

## HUMOR AS A SURVIVAL STRATEGY IN THE CONDITIONS OF SOCIOCULTURAL TRAUMA OF THE RUSSIAN INVASION TO UKRAINE

### UMORUL CA STRATEGIE DE SUPRAVIEȚUIRE ÎN CONDIȚIILE TRAUMELOR SOCIOCULTURALE PROVOCATE DE INVAZIA RUSIEI ÎN UCRAINA

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**Abstract:** *The full-scale invasion of Russia in February 2022 threw the citizens of Ukraine into a state of shock, causing a social collapse that, according to the Kremlin's idea, should have led to the capitulation of state power and the end of Ukraine's resistance. However, the citizens of Ukraine mobilized, and already 15 months have been giving a worthy rebuff to the enemy. As a paradox, the ability of Ukrainians to reflect on tragic events comically helped in this opposition. In this article, we describe humor features that helped Ukrainians pass the sociocultural trauma of the war, namely: creating a new heroic epic, creating a new identity, ridiculing enemies' narratives, and proposing survival tactics to the human psychics. These features transforming the traumatic experience into a non-traumatic narrative and give Ukrainians hope to win the war.*

**Keywords:** *sociocultural trauma, full-scale invasion, humor, comedy, memes, gallows humor*

**Rezumat:** *Invazia pe scară largă a Rusiei din februarie 2022 i-a aruncat pe cetățenii Ucrainei într-o stare de șoc, provocând un colaps social care, conform ideii Kremlinului, ar fi trebuit să ducă la capitularea puterii de stat și la sfârșitul rezistenței Ucrainei. Cu toate acestea, cetățenii Ucrainei s-au mobilizat și deja de 15 luni au dat o respingere demnă inamicului. Ca paradox, capacitatea ucrainenilor de a reflecta asupra evenimentelor tragice a ajutat în mod comic în această opoziție. În acest articol, descriem caracteristicile umoristice care i-au ajutat pe ucrainenii să treacă de trauma socioculturală a războiului, și anume: crearea unei noi epopee eroice, crearea unei noi identități, ridiculizarea narațiunilor inamicilor și propunerea de tactici de supraviețuire psihicului uman. Aceste caracteristici transformă experiența traumatizantă într-o narațiune non-traumatică și le dau ucrainenilor speranța de a câștiga războiul.*

**Cuvinte cheie:** *traumă socioculturală, invazie la scară largă, umor, comedie, meme, umor de spânzurătoare*

## **Introduction**

Ukrainians used to reflect with jokes for any historical event. It is worth mentioning the narrative about the letter of the Zaporizhzhya Cossacks to the Turkish Sultan, which they wrote in the 17th century in response to the Ottoman leader's offer to surrender. Today we would call it "trolling". Satirical Ukrainian Insurgent Army magazines "Ukrainian Pepper" or "Osa", caricatures of the times of the Nazi occupation during the Second World War, and military humor during the time of the Anti-terrorist operation show that laughter is used as a survival strategy in critical periods when living conditions of the entire society are changed.

As M. Aleksandrova points out, Ukrainians are used to analyzing historical events as a massive list of past traumas: World War I, civil war, collectivization and deportations, the famine of 1932-1933, Great Terror, World War II, the famine of 1947, Chornobyl disaster, etc (Aleksandrova, 2015). The stages of the development of our society during the time of independence were also marked by traumatic events: the Orange Revolution, Euromaidan, the temporary occupation of Crimea and parts of eastern Ukraine by Russia, and, subsequently, the full-scale invasion in February 2022. As O. Suchy notes, each of these periods had a severe psycho-traumatic effect, built on top of the previous one, forming a multilayered frozen trauma. At the same time, the survival strategies of Ukrainian citizens in each of these difficult periods are determined by many objective and subjective factors. Still, some are common and have a powerful congratulatory and unifying potential, among which humor plays not the least role.

## **The degree of investigation of the problem currently, and purpose of research**

The degree of study of the problem is determined by its object-subject field. It constitutes the interdependence of the study of "social trauma" and its overcoming, in our case, through reflection with jokes.

The essence of national-cultural and spiritual traumas has been well-researched by well-known scientists - P. Shtompka (1996), D. Alexander (2012) and R. Ayeman (2013). Each of them analyzed why trauma is a psychological mechanism and a socio-cultural and anthropological construct.

The role of humor as a strategy of resistance to the dictates of totalitarian power has fairly numerous historiography. In Ukraine, the topic was studied by O. Styazhkina (2001), M. Stolyar (2011), A. Yakovlev (2016), etc.

At the same time, the use of humor as an element of resistance to the enemy during the war in independent Ukraine has not been well studied.

## **Methods applied**

The main research methods are observation and content analysis of humorous accounts that were rebroadcast in media formats during the beginning

of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

This article aims to investigate how the compensatory functions of humor (stress relief, reflection, etc.) and other features can become tools for overcoming sociocultural trauma.

### **Results obtained and discussions**

P. Stompka singled out the following signs that are inherent in every traumatic event: unexpectedness and speed of the changes taking place; totality and radical nature of changes; exogeneity, perception of the event that occurred as independent of the individual's will and desire; negative nature of the event (Stompka, 1996). Thus, the occurrence of sociocultural traumas is considered a consequence of events in society, and a person's inability to abstract from them becomes a natural reaction to the transformation of the social environment.

D. Alexander explains what role trauma plays in the life of society and person. "Cultural trauma occurs when members of a particular community feel that they have been forced to experience some horrific event that leaves an indelible mark on their group consciousness, is permanently imprinted on their memory, and fundamentally, irrevocably alters their future identity" (Alexander, 2012).

As noted by O. Rafalskyi and Y. Kalakura in their book "Anthropological Code of Ukrainian Culture and Civilization", the traumatic situation in which the Ukrainian people found themselves since the occupation of their territory by both the Russian Empire and Soviet Russia is fully included in the given theory regarding the occurrence of sociocultural trauma and its features (Rafalskyi, Kalakura, 2020).

Thus, the Russian-Ukrainian war of 2014-2023 not only corresponds to the signs inherent in socio-cultural trauma theory. It also superimposes the painful historical processes of denationalization and de-Ukrainization of Ukrainian society by the Russian and Soviet empires (multi-layered frozen trauma).

War in this context is a traumatic apogee: an armed clash of opposing parties. The strategic goal of war is defeating the enemy and victory over the enemy. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to mobilize all the forces of the state - economic, political, ideological, spiritual, and moral. Therefore, not only the material equipment of the armed forces play an essential role in any war, but also the moral factor - the resilience and courage of people, both at the front and rear.

Even though the military operations in the East of Ukraine continued since 2014 and warnings about the beginning of Russia's offensive appeared in the media from the Western media, people wanted to believe that a conventional war in the center of Europe was impossible in the 21st century. Therefore, the first days of the full-scale invasion of Russia in February 2022 were marked by chaos and panic, the momentary occupation of part of the territories, the first casualties among the military and the civilian population, spontaneous evacuation, and fear.

At the same time, danger in war, as a rule, causes such a strong mobilization of a person's protective capabilities that he eventually adapts to his terrible circumstances and can overcome such stresses, which in peacetime can cause the most severe suffering and disorders. This is facilitated by the high consolidation of society in a relatively short time, the growth of various forms of group identity, and the creation of tools for the self-organization of society in the face of an external enemy. And in February 2022, Ukrainians mobilized and prepared for defense, using humor as a weapon.

Returning to P. Shtompka, who outlined the stages of traumatization, in this article, we are interested in the last, sixth stage, namely overcoming trauma. As the researcher notes, this may be the final phase or the beginning of a new cycle of the traumatic sequence, when an unconscious or mitigated trauma receives potentially favorable conditions for the manifestation of a new type of trauma (passing on a sociocultural trauma).

*Humor: the way to pass sociocultural trauma*

As Petro Gornostay, a well-known Ukrainian psychologist and specialist in social psychology, notes, even in ancient times, ritualization served as one of the most effective ways out of collective trauma. People created a heroic epic in which heroic deeds were described and tragic events were mourned. These experiences became an effective way of healing from the collective trauma, the story of which was the basis of the epic plot. Group stories combined with group mythology also have a therapeutic effect. It helps transform a traumatic experience into a non-traumatic narrative, allows for discussion of problematic topics in a group, and allows for the safe transmission of problematic information to the outside world (Gornostay, 2021).

*Humor: possibility of creating new heroic epic*

In the era of high-speed Internet, the Ukrainian border guard, the author of the phrase "Russian warship - go f\*ck yourself" in response to the offer of the Russian occupiers to lay down their arms, became the hero of the Ukrainian heroic epic from the first days of the invasion. The image of a soldier with a characteristic gesture intended for a warship was spread on many pictures, postage stamps, printed matter, and clothing becoming a collective image of fortitude and readiness to face the enemy. The "Ghost of Kyiv", which in the first weeks of the invasion became a national hero because it protected the sky of the capital, according to the statements of the Air Force of Ukraine, is the collective image of the pilots of the 40th tactical aviation brigade of the Air Force of Ukraine. And the older woman from Kyiv, who shot down an enemy drone with a can, became the prototype of hundreds of memes. The unnamed gypsies who stole a tractor, brave Kherson people who fearlessly lay down under enemy tanks, Konotopian witches who threatened the invaders with male problems - enabled Ukrainians to escape a state of social shock. They demonstrated to society that it

is possible to resist the enemy and that everyone can do it.

Humor, namely its collective media forms in memes, Internet jokes, and cartoons, is ideal for compensating for traumatic experiences. On the one hand, they create potent myths that support the national spirit and consolidate society; conversely, they have a therapeutic effect because they vent anger, fear, anger, and other negative emotions. As Professor Z. Ozolina notes, due to the principle of minimizing joint efforts, i.e., ease of perception and transmission of the message, the compensatory function of humor is strengthened in direct proportion to the degree of coverage. Simply creating a picture, viewing it, liking it, and reposting has a quick therapeutic effect (Ozolina, 2017).

*Humor: creating a new identity - opposite to the enemy*

Professor Z. Ozolina notes that a common language or historical past does not mean common knowledge; a common social identity is needed to interpret a joke.

For self-definition and self-identification of an individual personality, an "other" is necessary, compared to which it seems to define the contours of its image. As K. Schmitt noted, "the fact that peoples are grouped by the opposites of "friend-enemy" cannot be denied because this is needed for every politically existing people" (Schmitt, 1932). There was no need for Ukrainians to invent an enemy. It was always represented by Russia - Imperial, Soviet, or Putin's. Even for those nostalgic for the Soviet or recent past with Russia, Putin's aggression put everything in its place. That is why, after a full-scale invasion, the constructs "Rusnia", "f\*ing Rusnia", and "good Russian - dead Russian" appear, which become elements of the oppositional mass identity - "us against them".

*Humor: ridiculing the enemy's geopolitical narratives*

Russia's self-positioning as "great", and "powerful", with "the second army of the world" and "capturing Kyiv in three days", which still terrifies the collective West with the specter of the USSR during the Cold War, is also debunked through jokes. When it's funny, it's not scared. Hence, humor acts as a means of ridiculing the enemy's geopolitical narratives. According to Professor G. Pocheptsov, the conflict between Ukraine and Russia is "the first semantic war in the world." In the semantic war, the image and visualization turn on the world of emotions, where there is no place for rational reasoning. At this time, memes become the visual components of mocking the enemy. The term "meme" comes from the Greek word "mimema," meaning "something imitated". Internet memes are often created by altering and remixing existing content to make it humorous or meaningful in a new context. Today, memes are full-fledged elements of mass communication from below, meaning they are created by society. But at the same time, it is a carrier of programmed ideas and messages, in a broader sense – ideologies. Making fun of the narratives of the enemy, Ukrainians create all possible variations of memes with "Kyiv in 3 days", "palyanytsia", "Putin is

h..ylo", "rashists", "Moscow dwarfs", "pig dogs", "putler" , "Krymnashists", "Chornobaivka", "sunflowers" and so on almost ad infinitum. While the Russian military bombards Ukrainian cities with missiles, the residents of these cities sit in bomb shelters and mock the weakness of their enemies. Thus, Russia's geopolitical ambitions are debunked by simple pictures made by the "Internet troops" of Ukrainians, where geese attack the Kremlin, Russian soldiers steal toilets and washing machines or "evacuate" a raccoon from a zoo, shamefully retreating from Kherson.

*Gallows humor: survival means*

According to Paul Wong, a professor at Trent University, humor also serves as a survival tactic: a means of resistance, a form of socio-political expression of the population. In particular, black comedy helps to cope with adverse situations. War is when negative events climax and become so terrible that a person laughs or cries just to keep his sanity. Wong says that war can be seen as a demonic comedy in which cruel ironies multiply at breakneck speed (Wong, 2003).

"Gallows humor" is perhaps the most widespread type of black humor in wartime. This is the ability to joke about tragic, severe, and complicated topics. Z. Freud wrote about the gallows' humor: "The ego refuses to suffer because of reality, which can make it suffer. It insists that traumatic episodes from the outside world cannot affect it; it shows that these injuries are not stronger than the possibility of pleasure" (Freud, 1990).

And Ukrainians vividly demonstrate "gallows humor." Russia declares the possibility of using nuclear weapons - Ukrainians make memes about Shchekavytsa. Putin announces mobilization - Ukrainians answer: "Where can we get so many black bags!?". PROBASS Δ HARDI's song "Good evening, we're from Ukraine" became a cult song, to the words and music of which thousands of videos were shot about how Ukrainians fight against the Russian invaders: civilians stop a tank with their bodies, carry mines with a cigarette in their teeth, steal tanks with tractors, and the military dance in the fields with a machine gun on their shoulders. These jokes provide society with the necessary comic release, manifesting in the compensatory function of humor.

But not only the threat of occupation and physical extermination became the topic of "gallows humor". The rocket attacks, which aimed to undermine the desire of Ukrainians to resist and force them to protest against the government, became the subject of jokes: "Even without light, we can see what idiots you are," "Our candles are burning for your repose," "They want to leave Ukraine without light? Idiots, 1 million Bandera residents will be born in 9 months." In this way, the Ukrainians demonstrated their contempt for the enemy's plans and arrogance, because they sublimated the "betrayal", which the enemy was waiting for, into a joke.

John Greenspan, Ph.D., from the University of Virginia, researching humor during the American Civil War, concluded that the more horrific the events at the front, the more they produced jokes and caricatures, allowing Americans to talk about their fear and pain (Greenspan, 2012). The compensatory function of humor, i.e., the possibility of releasing negative energy, was considered by Z. Freud in the psychoanalytic theory of humor. According to Z. Freud and his followers, wit and jokes, humor, and comedy contain various mechanisms for storing mental energy and releasing its excess through laughter. Z. Freud grouped possible humorous situations and their corresponding energies, which can be discharged by laughter: 1) discharge of the energy of displacement (sublimated into wit). 2) discharge of mental energy (through the comic). 3) discharge of emotional energy (directly humor) (Freud, 1990).

And this is what is most in demand during military time because it protects a person from the inferiority of being. When the tension and tragedy increased, people mocked the failed offensives, rejoiced at the loss of enemy military staffing, and visualized their victories in Kherson with photographs of watermelons (watermelon - is a symbol of Kherson).

### **Conclusion**

Thus, in the extreme conditions of war, humor and laughter become means of survival, helping to survive the daily brutality and tragedies, radically changing society's entire life. The creation of collective myths, the heroization of unnamed defenders and civilians who resist the occupiers using improvised means - allows the population to escape from socio-cultural trauma by ritualizing and transforming the traumatic experience into a non-traumatic narrative. And most importantly, laughter and humor become a powerful factors in mobilizing the people's spiritual forces in their fight against the enemy, giving hope for overcoming the multilayered frozen trauma associated with Russia's age-old expansion of Ukraine.

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