

Songs of War: The Russian war on Ukraine, popular music and social media

David-Emil Wickström

Popakademie Baden-Württemberg

david-emil.wickstroem@popakademie.de

Abstract

Russia's war on Ukraine has highlighted how Russia and Ukraine conceptualize differing narratives of the region's history, and how this is reflected in current popular music. This article looks at how popular music is used by both conflict partners by analyzing songs published on social media during the full-scale invasion's first phase. Here, a pattern emerges: songs being reworked, memetic songs drawing on specific occurrences or weapons emerging, and previously existing songs being used as anthems. While these strategies have been heard in past wars, a new dynamic is at work: The output from the current war is interesting due to the use of footage from the battlefield, the speed of reaction and the distribution of the songs aided by social media, and the continuity of musical material as well as support from outsiders. These processes have made social media platforms an important part of the ongoing war.

KEYWORDS: music and war, Ukraine, Russia, social media, memes

Introduction

A Turkish-produced Bayraktar TB2 drone is seen taxiing down an airfield accompanied by the sound of a synthesized glockenspiel melody. This is followed by images of (Russian) military hardware being destroyed. At the same time the viewers of Taras Bovorok's (2022a; 2022b) "*Bairaktar*" hear a male-sounding voice proclaiming how effective the drone is in fighting the *Rashysty* and *Orcs* invading from the east.¹ Bovorok's "*Bairaktar*" music videos were uploaded to YouTube less

than a week after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine and celebrated the early success of the Ukrainian army in repelling the invaders. The song's video also shows what Deaville (2012: 119) predicted in his chapter on the evolution of sound in TV news: "soldiers broadcasting video and sound from actual battlefields with added music tracks." In other words, the music video includes actual (and current) footage from the battlefield recorded by soldiers bringing the war home to spectators around the world.

While the Vietnam War was the first "living room war", with reports packaged within the evening newscasts seen on television, the 1991 US-lead war against Iraq was arguably the first to be televised immediately with both live transmissions from Baghdad as well as footage provided by the military showing bombs and missiles striking targets (Deaville 2012: 107,111). YouTube has, as Strangelove (2010) argues, not only helped initiate the post-television era with a new mode of production and consumption through amateur video practices (including videos from conflicts zones) to an online television-like medium, but also moved the reception of content to everywhere someone and their connected device might be, with social media platforms such as YouTube playing a central role. This made the US-lead wars against Afghanistan and Iraq in the 2000s the first everywhere war (Strangelove 2010: 154).

Miller in her study of video games, virtual performances, and online music lesson participation reminds us how the virtual has become part of the real world: players are absorbed into the process of game playing or watching online tutorials. This results in "their ability to move in and out of immersion at will and to let their virtual and actual domains of experience inform one another" (Miller 2012: 8). This can also be said for producers and consumers of online videos from Russia's war on Ukraine. Here the use of augmented reality has made the conflict an immersive and interactive experience for the soldiers fighting – similar to what Miller describes when playing video games. Consumers can participate by watching combat footage with an added soundtrack on social media (such as Defense of Ukraine 2022).

As Johnson and Cloonan (2009: 2) point out, war is the most extreme manifestation of the connection between music, identity, and violence. The instrumentalization of music and moving images from wars goes back to World War I. Following a broader shift in US news towards infotainment starting in the late 1970s, Deaville (2012) argues that the modern use of music in news has its roots in the 1991 war against Iraq. During this war, CNN instrumentalized non-diegetic music in news broadcasts to support its visual images. Music is also used to create community among soldiers – like the United Service Organizations (USO) Camp Shows in World War 2 with musicians performing for soldiers – or listening to popular music which the soldiers perceive as speaking to their situation.

In addition to songs from World War II, the Soviet Afghan war inspired many Soviet compositions such as Aleksandr Rozenbaum's (2023) "*Monolog pilota 'chërnogo tiul'pana'*" ("The 'black tulip's' pilot's monologue" – 'black tulip' is a reference to the Soviet An-12 transport plane which transported dead troops home). Describing the Soviet soldiers' war experience it is only one of many examples of war songs now hosted on YouTube – one of the main online platforms for music consumption.

At the same time music is also employed to manipulate, intimidate and torture the enemy: Johnson and Cloonan (2009: 150–154) highlight the use of loud music

to disorientate prisoners in Iraq and Guantánomo Bay. The Ukrainian prisoners of war freed during the prisoner swap on 21 September 2022 reported that they were continuously exposed to Abba's "Mamma Mia," Cher's "Believe" as well as Soviet songs while in captivity (Hestenes 2022).

On the other hand, musicians are also soldiers and are an important component to keep the soldiers' moral up. Many armies maintain orchestras, choirs and dance ensembles whose members are musicians in uniform (and who can also be deployed to fight). Okean El'zy's vocalist, Sviatoslav Vakarchuk, is one of the many Ukrainian musicians who joined either the Ukrainian army or Ukraine's Territorial Defence Forces (Lopez 2022). He has, during several spontaneous concerts (for example, Vakarchuk 2022b; 2022c), played for soldiers and inhabitants in different cities. Vakarchuk, who is also a Ukrainian politician and a former member of the Ukrainian parliament, has actively used social media to both promote the concerts as well as to appeal for Western support and to spread the word of Russian atrocities, like in the aftermath of the massacre in Bucha in March 2022 (Vakarchuk 2022a). Using English in that clip, he targets an international audience through social media. Other prominent users of social media during this war include Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyi, the former Ukrainian defense minister Oleksii Reznikov and former Russian president Dmitrii Medvedev.

Songs discussing war are, as Shuvalova (2019: 6-7) points out, productive objects of research in contexts of armed conflicts due to their simple and fast dissemination through social media and their dialogical function. Since the production, distribution and reception has changed since the early 1990s songs as well as user-generated videos and posts are today primarily distributed online via streaming services and social media.

Thus, the war following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine brings the above-mentioned strands of popular music, technology, violence, medialization, and media use together and shows how sound and music have been employed creatively in mobilizing and uniting people around a common cause. Previous academic research dealing with popular music, war and politics (especially in the aftermath of 9/11 – Helms and Phleps 2004; Thomas et al. 2001) has focused on how music has given soldiers a voice (Decker 2019), how artists responded to the events and aligned themselves politically (Gengaro 2009) and how genres like country and rock have become associated with conservative and/or progressive values and what happens when artists break with such perceived (or expected) values (Boulton 2008; Hart 2005; Jones and Smith 2023).

One major shift from past wars and revolutions like the Orange Revolution of 2004/05 not discussed in past research is the increased role the internet (especially social media) and music play in conflicts today (a positive exception is Helbig 2006). As Strangelove (2010: 150–157) points out, the emergence of amateur videos posted to YouTube has disrupted the control states have over how they portray wars: "Amateur videographers' growing ability to circumvent official voices and directly represent events and vernacular opinion represents a threat to the carefully constructed identity of religious and political authorities" (Strangelove 2010: 156–157). Analyzing Ukraine's online resistance in the ongoing war Munk (2023: 57–62) argues that online civic resistance is a new dimension of defense in

cyberspace. This consists of mobilizing numerous informal resistance communities including online users within memetic warfare thus extending the resistance against the full-scale invasion to the public.

Popular music disseminated online has become an area of research in publications on Russia's war on Ukraine (including Andrianova 2024; Bondarchuk 2024; Cane 2022; Hansen et al. 2019; Schneider 2023; Shnitman-McMillin 2023; Shuvalova 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022 and von Winning 2023). By focusing on the types of songs disseminated on social media this article moves the discussion further by exploring how popular music has been instrumentalized on social media as a tool of propaganda. After giving a technological contextualization by looking back at the aftermath of 9/11 where online media was used to comment on the attacks, I briefly outline the major changes within the music industry which paved the way for why popular music disseminated online is central today. The article then discusses songs uploaded in the first phase of the full-scale invasion (February to April 2022). Like "*Bairaktar*" these songs, which have a more meme-like quality, were released with a quick production time and thus underline Shuvalova's (2019: 6–7) point of popular music being more accessible to amateur musicians as well as being able to quickly reflect on changes due to the war. As the war progresses a shift has happened from these meme-like music videos to a steady increase of music videos which have a longer production time and appear more polished. The songs discussed have been selected based on their virality on social media (primarily YouTube, Instagram, VK and/or Twitter/X), reception (including becoming memes and intertextual references in other songs) as well as political instrumentalization by Russia respectively Ukraine.

Music and the technological shift since 9/11

Many artists reflected and commented on the 9/11 attacks and its aftermath. These songs were mainly played on radio or uploaded to online repositories like mp3.com (including parodies of existing songs which were often produced by radio stations, Phleps 2004b – see Helms and Phleps 2004b and Phleps 2004a for a sample discography). In addition, there were internet memes and short videos hosted on webpages and sent around as email attachments. "The Osama bin Laden Boat song" (N.N. 2012) provides a good example: Referencing Harry Belafonte's (1956) "Day O" (aka "Banana boat song"), the Las Vegas based radio station KOMP FM produced this parody a week after 9/11. Written by the station's morning show crew and produced by their team the song's mp3 was subsequently downloaded about 60,000 times from the station's website and about 10 million times from madblast.com as well as gotlaughs.com (Snedeker 2001).

Despite pre-YouTube online video hosting platforms like madblast.com and Mp3 repositories like mp3.com the main distribution forms for digital media were email or peer-to-peer networks – Napster and Kazaa were an extremely efficient but mostly illegal way to share music and videos – which limited their reach. While "traditional" media like TV and radio remained dominant forms of music distribution and consumption, new disrupters were slowly emerging. Reeling from file sharing and declining physical sales, the music industry was already in the

middle of the digital transformation initiated with the introduction of the CD in the early 1980s (Weinacht and Tschmuck 2021: 434). This transformation is linked to the digitalization of music production, the emergence of file compression standards as well as the internet which paved the way for fast and easy file sharing facilitated through a shift from dial-up modem to high-speed internet connections. These changes disrupted the music industry's marketing models and triggered the shift towards digital music consumption (Cook 2019; Sin 2021).

Another precursor opening for online music consumption were online forums and instant-messaging platforms like IRC and ICQ. They enabled instantaneous online conversations and served as predecessors to social media. In its current form, social media with its focus on user-interactivity and user-generated content took up speed in the 2000s with the emergence of dynamic webpages. This new phase commonly referred to as Web 2.0 (Cook 2019: 8) paved the way for social media platforms like Myspace, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. Today social media plays a central role in Russia's war on Ukraine.

The shift towards online consumption and mobile music has in part also been facilitated through the emergence of digital portable devices with SSD-storage during the 2000s and 2010s (Weinacht and Tschmuck 2021: 438). This not only makes it easier to watch and consume media, but also to write, produce and distribute songs and music videos. Current technology including cloud-based file exchange services, mobile and satellite technology opening for collaborations across borders enables easier access to both recording the songs and creating music videos as Andrii Khlyvniuk's rendition of "*Oi, u luzi chervona kalyna*" ("Oh, in the meadow is a red guelder rose", short "*Oi, u luzi*"), discussed below, demonstrates. Today the distribution of music is thus facilitated not only by streaming services like Spotify and YouTube, but also by other social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and messenger services like WhatsApp and Telegram.

These platforms act as new intermediaries by offering other ways to distribute media, enabling different means of including or excluding users and by removing the traditional gatekeepers within the media and music industry. This mostly facilitates easier access to a global audience (Weinacht and Tschmuck 2021: 448,452). It is also harder to stop the spread of videos since there can be multiple uploads of the same video by multiple users and across multiple platforms which also facilitates the spread of AI-generated fakes and unverified material aimed at manipulating the public opinion (see Munk 2023; Myers 2023). "*S rossiei v serdtse*" ("With Russia in my heart", discussed below) is a good case in point of a pro-Russian propaganda video posted on VK, Twitter and YouTube by different users (Pop-gruppa 'Sobor' 2022; Seddon 2022; Siostry Pobedy and Sobor 2022a; 2022b; 2022c). While control over intellectual property online has been strengthened not all online platforms (especially Twitter/X and VK) nor all countries are equal in their enforcement. Social media platforms also act as gatekeepers: users can restrict or enhance a post's distribution through their reactions which, in turn, influences the underlying algorithms used in the promotion of posts. In addition, the platforms themselves can restrict content that violates their terms and conditions or infringes on copyright.

The shift from owning music files towards online music and video streaming, in other words, getting access to the content on demand (Sin 2021: 506) is also important for the spread of online media. Statistics from selected countries across six continents compiled by the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry for 2022 show the dominance of online music consumption over radio, TV and physical recordings (N.N. 2022d). At the same time, online media consumption, including online streaming (audio, video, and social media), is higher among the younger generation (under 25 years) than among older generations (see Drücke et al. 2022 for Germany, Volkov and Goncharov 2019 for Russia and Volosevych et al. 2023: 8 for Ukraine)

The shift to online media consumption shows that not only access, but also regulating the internet (especially in Russia and China) has become an important strategic asset for governments. This is not only the case for media consumption, but also in combat: Starlink, a SpaceX subsidiary, plays a central role in providing internet access to Ukrainian soldiers in the field and thus helping them in fighting the Russian forces not only through coordinating their assault, but also through social media by posting pictures and video broadcast from the field. At the same time SpaceX's CEO Elon Musk is one of the new gatekeepers in his capacity of being a private investor. He controls access to the satellite network and makes decisions driven by personal motives and capitalist interests which have also influenced the ongoing fights (Laaff and Schinkels 2022).

In summary, there has been a paradigm shift within the music and media industry towards online media consumption. This shift has not only had a profound impact on revenue streams and consumption habits, but also on accessibility to information and how (dis-)information is spread. Linked to this are new intermediaries and gatekeepers who regulate access and thus influence the flow of media.

Songs, memes and war

The role of online media distribution and consumption bringing war footage to interested viewers around the globe was visible when Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine started on 24 February 2022. Almost immediately there was a proliferation of videos on social media which drew on material from the war and enabled interested viewers outside of Ukraine to experience the war. Popular music was quickly used to provide a soundtrack on social media: On 27 February 2022 Ukraine's official Twitter channel tweeted a music video about the "Ghost of Kyiv" (Ukraine / Ukraina 2022). It draws on combat videos depicting a MiG-29 fighter jet and stills of aircrafts in flames as well as the picture of a pilot whose face is covered by a helmet visor. The video uses PROBASS Δ HARDI's (2021) song "*Dobroho vechora* ["Good evening"] – Where Are You From" released in 2021 as a non-diegetic music track which sets the mood implicit in the images. Embedded in the video, there is also text mythologizing the pilot and how many planes he has shot down since the full-scale invasion. While the "Ghost of Kyiv" is a myth (Komanduvannia Povitrianykh Syl ZSU / Air Force Command of UA Armed Forces 2022), the post is a good example of the relevance of social media for Ukraine's wartime public relations strategy from the beginning of the full-scale invasion.

The songs dealing with the war can be categorized according to the stance they take (pro-Ukrainian / pro-Russian) and if they are topical or symbolic songs.² The former are songs dealing with the war, the war's achievements and suffering. This includes references to weapons like Bayraktar or Javelin missiles, people and activities. Symbolic songs consist of anthems or traditional songs with no direct link to the current conflict but with symbolic value for the country. "*Oi, u luzi*" (discussed below) and the Ukrainian national anthem are good examples of this. What unites the songs analyzed here is that they have all been released to social media since February 2022 and employ references to the ongoing war thus also pursuing a political agenda. Some, especially in the early phase, have a stronger meme-like quality drawing on novel aspects and/or are in dialogue with other songs, events or memes.

Originating within biology as an analogy to how culture replicates based on genetics (Dawkins 2016) internet memes are according to Shifman (2013: 177) "multiparticipant creative expressions through which cultural and political identities are communicated and negotiated." A central part of what makes memes work is intertextuality (Kristeva 1982), in other words (musical) texts referencing to and commenting on other texts – both musical and non-musical.

Pointing out that memes are a form of civic resistance on social media informed by critical events Munk (2023: 11) adds that memes are "cultural expressions transmitted through the use of visual and non-visual material." Munk (2023: 61–66) argues further, that Russia and Ukraine are engaged in memetic warfare where memes are used as tools to both spread and combat dis- and misinformation. Due to recommendations and the dynamic loading of new posts which are inherent parts of the social media experience watching (music) videos online from the war can become an immersive experience similar to that what Miller (2012: 8) describes. These videos can thus be considered propaganda used to influence viewers and promote an awareness of the conflict and to keep it present among an audience outside the Ukraine. This includes through soft power (Nye Jr. 2004) to garner sympathy for the Ukrainian cause as well as to ask for donations and help. The song's chart placement or streaming numbers (as well as sales) are, in this case, not relevant.

Thus, in addition to the stance they take and if the songs are topical or symbolic, the material can also be differentiated between songs created with the primary aim for online publication and distribution – functioning as memes – or if they have been created for the portfolio of an established artist. The aesthetics of the songs published in the early days of the full-scale invasion point to short songwriting and production processes. As the invasion progressed the songs released seem to draw on longer production times resulting in a more polished product which points to a use beyond being memes and the online space and to be incorporated within a (live) performance context.

Memetic songs

Hodges (2023: 295) argues that novelty songs appear as a reaction when the dominant genres in the market have become too boring. Novelties act as a form of comic relief, being songs “about pointless laughter [which] interrupt” (Hodges 2023: 294). In a way many of the songs following the invasion are reminiscent of novelty songs providing an interruption (but without laughter) and trying to break through the status quo aiming for attention to the war. This can be popular (internet) memes, current events, or a (technological) innovation. Examples for this are the pro-Ukrainian songs “*Bairaktar*” (Bovorok 2022a – discussed in the introduction) and “*PNKh*” (Botashe 2022). Besides (male sounding) vocals “*PNKh*”’s musical accompaniment seems to be electric guitar, programmed drums with cloud-rap-sounding programmed hi-hat/cymbals and a synth bass. Like “*Bairaktar*”, only vocals and guitar seem to have been recorded, the rest sounds like it has been produced in a digital audio workstation. This form of production does not require an elaborate studio to record in nor many specialized musicians. Similar to “*Bairaktar*” the “*PNKh*”-video incorporates a collage of videos and pictures from different sources (among others Deutsche Welle, Radio Svoboda, Defense Express, 1+1, Kanal 24, Dnipro TV) primarily showcasing soldiers and military equipment as well as the damage incurred by the Russian attacks.

Both the music production and the video aesthetics in Bovorok and Botashe’s examples point to a fast song writing and production process triggered by the full-scale invasion with Bovorok’s versions released around 1 March and Botashe’s song uploaded to YouTube on 7 March 2022.

“*PNKh*”’s refrain quotes the answer the Ukrainian border guard on Zmeinii island, Roman Hrybov, gave the Russian missile cruiser *Moskva* (Moscow) in Russian on 24 February 2022, in response to the order to surrender: “Russian warship, fuck off” (“*Russkii voennyi korabl’ idi na khui*”) (Pravda Gerashchenko 2022 – the song’s title picks up on this quote since “*PNKh*” is probably short for “*Putin na khui*”; “Fuck Putin”). As a meme this quote became synonymous for Ukrainian resistance and support.³ The phrase was picked up by the crew of a Georgian tanker when refusing a Russian ship’s request for fuel (David 2022) on or around 27 February. Ukraine’s president Volodymyr Zelenskyy quoted the (first half of the) phrase in his 2023 New Year Greetings (Zelenskyy 2022: 5:20). The phrase was also referenced in the refrain of the well-known Ukrainian artists Oleksandr Ponomar’ov’s “*Ukraïna Peremozhe*” (“Ukraine will win”) (Ponomar’ov et al. 2022) released 18 April and Oleh Skrypka’s (2022a; 2022b) “*Heroiam Slava*” (“To the heroes Glory”) released 4 April. In “*Heroiam Slava*” the curse word is replaced with a pause:

Kazhy slova!
Slava Ukraïni! Heroiam Slava!
Kazhy bez strakhu!
Rosiis’kyi korabel’ [pause]

(Say the words!
 Glory to Ukraine! To the heroes Glory!
 Say without fear!
 Russian battleship [pause])

The song also includes two Ukrainian symbols of sovereignty: the refrain cites the Ukrainian rallying cry “*Slava Ukraïni! Heroiam Slava!*” (“Glory to Ukraine! To the heroes Glory!”). In addition, the beginning of the Ukrainian national anthem is played on a button accordion throughout the song in the background.

With their fast production process and drawing on memes, significant events or (technological) innovations following the full-scale invasion these songs in themselves have a memetic character making them ideal for quick dissemination on social media.

Answer songs

The intertextual references in Skrypka’s “*Heroiam Slava*” leads us to answer songs – a category of songs which refer to earlier songs and are thus in dialog with them and through their intertextual references share some commonalities with memes. As Cooper and Haney (2013: 13) point out, answer songs “are tunes that respond to direct questions or continue to develop specific themes, ideas, or melody patterns from earlier songs.” Cooper and Haney (2013: 13) list answers to direct questions, responses to statements or commands, challenges to positions or ideologies and continuation of distinct storylines or themes as subcategories. Answer songs is also one of the analytical frames we draw on to discuss how songs are used in Russia-Ukraine relations since the annexation of Crimea (Hansen et al. 2019).

The mentioned pro-Russian song and dance routine “*S Rossiei v serdtse*” (Siostry Pobedy and Sobor 2022c) from Luhansk also belongs in this group. It was published online in April 2022 by the female youth movement *Siostry Pobedy* (“Daughters of victory”) and the female group *Sobor* (“Cathedral”). The melody is based on “The Wellerman”, a whaling song from New Zealand. Nathan Evans’ (2021) rendition became a No. 1 hit single in Germany and the UK in 2021 (Drücke et al. 2022: 48; Brandle 2021) and is emblematic of the central role social media plays for new artists today: Evans’ career started on TikTok. *Siostry Pobedy*’s version contains new lyrics accompanied only by a membranophone (possibly a bass drum) playing a steady beat of quarter notes. In the refrain, a muted guitar strumming two sixteenth notes on the off beats is added. The female sounding singers praise holy Russia and May, the month of victory (a reference to the Soviet Union’s victory over Nazi Germany in May). Their choreography symbolizes the letters V and Z which have both become prominent symbols for the Russian invasion. “*S Rossiei v serdtse*” was performed at the *Puting*⁴ “*Vybor Liudei: vmeste navsegda!*” (“People’s Choice: Together Forever”) on the Red Square in Moscow on 30 September 2022 (Various Artists 2022b). This official state event celebrated Russia’s illegal annexation of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia.

The Russian videoblogger Pikuli (Anton Ustimov) created an answer song parodying “*S Rossiei v serdtse*”: With a heavy dose of sarcasm the lyrics point out the looting done by Russian soldiers, the lies that Russian authorities tell, how Russia is falling apart, comparing Putin to Hitler, and highlighting the casualties of Russian soldiers. Pikuli’s first version released on Instagram on 24 April 2022 (Pikuli 2022a) mainly uses the *Siostry Pobedy* video, however with Pikuli’s audio track as the musical accompaniment pointing towards a short production process. A second

version with a new audio track and new video was published on 20 September 2022 (Pikuli 2022b). This version features Pikuli and a blue hand puppet acting out the lyrics. It also references Evans' music video (especially the beginning where Pikuli pounds the song's meter on a picture of Putin's head taped to the back of an acoustic guitar).

Symbolic songs like adaptations of hymns and anthems share traits with answer songs by being in dialogue with previous renditions. These include the pro-Ukrainian "*Ukrainsk'i artysty vykonaly Himn Ukrainy*" ("Ukrainian artists perform the National Anthem of Ukraine" – Ukraïns'ki artysty 2022) and songs which sound like or are traditional songs, such as Ukrainian songs "*Chervona ruta*" ("Red rue", written by Volodymyr Ivasiuk – for example Vakarchuk 2022b) or the mentioned "*Oi, u luzi*" (for example Eileen 2022; Khlyvniuk 2022). In its current form "*Oi, u luzi*" has its roots in a traditional melody and goes back at least to 1914 where Stepan Charnets'kyi composed it for the play "*Sontse Ruiny*" ("The Sun of the Ruin"). The song was subsequently used by the Ukrainian Sich Riflemen who were part of the Austrian-Hungarian army and fought in World War I. The song became an important pro-Ukrainian symbol during the Soviet Union, a symbolic value it continues to have today. This value has also led to people being sanctioned for singing or listening to that or other songs in the occupied parts of Ukraine – including Crimea – during the ongoing war (see Kurkov 2022; N.N. 2022a; 2022b; 2022c; 2022f for some instances of sanctioning of performances).

There are several versions of "*Oi, u luzi*" with slight variations in the song's underlying meter in circulation today. Basically, the song is a two-part march (4/4 time) with an A-B-structure, but the end of the A-part can have an interjected 2/4 time. The B-part is also irregular with an inserted 2/4 time (4/4 plus 2/4 or 6/4 bar) in the first half of the B-part and with an inserted triple meter (2/4 time plus 3/4 time or 5/4 time) at the end of the B-part. These metric changes can be heard in the Ukrainian singer Eileen's (2022) version.

Andrii Khlyvniuk's (2022) version of "*Oy, u luzi*" is probably the best-known rendition of this song following the full-scale invasion. Khlyvniuk, vocalist of the well-known group BoomBox, joined Ukraine's Territorial Defense Forces right after the war started and recorded the song in front of the *Sofijs'kyi sobor's* ("St. Sophia Cathedral") bell tower. Dedicating the performance to the volunteers fighting against Russia he published the song on Instagram on 27 February 2022.

Khlyvniuk sings a capella and with a freer meter: He groups the phrases with slightly larger pauses between them. Therefore, it sounds as if he is singing a continuous 4/4 meter interspersed with small pauses. The South African artist The Kiffness (aka David Scott) posted a remix of Khlyvniuk's rendition to YouTube on 4 March 2022 (The Kiffness and Khlyvniuk 2022). Here the meter is transformed into a continuous 4/4 time (and Khlyvniuk's video and singing is digitally adjusted to fit the meter at about 120bpm). In addition, Khlyvniuk's intonation is digitally altered so that he ends on C sharp, the same note as when he begins (Khlyvniuk goes down a semitone from C sharp to C when he sings it a capella). This song is a good case in point of the digital transformation in and delocalization of music production (Cook 2019: 11–12): by just using a cell phone a master version is created and uploaded which is then downloaded and remixed.

Pink Floyd (2022) also draw on Khlyvnyuk in their song "Hey Hey Rise up", but the use here is more as a meme. Khlyvnyuk's rendition is likewise digitally altered

with the meter adjusted to a 4/4 time (at about 113 bpm) and with the intonation corrected so Khlyvnyuk ends on a C sharp. Unlike the original version and the Kiffness' remix, Khlyvnyuk's singing in the Pink Floyd rendition is stretched at the end of the first half of the B-part so that the word "*pidiimemo*" (lift, raise) more or less starts on the downbeat of a new measure and then an extra bar without singing is added following "*pidiimemo*" (in the two other renditions Khlyvnyuk starts the new measure on "*-memo*").

These renditions of *Oy, u luzi* provide good examples of a song that went viral in different versions on social media with about 616 000 views on Instagram by January 2024 (Khlyvniuk 2022). The Kiffness' version had 16.8 million YouTube views and 7.9 million streams on Spotify while Pink Floyd's version had 12.5 million views on YouTube and 16.3 million streams on Spotify (The Kiffness and Boombox 2022; Pink Floyd and Khlyvnyuk 2022; Pink Floyd 2022 – all accessed on 18 January 2024).

Discussing why popular songs are valuable sources when researching communities affected by war Shuvalova (2019: 6–7) argues that

songs are prone to evolve along with the conflict. In this way, they can be classified as a subgenre of oral poetry, which has a special, participatory nature. (...) They are frequently re-interpreted and re-recorded with significant alterations made to them, which sometimes completely change the character of the original piece.

"*Oi, u luzi*" in general and specifically Khlyvniuk's version illustrates her argument. From a probably spontaneous and unedited Instagram post in the first days of the full-scale invasion, the song was picked up and reworked by musicians outside the Ukraine – also as a way to support Ukraine and the war efforts since the song's proceedings have gone to humanitarian charities in the Ukraine.

The first phase of the war also included covers and reissues of older songs, some, with new new lyrics added, and including intertextual references to the war. Khrystyna Soloviy's (2022) "Ukrainian Fury" which is based on the protest song "Bella Ciao" or Beton's (2022) "Kyiv Calling" which is based on The Clash's (1979) "London Calling" are two examples for covers by established Ukrainian artists. Pushystyi's (2022) "*Iz Ukrainy vezut ikh mashyny*" (They're bringing their cars from Ukraine) is an example of an amateur musician's cover of "*Monolog pilota 'chërnogo tiul'pana*" (Rozenbaum 2023) the mentioned Soviet song about Afghanistan. Pushystyi sings his own lyrics with references to Russia's war on Ukraine and embeds media from news and other sources in the video.

The Russian artist Zemfira's (2022) "*Ne Streliaite* ["Don't shoot"] (The Uchpochmack Version)" is a new release of a song originally written in 2005 during the second war in Chechnya (N.N. 2022e). Another example is the Belarusian group Liapis Trubetskoi's (2022) "*Voïny svitla*" ("Warriors of Light") which originally was released in the aftermath of the Euromaidan protests 2013/14 in Russian as "*Voïny sveta*" (Liapis Trubetskoi 2014). The song became linked to the protests and how it was remembered by its participants (Hansen et al. 2019: 69–73). In the new release the lyrics have been translated to Ukrainian by the well-known Ukrainian poet, musician and (now also) soldier Serhii Zhadan.

As the ongoing war has progressed, more songs with higher production standards and more elaborate videos have emerged. These include the pro-Ukrainian songs “I’m gone” (Roxolana 2022), “*Molytva*” (“Prayer” – alyona alyona and Jerry Heil 2022), or “12” (Morgenshtern 2022). While these songs also deal with the war and take a clear stance, they are not primarily built around intertextual references and memes from the war itself. Thus, they lack the novelty and dialogical aspect that the previously mentioned songs have. This latter body of songs has grown continuously as the war has dragged on.

Songs as territorial markers

While the memetic use of war references is an important commonality of the songs the immersive experience (Miller 2012) of both listening and watching music on social media is another characteristic of the songs and how they are distributed. One reason is that the songs and videos are used to present different (competing) ideas of national identities in relation to Ukraine: Ukraine asserting their sovereignty versus Russia and their separatist supporters denying this sovereignty. In other words, music is used to create and maintain biased imagined communities (Anderson 1991) and promote different views of Ukraine.

In times of conflict, one central aspect of community building is nostalgic songs which remind the listeners of an idealized home. As Johnson and Cloonan (2009: 4) highlight, these songs can also function as markers of territory:

every time music is used to demarcate the territory of self or community, it is incipiently being used to invade, marginalise or obliterate that of other individuals or groups.”

Jerry Heil’s (aka Iana Shemaieva) “*Moskal’ Nekrasivyi (Het’ z Ukrainy)*” (“You hideous Muscovite (Get out of Ukraine)” – Heil 2022) is a good example of a song marking Ukraine’s territoriality vis-a-vis Russia. The melody is based on the Kozak song “*Oi na hori ta i zhentsi*” (“Oh, on the mountain the reapers reap”) about the Cossack leaders Doroshenko and Sahaidachnyi. In Heil’s rendition the lyrics praise Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the Governor of the Mykolaiv region, Vitalii Kim and the (at the time) president’s advisor Oleksii Arestovych. The refrain is a meme taken from a sample of the well-known Ukrainian drag artist Virka Serdiuchka’s (aka Andrii Danylko) performance “*Monolog Baleriny Bella Kutsenko*” (“The Ballerina Bella Kutsenko’s monolog”) from 2004. In it Serdiuchka says the phrase “*Het’ z Ukrainy Moskal’ Nekrasivyi*” (“Out of Ukraine you hideous Muscovite” – Serdiuchka 2004: 4:15).

Musically both a plucked chordophone with gut or nylon strings playing a riff which moves up a semitone (from C to C#) and the vocalist’s melismas and harmonization sound like Ukrainian traditional music. These musical signifiers signpost the *etno* in what Sonevitsky (2019: 7) labels “*etno-muzyka* (ethno-music), which places local (here Ukrainian) sonic markers (*etno-*) within global popular music styles (like rock, hip-hop)”, in other words sonically linking the song to Ukraine.

While the music video is based on the Soviet cartoon miniseries *Kozaky* (“Kozaks”) it creatively inserts memes from the ongoing war as part of the visual

narrative of the Kozaks repelling a group of invaders and marking the territory. This includes windmills turned into planes with *Bairaktar* written on their sides dropping sacks of flour on the invaders next to a village sign with Chornobaivka written on it, a character showing an image of Kim sitting with his feet on a desk holding a shield that caught a Russian missile and Arestovych commanding a wagon with S300 written on it fending off an incoming canon ball.⁵ By drawing on intertextual references to Ukraine and how it not only repelled but is repelling invaders the song clearly demarks Ukraine as sovereign and argues for Ukraine's need to defend itself against Russia's invasion.

On the other hand, Natal'ia Kachura's (2021) song "*Donbass za nami*" ("Donbas is with us") which sounds like a 1980s power metal ballad demonstrates how a song symbolically invades and wounds Ukraine's territorial integrity by localizing Donbas as a part of Russia. The melody in the verse slowly rises from a Bb3 up an octave to a Bb4 building intensity which culminates in the refrain:

*V polneba plamia, v polneba smog
Donbass za nami, i s nami Bog!
V polneba plamia, v polneba smog
Rossiia s nami, i s nami Bog!*

(In half the sky there is smoke, in the sky there is smog
Donbass is with us and with us is God
In half the sky there is smoke, in the sky there is smog
Russia is with us and with us is God)

As the refrain hints, the lyrics emphasize how the Christian deity and Russia stand behind Donbass. Originally released on YouTube in 2021 the song was heard early after the full-scale invasion in Moscow during a pro-Russian *Puting* in the Moscow Luzhniki-stadium on 18 March 2022. During the festival Putin gave a speech legitimizing the war and Donbas born Kachura performed the song with the Russian singer Viktoriia Daineko (Kachura and Daineko 2022). The stage they performed on had the slogan *Za mir bez natsizma* ("For a world without Nazism"), *Za Rossiia* ("For Russia") and *Za prezidenta* ("For the President") written on it and both singers wore a Z made from a St. George's Ribbon pinned to their dresses – clearly positioning themselves on the Russian pro-war side.⁶

Another example of Russian musical support of the invasion is Leningrad's (2022) song "*Geopoliticheskaia*" ("Geopolitical"). This song trivializes the Russian war on Ukraine as a family conflict between husband and wife where the wife was unfaithful (the term 'wife' being a metaphor for Ukraine – on the feminization of Ukraine by Russia see Gaufman 2023; Hansen et al. 2019). Both sides present their versions of the conflict, and in the song, it is difficult to see where the truth lies. By implying that the wife (and not the husband) was unfaithful, the song, however, not only portrays Ukraine as being morally inferior to Russia but also indirectly blames Ukraine for starting the conflict.

Unlike Heil and Kachura Leningrad actively includes both sides of the war. By framing the war as a domestic conflict, the song not only declares Ukraine and Russia one entity, clearly violating Ukraine's territorial integrity. It also marginalizes

Ukraine's claim of being an independent nation since getting married (normally) implies a union created through mutual attraction. In other words, both countries voluntarily decided to be one through marriage. By placing the act of unfaithfulness on Ukraine the song draws on the official Russian line that Ukraine provoked the war. The song thus marginalizes Ukraine's point of being an independent nation since it implies that Ukraine at some point was in love with Russia.

These three examples show in different ways how territory can be marked and claimed in songs and thus also mark the stance they take. In the case of Leningrad, it also demonstrates how playing with ambiguity (which is a trademark of Leningrad's oeuvre) can be used to hide Russian colonial views of Ukraine. At the same time the songs touch on different aspects of the previous discussions: Heil's song is a good example of a memetic song drawing on numerous memes both from as well as before the full-scale invasion and which is aimed for online distribution due to how the video supports the song's lyrics and message. Online distribution is also the goal of the Leningrad song with its (deliberate) lo-fi aesthetic. Kachura and Daineko, on the other hand, shows a song which is created for an established artist and becoming part of a regular concert repertoire.

Summary

The transformation in the music industry over the last 40 years has moved music consumption away from physical to digital media and online consumption. While traditional media through national broadcasting is still relevant in promoting images on TV and radio the transnational reach of the internet connects not only diasporas and migrant groups to their homeland(s), but also opens for new audiences. Social media has enabled interested users outside the Ukraine to watch combat footage and thus immerse themselves in the war on their devices wherever they have an internet connection. This immersive quality is facilitated through the widespread use of smartphones, drones, and other digital devices in the war zone which lower the barriers for content producers to film and post footage. Here popular music is often added as a soundtrack when disseminating combat footage (like *Defense of Ukraine 2022*; *Vooruzhennye sily Rossiiskoi Federatsii 2022*).

Songs and music videos uploaded to social media have also both sonically and visually been employed to comment on the war. Besides the song's stance (pro-Ukrainian / pro-Russian) the discussion of song types in this article has on the one hand outlined songs being used as memes commenting on novelty aspects or current events, with fast production times and aimed for a primarily online use. As the war has progressed the type of songs have shifted to songs by more established artists which seem to have a longer production process. While technological production advances have sped up the songwriting and production process, this shows that time is still needed to produce a more polished product.

In addition to examining the production and distribution process the song types can be explored. These types are framed around topical and symbolic songs. The former are songs dealing with the war and the war's achievements and suffering. This includes references to weapons like Bayraktar or Javelin missiles, people and activities, as demonstrated in Oleksandr Ponomar'ov's "*Ukraïna Peremozhe*" (Ponomar'ov et al. 2022). This song recaps major achievements of the Ukrainian army from the first 1 1/2 months of the full-scale invasion and includes references

to, among others, the Russian warship quote, the Ghost of Kyiv as well as Chornobaivka. The other group consists of symbolic songs like anthems or traditional songs with no direct link to the current conflict but with symbolic value for the country. “*Oi, u luzi*” and the Ukrainian national anthem are good examples of this.

At the same time Russia and Ukraine are engaged in memetic warfare where (musical) memes posted to social media are used as tools to both spread and combat dis- and misinformation. Music videos like “*Bairaktar*”, “*PNKh*” and “*Ukraina Peremozhe*”, but also *Geopoliticheskaia* are aids in this memetic warfare being employed as propaganda used to promote an awareness of the conflict and to keep it present among an audience outside the Ukraine. By enabling this access through social media music videos have also become a tool for garnering (financial) support, especially for the Ukrainian cause, in Europe and North America like the versions of “*Oi, u luzi*” based on Khlyvniuk’s Instagram post. This also includes online crowdfunding projects, like the compilation “*Rusishe krigshif, shif zikh in dr’erd*” (translating the Russian warship slogan to Yiddish – Various Artists 2022a; N.N. n.d.).

As Russia’s war on Ukraine has shown, cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns and information operations, including deep fakes, play a major role with “[t]he goal (...) to create chaos, destabilize Ukraine, and exhaust its moral forces in support of Russia’s conventional operations” (de Liedekerke and Frankenthal 2023: 242). This not only happens through hackers disrupting critical infrastructure, but also through people and institutions. Social media has become a tool in manipulating public opinions and to target civilians beyond Ukraine and Russia with propaganda and disinformation (Munk 2023: 45-46; see Korowin 2023 for a discussion of how the visual art world is dealing with the ongoing war). Using cultural artifacts trying to sway public opinion and promote their version of an often elusive “truth” social media has become a central battlefield in modern warfare. Music and music videos have taken on a major role in this fight promoting competing versions of reality.

Endnotes

- (1) All translations are mine unless otherwise noted and I follow the ALA-LC romanization tables when transliterating non-Roman scripts. *Rashysty* (a portmanteau of Russia and fascist) and *Orcs* are derogatory words used for the Russian invaders. See Reuther (2016) for an etymological discussion of terms used in 2014 and 2015 for pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian fighters in the conflict and Shuvalova (2021; 2022) for terms used in relation to popular music.
- (2) See Shuvalova (2019: 2) for another model distinguishing between essentialist and circumstantialist othering in songs.
- (3) See Korowin (2023) for a discussion of the Russian warship as a meme.
- (4) A portmanteau of Putin and meeting *Puting* refers to a pro Putin event. The term probably has its roots in the Russian 2011/12 demonstrations (Gabowitsch 2013: 14) and implies that (most of) the participants were probably forced or given financial compensation to attend.
- (5) Chornobaivka is a village with an airfield which was occupied by the Russian army on 27 February 2022. It remained under repeated attack from the Ukrainian army and within popular culture Chornobaivka has become a recurring meme for certain death for the Russian invaders (Bezpiatchuk 2022). S-300 is a Soviet made surface to air defense system.

- (6) The St. George's Ribbon, which consist of 3 alternating black and orange stripes, is a symbol of the army (especially of the Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany) and, as mentioned before, the Z has become a pro-war symbol of Russia's war on Ukraine.

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