibitions from 2015 to 2016 were small, revealing a limited ability to express the war reality. At this point, photography played an exceptional role at the War Museum; in fact, three of the past exhibitions exclusively presented works by photojournalists. One exhibition was dedicated to the Battle of Ilovaisk and its fallen defenders, while two further exhibitions were about Donetsk airport

and its defenders, who were metaphorically called "cyborgs" for their superhuman abilities in fighting the war (Shevchenko 2014). By producing exhibitions about Ukrainian soldiers, the War Museum greatly contributed to creating the pre-2022 war narrative, initiating exhibiting practices that mourned the fallen soldiers and produced the heroic myths of Ukraine's invincibility, as with the cyborgs.

In 2017, the War Museum launched the project *Ukrainian East*, which offered a deeper portrayal of the war, depicting both the military and civilians, and thereby provided a panoramic view of how different social and age groups were experiencing the war. The museum also started to work more productively with the materiality of war (wrecked cars, shells, salvaged civilian belongings) included in installations. The museum also began to tackle more problematic questions of identity, such as the choices faced by the Donbas residents to join the separatists (referenced as representing the Soviet past and exemplified in staging the Soviet interior), remain under occupation, or support Ukraine; specifically, with the exhibition *On the Line of Fire*.[4]

4. On the Battlefield: Museums and Their Teams During the First Months of the Full-scale Invasion

At the beginning of the full-scale invasion, both museums and their respective teams focused on dismantling and safeguarding their permanent collections. Some museum workers joined Ukraine's Armed Forces, some female team members with children evacuated to Ukraine's western regions or even abroad, while yet other team members became volunteers, helping the army with military supplies and medicines (Higgins 2023; Ivanysko et al. 2024; Pasternak 2022; Prykhod'ko 2022).

The functions of museums during warfare are usually subject to wartime requirements. In their book, Catherine Pearson and Susan Keene describe how, during WWII, the United Kingdom's Ministry of Information, the main government body responsible for propaganda, intended to use British museums as places to exhibit war propaganda, while curators and museum specialists were less than enthusiastic in supporting this policy (2017, 76–86). Ekaterina Melnikova and Iryna Sklokina, who have separately studied the musealization of WWII by the USSR, paint a similar picture: the Soviet state dictated the rules and requirements for exhibiting war, and these changed numerous times due to developments on the front line and the policies of the Communist Party (Melnikova 2015; Sklokina 2015). Thus, in the Soviet Union and in Britain, state bodies authoritatively directed museums on how to exhibit the war in accordance with state proclaimed directives.

In contrast, today's Ukrainian museum workers have themselves become the initiators of war musealization and active agents in the fight against Russian propaganda. This was even before state agencies had the chance to regulate wartime museum activities. In one surreal example, at the beginning of the invasion, when the Russian Army was rapidly approaching Kyiv, Iuri Savchuk, director of the War Museum, was approached by a high-ranking military commander with an unusual request: to borrow non-working military artifacts; specifically, tanks, and artillery. After consideration, Savchuk agreed, and the dummy military pieces were relocated to bridges in Kyiv as a military decoy, which aided in the "defense" of Ukraine's capital.[5]

This interaction also provided Savchuk with the necessary connections to receive exclusive permissions for collecting artifacts and information for future exhibition purposes. In March 2022, Savchuk received permission to take photographs on the streets of Kyiv, collecting rare documentary evidence of the city's situation on the 13th day under the threat of siege. According to the museum's Facebook post (April 8, 2022), Savchuk used collected materials for the first exhibition of war-torn Ukraine that was presented at the World Center for Peace, Liberty, and Human Rights in Verdun, France.[6] Later, the exhibition traveled to a few additional countries and was honored with an award from South Korea as a strong example of cultural diplomacy.[7]

Immediately after the de-occupation of the Kyiv Region in early April, Savchuk was among the first to receive permission to visit the military zone. After Ukrainian soldiers and legal experts, he

was the next to enter the devastated Kyiv Region, where he saw firsthand the horrifying realities of the war: ruined cities and villages, decaying bodies, and undetonated devices. Later, he was able to make approximately 40 expeditions to the frontlines with his museum team and collect numerous authentic artifacts.[8] The History Museum team made similar expeditions; yet, as they were restricted by transportation constraints, they were not able to collect as impressive artifacts as the War Museum had.[9] It was April before the Ministry of Culture finally provided the War Museum with their own instructions for organizing museum activities during the war, but since Savchuk had already pioneered much of his fieldwork prior to this, he was pleased to report that the museum team was already nearing completion of their first exhibition.[10] During the first six months of full-scale war, the War Museum managed to launch 22 war-related exhibitions.

On May 8, 2022, the War Museum launched its first exhibition following the invasion, *Ukraine: Crucifixion*, and highlighted its uniqueness in a Facebook post: "For the first time in world museum practice, an off-line project about war has been created in real time and during an ongoing war." Savchuk indicated that the date was chosen with the specific aim of severing Ukraine's ties with Soviet history and Soviet (Russian) commemoration of the "Great Patriotic War." Since 2015, in order to break with the Soviet cult of Victory Day on May 9, Ukraine annually commemorates its Day of Remembrance and Reconciliation on May 8.[11] Savchuk believes that the current war will completely change our perception of WWII, and this was the main reason for choosing May 8 for the opening ceremony.[12]

Less than one month after the War Museum launched *Ukraine* exhibition, and with rapidly growing popularity among and interest from a domestic and international audience, the History Museum launched its first new war-themed exhibition, devoted to the Kyiv City Day, which usually occurs on the last Sunday of May. Unlike *Ukraine: Crucifixion*, with its general description of an "exhibition about the Russo-Ukrainian war," this exhibition was titled *The Invasion: Kyiv Shot* and talked specifically about the "heroic defense of Kyiv." Yet, both exhibitions explore the same topic of Russian atrocities and are based almost exclusively on authentic artifacts collected during expeditions to the de-occupied territories. For this research, authenticity is not taken only as an inherited prerogative of the object or objective phenomenon discernible empirically, but also as a process, conceptualized by Marzia Varutti. She states "authenticity can here be understood as located at the intersection between audience expectations and assumptions, and museums agency in staging displays as authentic" (Varutti 2018, 50). In this vein, I will consider how objects are presented and framed in the displays and how imposing the voices of curators are in stating object provenance. Otherwise, museum exhibitions will be positioned as "cultural authenticators" (Varutti 2018, 53) that make an important shift in object categorization: from considering objects as just items collected in war zones, to a more powerful consideration as items creating a perception of the war.

Each exhibition is considered below.

4.1. Ukraine: Crucifixion

The War Museum's exhibition, *Ukraine: Crucifixion*, spreads over three floors, presenting different aspects of the current war and referring to the three-level structured world of "sacrum," "profane," and "hell." It contains 1,776 artifacts and is supplemented by videos and pictures. Importantly, the exhibition does not provide a textual narrative. As Savchuk, the curator of the exhibition, explained, this happened by pure accident: rushing to open the exhibition on schedule, he did not have enough time to prepare a supplementary textual narrative. Yet, Milena Chorna notes that the absence of text is a recognizable feature of Savchuk's curating method.[13] The absence of a textual narrative has a few contradictory implications. First, the curator's authoritative presence is seen through the selection of displayed objects, creation of several installations, and composition of the general exhibition which purposely leads visitors through the process of observation. Second, much of the substantial information that can enrich a visitor's experience are missing, especially with the acquisition history of the war-related objects, such as the context, and the curator's personal reflections and feelings

during the dangerous expeditions etc. Third, this type of narrative becomes a powerful means to create an engaging, participatory, and audience-grabbing exhibition based on performativity: visitors are left alone with the totality of authentic war evidence, invited to perceive the exhibition through the curator's choices and to become co-author of a war narrative. This narrative requires an affective reenactment and experience of the past, "turning visitors into witnesses" (Sodaro 2018, 184).

The first part of the exhibition, called "Horde," is located in two rooms on the ground floor. The visitor can easily understand that it focuses completely on the enemy image and delivers several messages. One is that there is an inseparable bond of Soviet and Russian policies in subjugating Ukraine, which is exemplified in the floor installation of recently issued Russian military boots positioned within a Soviet star (figure 1). Most domestic and international media outlets have chosen this powerful installation as the lead picture when covering the exhibition. This installation contains an additional meaning, which only becomes clear through a guided tour. Savchuk explains that many visitors have been very concerned about how the Russian footwear was acquired, suspecting that they were taken from the corps. To refute this suspicion, the curator recounts that as Russian soldiers extensively looted the occupied territories, they stole brand new shoes, which they immediately used, and left their military boots behind.[14] Essentially, the great number of Russian boots visibly testifies to the large scale of looting and portrays Russian soldiers as thieves.

A second message shows the closeness between Russia's state propaganda and the military invasion. This is illustrated by videos of speeches by Putin and his allies in the central room, with Russian military equipment arranged on the floor below.

Third, the exhibition breaks a Russian propaganda myth that was actively used in previous years: "их там нет" (they are not there). This myth states that the Russian Federation was not involved in "Ukraine's conflict"; nevertheless, the room is bursting with evidence of the Russian military presence in Ukraine. The curator has used long storage containers of BUK missiles collected from the frontline, filling them with Russian military uniforms and equipment, maps, identification documents, diaries, and letters. This composition's specific meaning has been encrypted by the curator: when visitors enter the exhibition room, they cannot see a lot of the artifacts "hidden" in the
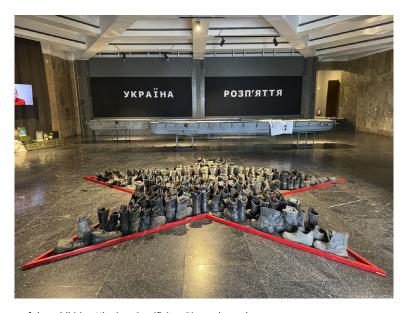

Figure 1. Entrance of the exhibition Ukraine: Crucifixion. Picture by author.

deep containers; it is only after approaching and looking from above that they can find the artifacts and realize that "they are not there" is a propaganda falsehood.

The fourth message breaks the myth of the invincibility of the Russian Army: in the second room, a TV broadcasts videos of Ukraine's Armed Forces destroying Russian tanks while they were approaching Ukrainian cities. This is the only part of the exhibition that is slightly connected to the image of the defender. Instead of heroizing Ukraine's defenders and formulating a narrative about the heroic de-occupation, the curator focuses on civilian destruction exemplified by the many installations and pictures exhibited in this room. For instance, a rocket crushing the bench, rockets lying on or balanced on fences, rockets with debris such as military vehicle doors and pot belly stoves, a large cross consisting of shells with a window attached, rocket launchers, and missile cases.

The second part of the exhibition recreates the Gostomel bomb shelter and tells the story of the civilians who lived there for 37 days during Russia's occupation. This part provides the meta-representational display that challenges visitors to fully immerse themselves reflectively within it. The display is located in a large underground floor with no electricity. In order to navigate the few rooms, as the civilians did in the shelter during the occupation, visitors need to use illumination from their phones. Savchuk had given a specific order to his team to document the actual bomb shelter, to collect everything, and to restore the exhibited items as they had been at the original site.[15] Visitors are allowed to enter and discover each room, finding themselves completely "inside" the exhibition. A few videos play in each dark room, with testimonies of civilian adults and children who survived the occupation, creating a feeling of a presence and providing a maximum immersive experience (figure 2).[16]

From the underground floor, visitors are directed upwards for the third part of the exhibition, called "Crucifixion," which consists of rescued cultural artifacts. Passing through church doors, visitors are led to the room's main artifact: the icon *Descent from the Cross*, which contains a fragment from a Russian bullet round and creates an image of Ukraine wounded, but surviving (figure 3). This room provides images of the most recognizable examples of this idea, such as the burned Ivankiv Local History Museum, from which locals rescued paintings by Maria Pryma-chenko, seen as the most precious artifacts of the museum's collection, and Ukraine's important cultural heritage.

Figure 2. Installation of bomb shelter in the exhibition Ukraine: Crucifixion. Picture by author.
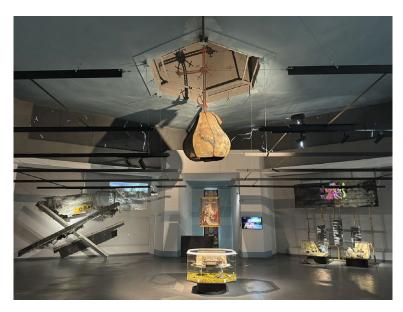
Figure 3. Ukraine: Crucifixion. The icon "Descent from the Cross" which contains a fragment from a Russian bullet round. Picture by author.

Alongside the main exhibition, the War Museum has produced a few spin-offs with different titles. These have been displayed in a limited number of countries or during various important international events. For instance, the exhibition *Evidence* was on display at the international symposium of lawyers, "United for Justice," in March 2023, Lviv, and one month later, *Ukraine. Crucifixion. Tribunal* was displayed at the UN offices in New York.

The *Ukraine* project and its derivations have a distinct feature of providing testimony for transitional justice: they bear witness to Russia's crimes in Ukraine via domestic and international platforms, working for both the general public and specific groups, such as lawyers and diplomats, who directly influence world politics and may assist in legal issues. *Ukraine* received intensive media coverage: as of June 7, 2022, 63 reviews and reports have been published by domestic and foreign media outlets. This exhibition was also recognized by the professional community: it received the Judges' Special Recognition Award within the international competition of Museum and Heritage Awards in 2023.

4.2. The Invasion: Kyiv Shot

The History Museum's exhibition, *The Invasion: Kyiv Shot*, is situated in the main entrance hall, a decision that emphasizes its importance. The center of the room features a glass case containing the main symbol for this exhibition: the crossbow depicted on the ancient coat of arms of Kyiv. Historically, the crossbow meant protection from attackers and Kyivan readiness for armed resistance to enemies. However, despite the crossbow's central location, defense is not the main narrative point and is only partially supported by passing mentions of the Ukrainian Defense Forces. While focusing on the enemy image, the curators of *The Invasion*, unlike those of *Ukraine*, privilege a textual narrative supplemented by installations, artifacts, and pictures.

A replica of a Ukrainian building damaged by the Russian Army provides the main structure for this exhibition, presenting a powerful image of the war (figure 4). Its selection was dictated by hardship: as with many state museums, the History Museum is limited in its funding; thus, its curators decided to dismantle a previous exhibition devoted to Independence Day and to reuse parts of the building in the new exhibition.[17] The installation also includes road signs from the Kyiv

Figure 4. The Invasion: Kyiv Shot. Picture by author.

Region and plaques with images of Ukraine's fallen soldiers, all of which have been visibly damaged by shooting. Many authentic artifacts, such as military equipment, remnants of ammunition, Russian soldiers' personal belongings, Russian Army food, Russian propaganda documents, and articles destroyed or stolen by the occupiers, are displayed within glass cubes. The display items were collected by curators, with some acquired from volunteers, such as Oleksandr Skarlat with the assistance of the Serhiy Prytula Charity Foundation.

The curators created a textual narrative through a few dozen small signs in Ukrainian and English scattered throughout the main installation. The narrative provides the general overview of the full-scale Russian invasion and occupation of the Kyiv Region. Stylistically, it emulates media military reports from the battlefield (Ononiwu 2023). The exhibition focuses also on the description of the occupation and its aftermath in settlements of Kyiv Region, such as Irpin, Bucha, Borodianka, and Dymer.

Additionally, two sub-narratives are built into the image of the military enemy, which is specified through the descriptors. First, there are a range of emotionally neutral naming conventions such as "enemy" (4), "the russian troops" (7), "the russian units" (2), "the russian soldiers" (4), "the russian servicemen" (6), "the russian army" (7), and "the russian military" (5). For these, the exhibition follows the "war predetermined spelling" adopted by Ukraine's media and in the Ukrainian segment of social media: specifically, any proper names related to the Russian Federation are written without capitalization, with the aim of belittling and humiliating the enemy. Second, emotional keywords predominate in the textual narrative, providing a clear emotional statement against the enemy: the exhibition actively repeats "the russian occupiers" at least 45 times, "the invaders" six times, and "the russian aggressors" twice.

Generally, the exhibition portrays the image of the military enemy as follows: Russian soldiers are victims of their state propaganda; they conduct crimes against humanity by torturing and killing civilians; their families allow them to rape civilians (the exhibition provides a conscript soldier's conversation with his wife recorded by Ukraine's Security Service where she encourages him to rape Ukrainian women); they destroy civilian infrastructure and leave behind a vast amount of garbage; they engage in mass looting; they are uneducated and careless, using outdated Soviet maps and allowing themselves prolonged exposure to high doses of radiation at Chornobyl; they are not

civilized, being surprised by Ukraine's paved roads, street lighting, internet, and gas infrastructure; they are conflicted and desertions prevail in the Russian Army – an army of losers suffering heavy losses; soldiers of the Russian Army are from non-Slavic minorities, and they themselves are victims of Russian imperialistic politics. Basically, this exhibition reproduces, summarizes, and exemplifies the main tropes about the "enemy," which were already being developed in the media space and on social media (Dmytriv 2023).

Yet the exhibition also expands the understanding of the enemy, going beyond its "military" representation. It mentions the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, the Ministry of Defense, and Russia's state media, claiming their responsibility in anti-Ukrainian propaganda and in waging war against Ukraine. The exhibition also supplies poll results, transcripts of Russian soldiers' telephone conversations with their relatives, and other evidence proving that Russian society strongly supports the war in Ukraine. Hence, the Russian Federation and Russian society are portrayed together as a collective enemy. Importantly, the exhibition also raises a very painful question about an "inner enemy" by raising the topic of Ukrainian citizens collaborating with Russian occupying authorities.

To summarize, both *Ukraine* and *The Invasion* focus on the enemy's image, which is explained by practical and ideological reasons. First, as Anton Bohdalov explained to me, it was artifacts from the battlefield that predetermined *The Invasion*, as the majority of the items found belonged to the Russian Army. This same explanation seemingly applies to *Ukraine*, since Russian artifacts overwhelmingly dominate the exhibition. Continuing, Bohdalov explained that the image of the defender remained undeveloped at that early stage of the full-scale war, as it was unclear whether presenting information about the defenders might be considered a breach of secrecy. Second, it was important to exhibit the Russian atrocities in order to strengthen Ukraine's societal mobilization and appeal for international support. Thus, in prioritizing the enemy image and exhibiting Russian atrocities, these two exhibitions provide testimony, the most important function of waring memory.

5. On the Battlefield One Year On: Museums and Their Teams after 2022

In comparison with 2022, both museums were less active in producing new war-themed exhibitions in 2023 and 2024 which can be explained by the hardship of wartime, the lack of substantial state's financial support and human resources. Yet, since 2022 each museum launched at least one major exhibition devoted to Ukraine's defenders. The first of the two exhibitions considered below, *Azovstal: New Meanings* which highlights Mariupol's defenders, opened at the History Museum on February 24, 2023, a date which marked the first year of full-fledged Russian invasion. The second, *Aidar: 10 Years*, opened at the War Museum on May 10, 2024, a date that commemorated the tenth anniversary of Aidar, one of the first volunteer battalions formed in 2014, which by 2024 had become an elite assault brigade.

5.1. Azovstal: New Meanings

The 84 days of defending Mariupol in 2022 became a milestone in the perception of the full-scale invasion, and many online and offline cultural projects and exhibitions testify to the importance of this event in narrating the Russo-Ukrainian war.[18] The History Museum's exhibition *Azovstal: New Meanings* is devoted to the "Azov" regiment and their defense of the Azovstal plant, a metallurgical facility and one of the largest steel rolling companies in the country, which became one of the most emblematic points of the siege of Mariupol during the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Bohdalov explained that the museum planned to work on an exhibition about the event using the world-famous Azovstal photographs taken by Dmytro Kozatsky, a photographer and fighter in the Azov regiment who was known as the "eyes" of Azovstal. Simultaneously, Vira Lytvynenko, the mother of a soldier who died in Mariupol, and leader of the NGO "Heart Out," devoted to the commemoration of (fallen) Mariupol defenders, approached the museum with a request to provide space for an

exhibition created by the NGO. As of 2024, the NGO's traveling exhibition, which consists of pictures and biographies of fallen soldiers, has visited fourteen Ukrainian cities and has been on view three times in the center of Kyiv. The traveling exhibition works to provide a Ukrainian-wide commemoration of the Azovstal defenders and contributes to an immortalization of memory about them. The exhibition *Azovstal*, which is a blending of the NGO's traveling exhibition and the History Museum's artifacts, is the result of the cooperation between the museum's curators and the NGO and sets a good example for collaborative work between museum professionals, volunteers, and relatives of fallen soldiers.

The exhibition is located in two rooms on the museum's fourth floor. One had been under repair, and thus offered a unique "stark" interior to resemble the war environment of Azovstal. This room presents two histories of Azovstal – the Soviet one and that of the current war. The former conveys information about Azovstal's role as the largest steel rolling factory, exemplifying the grandeur of Soviet industrialization. The museum's rich collection of Soviet artifacts – including pictures of Soviet life, art, and documents, along with videos, awards, and workers' uniforms – provides an exceptional opportunity to create a fully-fledged picture of the importance of the Soviet plant and industrialization during the Soviet period, the status of Soviet workers in that society, and their everyday life. The latter focuses on Azovstal's war history, presenting it as a symbol of Ukrainian courage and sharing 12 stories of fallen soldiers, located in glass vitrines around the room. Representatives of the NGO chose which fallen soldiers would be profiled, and then provided the supporting artifacts for those chosen. Rather than creating typical biographies, they created laconic yet personalized stories with something iconic about each soldier (education, hobby, dreams, travels, family, etc.), giving visitors a very emotionally sympathetic and empathetic experience. For instance, the poster representing Vladyslav, Lytvynenko's son, says: "Since childhood, Vladyslav loved justice, played sports, read historical books, painted, and was fond of cars. He loved Ukraine, dreamed about creating a family, traveling, and having his own car. He joined Azov regiment in 2015 with the words 'Who else but me?' Vladyslav took part in the liberation of Shyrokyne and the battles at Svitlodarsk Bulge. He defended Mariupol from occupiers until his last breath."

The curators used lighting as the main way to represent and distinguish these two stories. The Soviet history stays in the dark, barely readable; thus, in order to access a rich collection of Soviet artifacts, the visitor will need additional lighting, while the cubes representing war history are on spotlit, demonstrating how new meanings overpower old ones. These two stories are powerfully supplemented by Kozatsky's photographs of the Azovstal defenders and a central mural masterpiece, created specifically for the exhibition by a volunteer painter (figure 5).

The second room presents the NGO traveling exhibition as it was initially conceived; that is, posters with fallen soldiers' pictures and biographies are located around the perimeter of the room (figure 6). As Lytvynenko pointed out in her interview with Nadiia Hordiichuk, the main aim of the exhibition is to show Ukraine and the entire world how young, handsome, well-educated, and motivated the fallen soldiers were, how they loved and died for their motherland, and what a terrible price Ukraine's people are paying for their freedom (Hordiichuk 2024).

The exhibition has also become a space for bereavement – relatives of the fallen soldiers visit the museum for commemoration and grieving purposes, leaving flowers and gifts near pictures of loved ones as they would at a cemetery. Since some fallen soldiers do not have graves, the exhibition remains a key place for mourning. The collaboration of the museum's curators with the NGO helped to introduce tragic topics – how relatives are surviving when their loved ones are participating in heavy war battles and how they experience the trauma of loss. Powerful and emotionally charged elements of the exhibition, including poems written by the mother of a fallen defender in order to cope with trauma, a *rushnyk* (an intricate embroidered towel) that was a parents' wedding gift, as well as portions of the final communications between the Azovstal defenders and their relatives on social media, draw the visitors' empathy and compassion.

Figure 5. Azovstal: New Senses. Picture by author.

Figure 6. Azovstal: New Senses, room of commemoration. Picture by author.

5.2. Aidar: 10 Years

The exhibition *Aidar: 10 Years* highlights Ukraine's elite assault brigade. As exhibition curator Iryna Kotsabiuk explained, Aidar servicemen approached the War Museum in 2023, requesting an exhibition to mark the regiment's anniversary. They also provided the museum with information about the regiment and donated artifacts for the exhibition (Balukh 2024). The curator posted on the museum's Facebook page that it was of the utmost importance to convey the human essence of

Aidar, to state that this is not an ordinary military formation, but a single family, where everyone feels the support of their brothers and sisters (May 11, 2024). Importantly, as with the memorialization of recent conflicts in Europe there are cases when veterans are very concerned and/or disappointed that exhibitions rarely include their memory and interpretation of events (Pitchford-Hyde, Parry 2025). *Aidar* will be excluded in this context since combatants perform the roles of stakeholders and co-creators of the exhibition, and thus have an authoritative voice in how they are portrayed.

The exhibition was located in one room with a single construction at the center containing posters, videos, and artifacts (figure 7). The composition is chronological, consisting of 10 sections, each representing one year, with similarly layered content: general descriptions of the regiment's decade and personal biographies of Aidar soldiers and their portraits. A series of videos from the project "Beyond the Front Line" (May 2024) were created by Zoia Shu and Filip Kaller specifically for this exhibition and became its most powerful content.

The video project offered a unique opportunity for combatants to create their own portraits, all answering the same questions, on topics such as their cultural background, how they understand the war, and their dreams. This format offered a rare chance to trace the transformation from civilian to combatant and provided a clear explanation of what it means to be a soldier. Videos integrate perfectly to create a well-balanced narrative on subjects ranging from the general/personal to military/civilian and man/woman, touching upon heatedly discussed questions in Ukrainian society: Can a Russian-speaker be a patriot of Ukraine? Did a majority of Donbas residents support Russia's aggression? With many Russian-speaking combatants originally from the Donbas Region fighting the war in the Aidar regiment, the answers to these questions are provided very clearly.

The image of the warrior is constructed through heroization. The poster at the entrance says: "Despite the lack of artillery shells, the soldiers of Aidar battalion hold the line of peaceful life for the whole world." The message *Aidar* delivers is that the regiment represents an example of how

Figure 7. Aidar: 10 Years. Picture by author.

devoted the soldiers are to their mission, and that despite their lack of substantial training and combat experience, they are able to defeat a much stronger enemy. Unlike *Azovstal*, where the portrayal of fallen soldiers goes beyond military representation, *Aidar* focuses on their prime military accomplishments. Yet, similar to *Azovstal*, "ordinary human stories" also have importance in portraying combatants. For example, there is a section focused on the commander of Aidar, Senior Lieutenant Oleksandr Kovalenko, who became known as the "dancing warrior" and achieved celebrity in social media. These stories present an image of the Ukrainian Army as a collective of "ordinary people" who decided to be combatants and devoted their lives to the defense of Ukraine.

To summarize, *Azovstal* and *Aidar* focus on the image of the defender (hero). In both cases, the initiative for creating the exhibitions originated from outside the museums – from the families of fallen soldiers and active-duty servicepeople, who actively assisted in the preparation process by providing artifacts and information, as well as by participating in opening ceremonies and other accompanying events. These grass-roots initiatives predetermined two different narratives.

Azovstal exclusively portrays the military dead. While recognizing courage and sacrifice, this exhibition primarily performs the mourning function of "warring memory." Stylistically, the exhibition room of *Azovstal*, with its portraits and biographies of fallen soldiers, is very similar to the practices adopted by many of Ukraine's cities and villages, where poster exhibitions commemorating fallen soldiers are located in each settlement's center, contributing to the creation of a mnemonic community centered on the mourning rituals (Cookman 2024; Kravchyk 2024; Shukova 2024; Skaskiv 2024). In this way, the *Azovstal* exhibition joins nationwide mourning for the war losses.

Aidar depicts the regiment's history through the personal stories of both fallen soldiers and current active-duty combatants. In commemorating the slain, fallen soldiers are not spotlighted as with the previous exhibition. *Aidar* focuses instead on the idea of resilience on the battlefield. While still providing deeply personalizing individual stories of service members, this exhibition reflects more on military duty, team unity, and the regiment's glory. As such, it creates a very positive image of Ukraine's Armed Forces.

6. Conceptualizing the War: The Main Images and Narratives in Representing the Russo-Ukrainian War

In portraying the full-scale war, the analyzed exhibitions have created three main images that can be provisionally described as "enemy," "victim," and "hero." Each will be discussed below.

6.1. The Image of the "Enemy"

Compared to the majority of pre-2022 exhibitions,[19] the enemy image is well-developed and plays an important role in predetermining the main narratives for the exhibitions *Ukraine* and *The Invasion*. The enemy image is multifaceted and polysemantic. Both exhibitions mention President Putin and his imperialistic speeches, as well as his allies and state bodies in videos (*Ukraine*) and textual explanations (*The Invasion*). The prevailing textual narrative from *The Invasion* provides an opportunity to discuss the responsibility Russian society holds in supporting the war in general, and that which Russian families of active combatants hold in promoting and justifying the atrocities. It thus expands the image of the enemy to the entirety of the Russian Federation and contributes to its non-military appearance.

Clearly, the military image of the enemy massively predominates in both exhibitions. Russian soldiers are portrayed as occupiers, symbolically represented as Russian boots (*Ukraine*) or as overtly repeated 45 times in the text for *The Invasion*. Both exhibitions depend greatly upon tangible objects while constructing the enemy image. Trophies collected by the museums from de-occupied territories with the "perceived value" of being "taken," and thus demonstrating that the "culture of

origin has been dominated" (Scott 2015, 491; Wellington 2019), became the main source for such constructions. The specificity of the enemy image is twofold: it follows tendencies of the antagonistic mode in being one-sided and a humiliating depiction of morally dehumanized soldiers, but it also attempts to apply a more problematized and nuanced portrayal.

Weaponry is the largest group of accumulated objects used in producing an enemy image, and these items are displayed in a realistic manner. The arsenal located on the floor in *The Invasion* and used in the *Ukraine* installations testify to Russia's atrocities and highlight a military threat and potential violence. A burned headlight from an armored vehicle and a Russian soldier's binoculars found in Bucha on Vokzal'na Street (*The Invasion*), provides a different message – of the incompetence of the Russian troops eliminated by Ukraine's Armed Forces. Both exhibitions display outdated Soviet roadmaps, which Russians had been using to navigate within Ukraine, also indicating their incompetence and backwardness. Another map exhibited in *Ukraine* indicates civilian infrastructure objects marked as targets, vividly revealing Russia's intention to commit crimes against humanity.

Importantly, both exhibitions pay special attention to the display of food and alcohol while constructing the enemy image. *The Invasion* has an interesting artifact: a box of food with "No one but us" printed upon it in Russian, along with a large handwritten comment in Ukrainian that says, "Trophy. The owner was killed by Ukraine's Armed Forces." Usually, guided tours provide more substantial information, drawing attention to the fact that food supplies were outdated and in awful condition. When conducting a tour of the *Ukraine* exhibition, Chorna stated that no Ukrainian would even give this food to their pigs. Chorna also commented that the food testified to the inequalities within the Russian Army, as ordinary regiments received low-quality food, while the elite military units would receive higher quality food produced to NATO standards.

The Invasion also introduces the topic of alcoholism as a main feature of the Russian Army by presenting a picture from a Dymer factory used as a Russian military headquarters. The picture shows a table filled with many empty bottles of heavy alcohol. Additionally, a few bottles are also shown on display alongside cigarettes and a Russian newspaper, *Red Star* (*Krasnaia Zvezda*), with the headline "We are strong, fearless, here, now and always." In exhibiting destroyed weaponry, outdated maps, low-quality food, and vast quantities of alcohol, the exhibitions compose "the archetypical image of the enemy as a representative of another species – a quasi-human creature of furious nature who comes from primitive society" (Bogumił et al. 2015, 134).

Both exhibitions present Russian official documents with instructions on how to interact with civilians in the occupied territories. They divulge the colonial intentions behind this war in promoting the idea of a "common history" that ranges from the Kyivan Rus to the Soviet Union, a shared religion and cultural background, as well as presenting themselves as the liberators of the Ukrainian people. Regimental registers and individual IDs are another set of documents that touch upon issues of ethnicity, belonging, and collaboration. They prove that many of Russia's soldiers are from non-Slavic minorities, and that some are from the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republic and are thus (former) Ukrainian citizens. With a focus on the Russian soldiers, the exhibitions succeed in creating a "homogeneous collective," but this does not exclusively predominate in representing the enemy. Through the great number of IDs, military registration papers, letters, and diaries, we learn names and biographical information; thus, the enemy is not a "universalized evil," it has a human face. This type of representation differs from the attempted "universalization" when portraying the enemy in the narratives of WWII and the Homeland War in Croatia (Bogumił et al. 2015; Radonić 2024).

The Invasion also describes the case of a Ukrainian man's collaboration with the Russian authorities. There is no further deeper reflection, but since the exhibitions touch upon these issues, it testifies to their attempt to problematize the image of the enemy and to discuss various aspects of its dimensions. By doing so, the exhibitions follow the newest trends of diversity and polysemantic analysis when displaying the enemy (Bogumił et al. 2015). This becomes an incredible example if we

also take into account the constraints of time and finances when creating exhibitions during wartime.

6.2. The Image of the "Victim"

Both exhibitions show the human face of the war as seen through the eyes of its civilian participants. This ties with a crucial trend in contemporary memorialization of wars (Jaeger 2020; Radonić 2024), where civilians are represented primarily as war victims who witness death, ruin, and destruction. *The Invasion* discusses the fates of civilians in media-like descriptions during the occupation of Kyiv's Region, while *Ukraine* devoted an entire section to a detailed, immersive experience by reconstructing a narrow, cold civilian bomb shelter without electricity. Again, similar to the enemy image, the tangible materiality of war (beds, blankets, toys, food, etc.) becomes the main source for creating a civilian's everyday life under occupation.

More importantly, *Ukraine* features oral history testimonies with video interviews of the elderly and children – the most vulnerable civilian groups. These videos contribute to the creation of an emotionally panoramic victimhood picture: hopelessness, fear of death, and grief, as well as a desire to survive and live life under the most terrible of war circumstances. Many pictures of the destruction of Ukraine's villages and cities displayed within both exhibitions complement the creation of the war environment as projected onto the civilian war experience. The importance of the image of civilians as victims predetermined the specificity of narrating: instead of a narrative of military battles, a narrative about human suffering plays the most important role.

Importantly, the enemy image is paired not with the "hero" image, but with the "victim." Despite the fact that both exhibitions were created after a de-occupation that testifies to the military success of Ukraine's Armed Forces and the heroic resistance of civilian Ukrainians, the image of defender ("hero") is practically missing (*Ukraine*) or is not as fully represented as the enemy and civilian images (*The Invasion*). This choice of images defines the main victimhood narrative: Russia's war against the Ukrainian people who suffer from Russian atrocities and yet survive the inhumane conditions of everyday life under the Russian occupation.

While *The Invasion* applies an informative media-like discourse in creating a panoramic view of multiple atrocities and crimes against humanity committed by the Russian Army, the *Ukraine* exhibition applies religious symbolism embedded in a logic of suffering, crucifixion, and resurrection. And while *The Invasion* provides knowledge on the war and the suffering of civilians with an emphasis on de-occupation, its counterpart engages with the emotions and empathy of visitors and pushes them to believe that after the suffering and crucifixion, there will be a resurrection. By applying Christian themes of death and resurrection, the War Museum exploits a long tradition of portraying the war and its losses in a manner still evident in commemorations of WWI (Mosse 1991, 49). The long life of Christian symbolism that has dominated powerful ancient forms of commemoration can be explained by the Christian hope that death can be transcended (74).

Portraying civilians is not a primary focus and is thus much less visible in *Azovstal* and *Aidar*, but it remains important nevertheless, since it goes much beyond the notion of victimhood. The NGO that co-created *Azovstal* represents civilians as memory activists who, while producing exhibitions and promoting memories of the war, contribute to the formation of the mnemonic environment and mnemonic community, which pays tribute to the sacrifices of fallen soldiers. This is memory activism, which, although not directly portrayed in the exhibition, is visible in its preparation, and can be identified as an act of resilience, changing the role of civilians from victims to "cultural combatants." *Aidar* provides an additional dimension to the image of civilians, focusing on the story of civilians transforming into warriors fighting for the country. Thus, the image of civilians is multidimensional with specific dynamics ranging from victimhood to embracing the role of cultural worries and military combatants.

6.3. The Image of the "Hero"

Azovstal and *Aidar* completely devote themselves to the defender image and use personalization, nationalization, and heroization as the main tools in its construction. *Azovstal* exemplifies the prevalence of fallen soldiers by narrating histories of Ukraine's defenders. Both exhibitions pay tribute to the soldiers as military professionals, yet they commemorate them primarily as "ordinary" individuals. As such, they follow the main contemporary trends of deep personalization in creating a memory of the war dead. As Luc Capdeliva and Danièle Voldman state, "in acts of commemoration there has been a move away from the cult of national heroes to a recognition of the sacrifice made by ordinary individuals" (2006, 173). The displays and textual explanations of objects from both exhibitions form nuanced portraits of the fallen soldiers to the extent that this representation is reminiscent of "a private scrapbook devoted to shattered lives." As a result, they contribute to a collective memory of war that focuses on the "individuals and tragedies which befell them" (Capdevila and Voldman 2006, 174).

Both exhibitions also focus on sacrifice as the main approach in portraying the fallen soldiers, thus creating a martyrdom narrative. In *Azovstal* this narrative is emphasized through the opposition between the Soviet period and the current war, where the former's industrial glory and grandeur is represented in a generalized panoramic picture of the past that is overshadowed by the sacrificial deeds of Ukraine's soldiers whose images are personalized. This martyrdom narrative projects two types of mourning. The first is individual and becomes almost intimate, by witnessing the relatives mourning their losses. One room of the *Azovstal* exhibition, full of portraits of fallen soldiers and used by relatives for commemoration purposes, best serves as the most striking example of such individual mourning. Relatives visit this exhibition as they would a graveyard: with prayers and flowers. Grieving their losses, they secondarily endow the fallen with a patriotic and national significance. As an example, it is noteworthy that Lytvynenko, who by immortalizing the memory of her son and highlighting his sacrifice for the nation in numerous rotating exhibitions, including *Azovstal*, promotes a nationwide collective commemoration and provides a patriotic education for Ukraine's youth (Hordiichuk 2024) Thus, the individual and national dimensions of the martyrdom narrative reinforce each other in underlining the price paid by an individual's contribution to the national cause.

George Mosse's scholarship conceptualizes the linkage between the nation and its war dead in his analysis of the myth of the war experience as democratic and centered upon a nation symbolized by a cult of fallen soldiers (1991, 99). He traces the solidification of this myth back to WWI – with the beginning of modern warfare, a new national consciousness, and the reinforcement of a sense of a patriotic mission – and sees its decline during WWII with a weakening of the cult of the nation. With reference to memorialization of the Vietnam War, Mosse states that the myth passed into European history. For Ukrainians, it is apparent that the decolonial nature of the Russo-Ukrainian war returns the importance of "nationhood" to the spotlight. Unlike other recent wars, such as Afghanistan and Iraq, with their arguably more complex (and confusing) histories (Danilova 2015a, Danilova 2015b), the images of Ukrainian defenders and the commemoration of fallen soldiers provides a clearly conceptualized war narrative: there is an ongoing struggle for Ukraine's existence and independence. With this narrative, the national framework provides recognition of Ukrainian defenders as a heroic ideal: it is how nationalization and heroization meet each other.

Continuing the tradition of portraying Ukrainian defenders that had been established in exhibitions prior to 2022, such as with the memorialization of the cyborgs, *Azovstal* and *Aidar* create a collective image of the two regiments while concurrently constructing a military narrative about "heroes,"[20] discussing questions of sacrifice and courage, as well as making sense of a patriotic mission. In doing so, they reinstate the military within the national imaging and restore trust and respect for the Ukrainian Army, which had been discredited following the first decades of Ukraine's independence. This attitude shift is significant since warfare brings the concepts of nationhood and national unity to the public's attention. These current representations of Ukraine's defenders in

museum exhibitions, and commemorations of Ukraine's fallen soldiers, allow the military to also function as a projection of national identity.

7. Conclusion: "To Testify, To Struggle, To Mourn"

The analyses of the four exhibitions testify that they are more than temporary projects providing a specific view of the recent past. Exhibiting during wartime prioritizes the roles of testimony, resilience, and mourning and acts jointly with Ukraine's efforts to disseminate information about the devastating war, to demonstrate persistence in military battles and fighting against Russia's war propaganda, and to cope with disastrous war traumas.

As outlined above, Ukraine's museums launched their first new war-themed exhibitions in May 2022, only a few weeks after a number of regions were de-occupied, and when Russia's crimes against humanity were discovered and shocked the entire world. After media outlets domestically and internationally transmitted information about Russian crimes on occupied territories, the Ukrainian museums were the next to produce a cultural response to these atrocities. Fearlessly collecting artifacts on freshly de-occupied and still dangerous territories, and making acquisitions through volunteers and private foundations, the museum curators formed exceptionally rich collections of artifacts and war trophies. This greatly contributed to the historical authenticity of the presented exhibitions, the main feature of *Ukraine: Crucifixion* and *The Invasion: Kyiv Shot*, lifting them to the status of a powerful appeal for transitional justice.

The spin-offs from *Ukraine* also played an exceptional role in the call for justice. When shown in several countries, including when targeting diplomats and law-makers during an international law conference in Lviv and when presented in the UN building in New York City, this exhibition successfully supplemented Ukraine's efforts to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, revealing Russian crimes through authentic objects and persistently demanding punishment for the Russian political establishment and high military commanders who are responsible for waging the war. My personal summary from the messages which these two early exhibitions deliver to visitors through their textual explanations, videos, artifacts, and pictures would be that "Russia's political establishment has been producing imperialistic anti-Ukrainian propaganda for many years, and justifies a war against Ukraine where the Russian Army heavily damages cities and villages targeting civilians and civilian infrastructure." It is this message that stands as the essence of the testimonial function of the exhibitions.

Within the four exhibitions, the function of resilience is twofold. First, despite the everyday threats of missile attacks, the dangers of traveling to de-occupied territories, and the lack of funding museum staff decided to be proactive in protecting museum buildings and collections, as well as in proceeding with new topical exhibitions – this is the most powerful form of resilience. Museum staff decided to complete exhibitions about the war, fighting the Russian propaganda, especially at the international level. The memory activism of volunteers, soldiers, and their relatives testifies to the phenomenon of a "cultural front," whereby all of Ukrainian society is opposed to Russian aggression through cultural engagement. More importantly, most initiatives are coming from the ground level, making war musealization a united act of cultural resistance by the people. This makes Ukraine's case truly unique in the history of exhibiting a war during active warfare.

Second, in the two later exhibitions, the museums created a very powerful image of the Ukrainian warrior by depicting the two famous regiments of Azov and Aidar, and then by creating a narrative of 10-years' resilience to the Russian invasion, struggling against an enemy who has greater numbers and is better supplied. My summary from the resilience message of these two exhibitions, would be that "we have our army, which has the strong support of Ukrainian society; and although consisting of ordinary people, our soldiers show superhuman abilities; they are devoted to this cause and are willing to die defending our country."

The enormous losses incurred since the full-scale war began predetermined that mourning the war dead is a major function of exhibiting the Russo-Ukrainian war. A deep personalization of each

soldier, which focuses on their ordinary human features rather than generalization and universalization makes the feeling of loss deeper and more tragic. In *Azovstal* we can see this through the eyes of the relatives who are coping with the trauma of loss and investing their efforts in the memorialization of their loved ones. They consider these exhibitions as places of mourning, placing flowers next to the pictures. This is an additional function of museums during wartime – to provide space for mourning and coping with trauma. From my personal assessment, this exhibition delivers a powerful message: "We are losing the best people of Ukraine as they fall defending us."

In the projective space of four exhibitions, Kyiv-based national museums are conveying a war-determined narrative: despite human, territorial, and cultural losses, the Ukrainian Army and the entirety of the Ukrainian people can resist the Russian aggression. Engaging in "warring memory" as a mnemonic response to the ongoing war, museums have become spaces for generating and shaping collective memory about the war, cultural ambassadors in transmitting knowledge about the war internationally, national advocates in raising questions of Russia's responsibility in waging the war, and initiators of commemorating the sacrifice and service of soldiers. By implementing the ideological tasks of the "cultural front" in opposing Russian propaganda, documenting Russia's atrocities, and commemorating losses, these museums are attempting to follow the newest trends in exhibiting the war, creating an inclusive narrative with a combination of military and civilian experiences, discussing the wider and nuanced dimensions of the "enemy," "victim," and "hero" images, as well as touching upon controversial issues such as collaboration. While many other Ukrainian institutions and commemoration spaces, such as the National Military Cemetery and war memorials, remain under consideration or construction, Kyiv's national museums continue to be an essential space for mediating the war experience and shaping meaning about war in Ukraine.

Disclosure. None.

Notes

1 There is no single "official" name for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Western academia and media have referred to the events ranging from 2014 to February 24, 2022 as "conflict," the "conflict in Donbass," "Ukraine's crises," or as "Ukraine's unnamed war" (Arel and Driscoll 2023); in Ukraine, the war of that period was officially called the anti-terrorist operation (ATO) and many of Ukraine's museums and exhibitions adopted this term. Since the full-scale invasion in 2022, the term "Russo-Ukrainian war" has dominated in scholarship (Plokhy 2023). I am using it in my research as the term for the ongoing war since 2014.

2 During my stay in Kyiv between May and June 2024, I discovered at least six war-themed street exhibitions located within the city center. A majority of the museums are tackling the war topic in one way or another and war exhibitions can be found in somewhat unexpected locations, such as *The Battle for Kyiv* on the premises of the Grand Cathedral of St. Sophia the Wisdom of God, the most ancient, fully preserved Christian church in the Eastern Slavic area. The exhibition speaks about Ukraine's long-term struggle for national security against Russian imperialism, which culminated in the current war.

3 I will adopt this shortened form in the text.

4 For more about this particular exhibition, see Olzacka (2021).

5 Interview with Iurii Savchuk, conducted by the author on June 4, 2024.

6 Pictures can be seen at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UbrFSK-M0FU.

7 Interview with Milena Chorna, conducted by the author on June 3, 2024.

8 Interview with Chorna.

9 Interview with Anton Bohdalov conducted by the author on June 6, 2024.

10 Interview with Savchuk.

11 Following Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's decree in 2023, the Day of Remembrance and Victory over Nazism in WWII has been celebrated in Ukraine on May 8, the same day as European countries. On May 9, Ukraine celebrates Europe day.

12 As of May 2024, when I visited the War Museum, at least three temporary exhibitions attested to the fact that along with conceptualizing the Russo-Ukrainian war, the museum is rethinking its Soviet legacy. *The Motherland Monument: Redefinition*, *Sign on the Shield*, and *Redefinition* are reflective of the nationalization and reinterpretation of the Motherland monument—the central monument in the museum's Soviet landscape. With the financial support of private enterprises, the museum replaced the monument's Soviet coat of arms with Ukraine's. The removal of numerous Soviet sculptures located on the museum's premises has also been scheduled. Alongside landscape changes, the museum staff is discussing more substantial changes to the naming and restructuring of the permanent exhibition: they want to redirect the museum's focus from the Second World War to the Wars of Independence. Importantly, upon a request by Ukraine's Ministry of Culture and Informational Politics, UINR prepared a poster exhibition, *Ukraine: War in Europe*, which then launched on May 8, 2022, and by doing so made reference to WWII. The exhibition "talks about the deep preconditions of the modern Russo-Ukrainian confrontation, about various aspects of the current phase of the Russo-Ukrainian war after the full-scale invasion of the Russian Federation on the territory of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, as well as about the heroic resistance of the Ukrainian people, which keeps Ukraine in the focus of European interest" (UINP 2022). The exhibition premiered in the center of Kyiv and was later shown in many European countries.

13 Interview with Chorna.

14 Interview with Savchuk.

15 Interview with Savchuk.

16 Videos can be assessed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8fretZ2wkZ8&list=PL-C58KfkuRcgZQQRgbJ90m2D7A-aUqd_A&index=3.

17 Interview with Bohdalov.

18 Only the History Museum participated in two such projects. First, *Mariupol.me* is a frigate map that combines 50 projects aimed at reconstructing the city, destroyed by the Russians, in a virtual form. Second, *My Mariupol* is a photo exhibition that presents photos of pre-war Mariupol. It was created in cooperation with a group of former residents who currently live in Kyiv. Both projects are digitized, and in addition to the physical presence within the walls of the museum, each project has a Facebook page, as well as separate websites. The museum is a co-participant of the *M86* virtual project designed to reconstruct the 86 days of the defense of Mariupol.

19 The War Museum's 2018 exhibition *On the Line of Fire* is an exception, presenting a deeper image of the enemy.

20 As Olzacka testifies, this narrative was designed in a few exhibitions portraying the Revolution of Dignity and the war before 2022 (2021, 1035–36).

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