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State Murals, Protest Murals, Conflict Murals: Evolving Politics of Public Art in Ukraine

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Abstract: Russian interference and invasion in Ukraine have transformed that nation's historical practice of mural painting. A traditional art form with deep religious and political resonance in Ukraine, murals have become an instrument for patriotic mass mobilisation against the Russian military threat. From the mid-2000s, spraypaint graffiti underwent a gradual process of professionalisation and reconciliation with mainstream culture as Ukrainian municipalities pursued urban beautification initiatives and city-branding strategies to mitigate the socioeconomic challenges of postsocialism. It was this legacy of apolitical, privately funded street art that provided the foundations for patriotic muralism following the Maidan "Revolution of Dignity" and the Russian annexation of Crimea. Amidst the post-Maidan search for a postcolonial understanding of Ukrainian culture disentangled from Soviet and Russian influences, professionally produced murals in central urban districts proposed new visions of national identity. The war's intensification since 2022 has resulted in a decentralisation of mural production. No longer reliant on international festivals in urban centres, conflict murals are now made by Ukrainian artists in large cities and small towns across the country. The newest murals represent a blending of the physical and digital—with a subject matter often inspired by viral conflict memes; artworks are, in turn, shared with worldwide audiences via social media.

Keywords: public art; monumental art; street art; graffiti; neo-muralism; conflict murals; postcolonial culture; Ukrainian identity; cultural heritage

1. Introduction

Barely three months after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, internally displaced artist Anastasiia Khudiakova decorated a schoolyard in rural Transcarpathia, more than 1200 kilometres west of her home in the eastern city of Kharkiv, with a bright blue and yellow mural of a madonna enveloping the whole of the country in a woven cloth, titled "Ukraine under the omophorion of the Mother of God" (PMG.ua 2022). With its aura of serenity and reference to the omophorion, a liturgical vestment used by bishops in both the Eastern Orthodox and Ukrainian Catholic faith traditions, the image affirms national unity and professes hope for Ukrainian victory. Khudiakova's mural is among hundreds of colourful spray-painted compositions that have sprung up in public spaces across Ukraine since 24 February 2022, telling the story of the war with imagery that intertwines the historic and the contemporary, the tragic and the whimsical, the sacred and the profane.

Historically an art form with deep religious and political resonance, murals in Ukraine today are a tool used to rally patriotic sentiment in the face of Russian invasion. Murals are a conspicuous medium of public communication because they intersect with individuals' everyday routines and add colour to an urban landscape that in much of the country is still dominated by grey concrete structures and Soviet-era spatial design principles. The new paradigm of Ukrainian street art is a hybrid of physical and digital viewing experiences, experienced alike by local passersby and international social media users.

Despite the prominence of the medium and the weight of the attendant political associations, Ukrainian street art has received surprisingly little attention in international

scholarship. This article proposes a simplified history of Ukrainian muralism from its ancient origins to its possible future trajectory, as a starting point for further research into the topic. In so doing, this research engages with new and nontraditional sources by Ukrainian authors and curators.

2. Historical Development of Ukrainian Muralism

Ukrainian muralism evolved over centuries as a syncretism of official art with folkloric traditions, a pattern typical of traditional heritage arts. If hieratic arts had a power projection function, folkloric arts conferred a distinctive quality of cultural authenticity. It follows that a fusion of state art with folkloric forms could confer a layer of legitimacy onto extant power structures; this, at least, was a conscious aim of Soviet cultural policy (Hilton 2002). Intended as visual icons within the urban landscape, mosaics communicated the imperial aspirations of the Soviet party-state. In line with official proscriptions to represent "socialist" imagery using "national" forms, Ukrainian Soviet mosaics of the late socialist period bore visible influences of mediaeval syncretisms of Byzantine religious arts with indigenous folkloric handicrafts. Late socialist mosaics occupied the intersection of high and low art.

Official and oppositional traditions of Ukrainian muralism together provided a historical basis for contemporary creative practice. Distinct from state art, street art evolved from an underground subculture in the late 1980s and 1990s to an urban beautification instrument in the 2000s and 2010s. On the eve of the Maidan, street art was rather decorative than dogmatic in nature, though the ideological associations of the mural form had never fully disappeared, making it relatively simple after 2013 to revive muralism as an instrument of Ukrainian cultural policy with the aim of consolidating collective identity.

Mediaeval princes and ecclesiastical hierarchy commissioned murals to decorate the interior spaces of cathedrals and churches. Following the ninth-century Christianisation of Kyivan Rus', Byzantine monumental arts spread to Ukrainian lands. Greek masters invited to work in the Rus' presided over the travelling workshops (*artels*) of local artisans. Not mere copies of Byzantine techniques, Rus' murals revealed clear influences of Slavic folk art. Human figures charged with a sense of primal vibrancy were framed by polychromatic borders of complex geometrical and botanical patterns. Even in these early artworks, a distinctive local style was already apparent (Lazarev 1966, pp. 31–36). The practice of setting tesserae at different angles into the surface plane produced a particular shimmering effect which captured natural and artificial light, making mosaic images appear to come alive. Church interior decoration produced a comprehensive symbolic program intimately related to its architectural environment: artisans harmonised individual pictorial items with the scale and rhythm of the architectonic structure, spatially aligning the iconographic program with the liturgical rites celebrated inside the church such that image and action came together to produce a polysensory experience for the congregant.

In the 11th century, local *artels* working under Byzantine direction created spectacular frescoes and mosaics partially preserved inside Kyiv's Saint Sophia Cathedral, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Saint Sophia's decoration illustrates the life of Christ and the saints but also incorporates portraits of cathedral donor Grand Prince Yaroslav the Wise and his family in the lateral naves, visually demonstrating the close relationship between religious and secular sources of authority. An enormous mosaic of the Virgin Orans in the chancel vault dominates the iconographic program. Depicted in full-length robes of brilliant blue, the Oranta stands six metres tall against a glittering gold background (Figure 1). She remains a popular symbol of Kyiv to this day, the city's supernatural protector.

Figure 1. Mosaic image of the Virgin Orans on the chancel vault of Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv, 11th century. Public domain (Saint Sophia of Kyiv 2015).

The Soviet era brought a state-driven revival of Ukrainian muralism while expanding its context from religious structures to the secular public space. Lenin's 1918 "Plan for Monumental Propaganda" called for the production of large-format murals to propagate revolutionary ideals of communism, recommending mosaic as the medium best suited to the extremes of the Soviet climate. Ukrainian Soviet muralism developed in two phases. The avant-gardes presided over an initial period of visual experimentation from the 1910s to the early 1930s. The extermination of Ukrainian artists in Stalinist purges and the country's devastation during World War II caused a two-decade lull in artistic activity. Later, modernism had its breakthrough moment during the late 1950s and continued through the 1980s, though its experimental peak had passed by the mid-1960s. Marxist–Leninist aesthetic theory demanded that artists should reference the best innovations of historical arts in their work, but 20th-century Ukrainian monumentalists were no mere agents of Soviet propaganda; despite the limitations imposed by the totalitarian system, artists possessed a margin of agency, and state-funded mosaic commissions became lucrative opportunities to exercise that agency.

A branch of the Ukrainian avant-garde that flourished from the 1910s to the mid-1930s, the Boychukist school produced monumental murals in the "Byzantine revival" style, employing technical and stylistic conventions of the religious arts to depict idyllic scenes of collective peasant labour. With their colour palette and compositional structure, Boychukist works bore an evident resemblance to historical traditions of icon painting and church interior decoration (Figure 2). Boychukists had considerable influence over the initial search for an official Soviet style in the monumental arts during the early 1930s, but Ukrainian secret police identified them as a threat, possibly because the Boychukist idealisation of premodern village life presented an alternative to the official vision of state-managed industrial collectivisation (Lucento 2022). Boychukists were executed and their works destroyed in 1937; only a few small-format sketches and studies survived. Lately, curators have revisited the Boychukist oeuvre as the last great attempt to create a truly "national" Ukrainian style in the visual arts (Klymenko 2018, pp. 8–9).

A turning point in Soviet city planning, the 1954 Decree "On the Elimination of Excess in Design and Construction" mandated a shift to modernist architecture and prefabricated construction. The postwar coincidence of industrially prefabricated concrete-panel architecture with a renewed search for "beauty" in the living environment revived party interest in Lenin's Plan (Tolstoy 1961, pp. 49–55). Rededication to the Lenin cult replaced discredited Stalinism as the purest representation of revolutionary ideology while monumental propaganda became a preferred tool to sensibilise proletarian masses to the midcentury reordering of the Soviet pantheon. To diversify an increasingly standardised built environment, planners turned to the genre of monumental-decorative arts, large-format embellishments inspired by traditional applied arts and integrated with their underlying architectural structures. In Ukraine, the "national" form of mosaic murals expressing "socialist" ideological values began to populate public spaces from the late 1950s. Mosaics around entrance groupings or on blank walls of buildings had aesthetic and ideological functions, serving alike to synthesise the architectural environment into a visually cohesive spatial ensemble and inspire the proletarian masses officially tasked with leading the promised transition to full communism.

The early 1960s ushered in a "golden age of the monumental-decorative arts" that extended through the 1980s, though its creative peak had passed by the late 1960s. A meeting point of academic and folkloric traditions, the Soviet genre of monumental-decorative arts employed a semiotic vocabulary instinctively familiar to local populations to translate socialist ideology into popular consciousness (Bachinska 2018, p. 41). A standardised system facilitated the mass production of mosaics: state organs commissioned projects, artist unions coordinated tasks and selected creators, and studio workshops executed the designs (Illyenko 2022, pp. 358–61). Mosaic panels leapt out, jewel-like, from their achromatic architectural environments with the intention of fixing the beholder's attention on a single colourful point (Piddubna 2017, p. 165). Designs of this period featured brilliant red colours

heroically representing the human figure, with pathos-suffused compositions narrating the Soviet citizen's superhuman triumph over the limits of nature itself (Figure 3). Mosaics were often hastily produced and low in quality, but certain panels evinced outstanding technical skill and stylistic innovation that remain appreciable today.

Figure 2. Mosaic of St. John by Mykhailo Boychuk, 1910, from a private collection. Public domain (Wikimedia Commons 2017).

Figure 3. Smalt and ceramic mosaic panel "Victory" by Halyna Zubchenko and Hryhoriy Pryshed'ko, 1971. Implemented on the façade of the Institute of Oncology and Radiology in Kyiv, it shows doctors using the power of science to defeat a black monster representing cancer. CC-BY-SA 3.0 (Wikipedia 2020b).

The midcentury revival of Ukrainian mosaic muralism is inseparable from the Sixtiers (*Shestidesyatniki*) generation of creatives who entered university in the immediate postwar years and actively participated in the youth Thaw. Nonconformism was an organic cultural movement of creatives loosely united around their rejection of a narrowly delimited official style and desire to explore new languages of composition and form-building (Rohotchenko 2019). For inspiration, nonconformists consciously looked back to the avant-gardes and specifically to Boychukism, sometimes even calling themselves neo-Boychukists. Their margin of experimentation was strictly limited to matters of form, not content, which invariably had to illustrate subjects from the official pantheon while conveying an optimistic mood. Even in matters of style, artists had to be careful not to venture into the "decadent" abstractionism that was popular in Western art of the day, nor to employ elements of the national art tradition deemed incompatible with Soviet identity discourses of pan-Slavism and ethnonational brotherhood. Rather than an openly oppositional stance, nonconformism thus was a midpoint between conformity and dissidence (Sydorenko 2016, p. 170). Most nonconformists specifically focused on aesthetic experimentation while only a vocal minority became active in social and political debates.

The biography of monumentalist Valerii Lamakh illustrates the balancing act that many nonconformists sought to maintain throughout their careers. Lamakh created state mosaic commissions while privately exploring abstract graphic art as a meditative exercise, reconciling these distinct spheres of activity with his philosophy of the artist's calling as the production of a fresh and memorable image no matter its context. Nor were the propaganda images which Lamakh produced alien to his creative vision; late in life, Lamakh (2015, p. 60) recalled that he "came to love [monumental-decorative arts] as a form of art most close to

me". Of the oppositional nonconformists, Alla Gorska was amongst the most visible. Her activism for the public acknowledgement of Stalinist crimes led to professional reprisals and, ultimately, to her death under suspicious circumstances (German 2023). Gorska's fate is notable given that, by the late 20th century, the spectre of financial consequences had replaced the threat of physical elimination as the primary instrument of state control over artistic production (Rohotchenko 2019, p. 320). Expulsion from the Union of Artists, as happened to Gorska, effectively cut off entry to the system that coordinated the production of public art. Fearing loss of access to lucrative commissions, artists and intellectuals often engaged in self-censorship.

The ubiquity of propaganda mosaics, intended to magnify their symbolic power, ultimately had the opposite effect of desensitising Ukrainians to visual messaging in their living environment. Because mosaics were visible everywhere, people stopped paying attention to them despite their massive proportions and vibrant palettes. Tetiana Shataieva (n.d.) summed up the intergenerational evolution of attitudes within her family of intellectuals living in Dnipropetrovsk:[1]

> "'Mosaic reminds me of our hopes for the future,' my grandfather, a certified geologist who travelled around the forests of the USSR, commented on his attitude towards Soviet mosaics. ..."

> "My mother, who grew up in the 1980s, told me: 'When we were teenagers, we didn't treat the Soviet mosaics as art, but rather as stamps from textbooks. They looked too aggressive and intrusive, staring at you from the sides of buildings, train station walls, even at summer camps. Most works lack the authors' personalities. We never knew anything about who created them. I even used to think that it was the same person who made all the mosaics.'"

Ambivalent attitudes similar to those expressed by Shataieva's mother have persisted into the 21st century, a condition that entails obvious implications for Ukrainian society's reception of wartime patriotic street art campaigns.

3. Mediaeval and Modern Mosaics

The historical relationship between the Rus' and Soviet paradigms of state-backed muralism in Ukrainian lands has occupied scholars since the mid-20th century. Rus' and Soviet mosaics are comparable as plastic translations of official authority into the public space, with a narrative compositional structure and didactic character meant to be immediately intelligible to the average viewer. Like Orthodox iconography, Soviet propaganda represented reality not in its actual form but in an idealised state that could be achieved by adhering to a "correct" lifestyle. The identifiable parallels between Rus' and Soviet muralism are worth critically examining in the context of Soviet aesthetic practices and their historical legacies in 21st-century Ukraine. Scholars have evolved through the decades in their appraisals of the similarities between mediaeval and modern Ukrainian arts; as the Soviet experience has receded in time, researchers have progressively recognised that the characterisation of Soviet mosaics as a continuation of historical traditions is arguably a perpetuation of ideological frames imposed by Marxist–Leninist aesthetic theory.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, an influential cluster of books by East Bloc emigrés became the first attempt at historicising the experience of aesthetic production within Soviet communism (Papernyi 1985; Groys and Leupold 1988; Golomstock 1990; Todorov 1995). These authors asserted a unique cultural propensity, rooted in the particularities of Russian history, towards projecting power through aesthetic means. In the broadest terms, emigré scholars described the Soviet experience as a totalising artistic performance extending (at least nominally) into the most intimate routines of daily life. They attributed Soviet reliance on the visual form to delayed industrialisation, with the consequence that the early Soviet Union remained a largely illiterate peasant society that had to be addressed through traditional means—grandiose visual propaganda displays reproducing the familiar monumental forms of religious art (Kruk 2008). Departing from the basic assumption of a

"totalitarian art" with a religiously derived symbolic language, the simple act of transiting through the city would make the Soviet citizen complicit in a collective mass performance whose ultimate author was not any of its participants but the party-state itself. The perpetual motion of pedestrians and transit systems, harmoniously interacting with the architectural environment and its monumental-decorative program, would bring alive the city and transform it into an ideal image of socialism akin to an Orthodox icon. Soviet muralism consequently appears as a modern art form exhibiting especially strong, albeit selective, continuities to premodern cultural traditions.

Critical scholarship since the turn of the millennium has affirmed the centrality of the emigrés' "totalitarian art" thesis while hinting that these authors were to an extent limited by the terms of the very ideological framework they had sought to deconstruct (Kiaer 2005; Reid 2006). A new generation of Eastern European scholars has warned art historians against the temptation to reproduce in their own work the Soviet ideological device of self-orientalisation, the act of auto-transformation into an exotic subject to construct a layer of cultural authenticity for the social order (Malakhov 2013, p. 170). Official historiography in the late Soviet period tended to exaggerate the civilisational uniqueness of the Eastern Slavs, insisting on the continuity of 20th-century Ukrainian Soviet culture with its mediaeval Rus' ancestor to historically justify the unification of Slavic "brotherly" peoples within the Soviet Union.[2] Mass implementation of monumentally scaled pseudo-folkloric decoration into public spaces throughout the 1970s and 1980s reinforced the argument of cultural continuity with a traditional past (Castillo 1997). At the same time, Soviet discourses of self-legitimisation pejoratively associated Ukrainian culture with peasant culture, which carried implications of a backward and unsophisticated people that needed external intervention to become civilised. Therefore, it is essential not to overstate the supposed historical appropriateness of communicating with Ukrainians through visual forms of propaganda, nor to simplistically narrate Soviet and Rus' muralism as successive phases in a common tradition of local ethnic art. It is nevertheless true that 20th-century Ukrainian mosaicists drew technical and stylistic inspiration from mediaeval religious arts, adapting them to conform with the ideological prescriptions of Soviet aesthetic theory. These interconnections are important to acknowledge because of their implications for the cultural landscape in independent Ukraine: the enormous legacy of Soviet monumental propaganda on Ukrainian territory comprised not only mass-produced Lenin monuments—imperial symbols which contained nothing specific to Ukraine, but also a collection of artfully executed mosaics that combined the mandatory communist symbols with intentional quotations of the national art-historical tradition.

Mediaeval and Soviet mosaics employed similar techniques of juxtaposing tesserae in contrasting jewel tones to achieve a sparkling effect capable of provoking an involuntary sensory response in the beholder. The stimulation of the physical senses was a classic feature of Orthodox liturgical celebrations during which the smell of incense coalesced with the sound of chanting and the sight of light reflected from gilded surfaces, producing a fully immersive experience in which the congregant became part of the celebration (Lidov 2014). The idea of producing a spontaneous sensory response was likewise at the heart of socialist realism, the official ideology governing Soviet-era cultural production (Efimova 1997). The Soviet conception of aesthetics collapsed the distance between subject and object, making the beholder an integral part of the artistic image (Roberts 2011, p. 227). The activation of the beholder's senses through a dazzling "aesthetics of gleam" that combined the effects of light, shadow, and perpetual motion was a consistent element of Soviet visual practice, already apparent in the first major infrastructure projects of national electrification and Moscow metro construction (Cooke 1997; Vujosevic 2013). In late socialist Ukraine, some of the best-executed mosaics achieved a gleaming effect through the setting of glossy smalt tesserae at different angles to make the sunlight dance across their surfaces. The striking decoration of the Mykola Ostrovsky Regional Literary Memorial Museum in Shepetivka, western Ukraine, by architect Anatolii Ihnashchenko and artist Anatolii Haidamaka required a team of some eighty executors for its implementation in 1979 (Nikiforov and Baitsym

2020, pp. 108–9). The horizontally developed mosaic envelops the entire façade upper register in an enormous Soviet Red Banner which appears to wave in the wind (Figure 4). An undulating sculptural relief surfaced by smalt tesserae in contrasting crimson reds and indigo blues achieves the illusion of dynamic motion. The banner is, quite literally, a shining representation of communism—and, consequently, an awkward presence in independent Ukraine.

Figure 4. Frontal view of the Nikolai Ostrovsky Museum in Shepetivka, Ukraine (since 2020 the Museum of Propaganda) with its decorative mosaic relief resembling a Soviet red banner. CC-BY-SA 4.0 (Zysko 2020).

Rus' and Soviet mosaics also employed similar compositional structures oriented around figures in dynamic motion, offset by abstract geometric or botanical patterns. In Soviet iconography, motion represented the inevitable triumph of the communist cause. Human bodies oriented upwards and rightwards suggested a heroic ascent towards the heavens. As would be evident to any Soviet citizen, the heavens were synonymous with the ultimate goal, communism, which had to be pursued through unyielding collective resolve. The typical mosaic protagonist was a variation of the male warrior archetype adapted to the industrial-age Soviet professions—a farmer, labourer, scientist, or cosmonaut. The incorporation of folkloric motifs projected an aura of historical legitimacy and cultural authenticity that created the impression of a deep civilisational foundation for the Soviet state. In the Brezhnev era, the discursive framework of "Soviet nationalism" encouraged the expression of a politically acceptable patriotism that celebrated ethnic culture but did not extend to demands for self-determination (Tromly 2014, pp. 217–31). An especially large number of mosaics with ethnic and folkloric imagery appeared in Ukraine during the late 1970s and early 1980s to prepare for major international celebrations vital to the Soviet Union's internal and external image. Kyiv had a star turn as a host city in the 1980 Moscow Olympiad, the torch relay for which passed throughout the territory of Ukraine, prompting republic-wide public works and urban beautification projects. Shortly afterwards, the 1982 celebration of Kyiv's 1500th anniversary modelled Soviet myths of an East

Slavic civilisational brotherhood amongst Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians—listed, of course, in that order. Pernicious legacies of these cultural attitudes are discernible in current Russian rhetoric about the limits of Ukrainian sovereignty, which purports to justify the military invasion.

A further historical commonality was the model of professional workshops collectively designing and implementing large mosaic compositions. In postwar Ukraine, the Soviet university system provided the institutional resources for specialised artist workshops led by collectives of monumentalists (Tromly 2014, pp. 25–52). The state-directed nature of cultural production meant that workshops had access to scarce resources and material inputs. On the other hand, the creative freedom of individual artists was necessarily limited by the imperative of keeping the collective in good official graces to ensure continued access to state commissions. The value of a monumental image was determined more by its ideological content than the identities of its creators ("cultural workers" in official parlance), who were essentially artisans making a product per the predetermined specifications of a public-institutional patron. Ukrainian mosaicists were not household names and the rights of artists over their own work were practically nonexistent. In many cases, it has been only recently, through the dedicated efforts of art historians and curators, that the authorship of mosaics could be conclusively established.[3] The art-historical documentation of these mosaics does not, however, necessarily imply official protections of Soviet-era mural art from neglect, alteration, removal, or destruction, as later sections discuss.

4. The Beginnings of Street Art

In contrast to the state-dominated mosaic form, an underground culture of spraypaint graffiti arrived in Ukraine during the late Soviet era as a cultural import from the United States and grew during the 1990s amidst the cultural globalisation and shrinking state monopoly over the public sphere that followed Ukrainian independence. Starting in the 2000s, Ukrainian graffiti began a gradual process of professionalisation and reconciliation with mainstream culture, becoming progressively distanced from its roots as an illegal protest subculture. A major factor in this evolution was the adoption of spraypaint muralism for urban beautification and city-branding initiatives. The two Ukrainian revolutions were another essential factor, giving rise to a phenomenon of street art directed at a mass public and containing social messages (Abyzov and Chuieva 2021, p. 58). The early 2010s witnessed the consolidation of a new paradigm of municipally permitted street art financed with private capital, marking the completion of the art form's progression from unauthorised protest graffiti to state-sanctioned public art.

Street art in the new millennium is, by definition, a hybrid phenomenon, a means of visual communication that ignores academic canons of art and instead relies on the sign systems of global mass culture (Havrylash 2018). Contemporary muralism is post-internet and post-smartphone in nature, relying on digital images both as a source of inspiration and as a method of documentation, giving it unlimited reach via the web. In former Soviet societies, the public reception of the street art boom passes through a particular prism of perceptions influenced by the historical legacies of communism. Accustomed to the Soviet paradigm of monumental propaganda and its lingering presence in the public space, and lacking a grounding of cultural appreciation for contemporary art, citizens may be unable to distinguish an artwork from a monument (Kartseva 2021, p. 88). As such, Ukrainian citizens are predisposed to perceive street art as an embodiment of ideological messages in the public space, rather than as a representation of an artist's creative vision as is typical in Euro-Atlantic societies.

In the West, where experiences with 20th-century muralism as a state-sponsored art form were far more limited, street art has effectively become a new type of commercial advertising amidst the "cultural conjoining of art, marketing, and urban discourses" that has accompanied globalisation (Borghini et al. 2010, p. 116). One dimension of commercialisation is the brand-building efforts of individual street artists, who leverage their physical artworks and social media footprints to establish name recognition at a level enabling them

to find paid opportunities internationally. Another dimension is the popularity of street art amongst municipal administrators as a "marketing tool for the Creative City brand", an instrument for urban areas to represent themselves as hubs of inward migration for educated young professionals attracted to lifestyles that are dynamic and exciting yet safe and sustainable (Schacter 2014, p. 162). Even if it is promoted by bureaucrats, Western street art is not necessarily perceived as bureaucratic. Rather, the street art aesthetic has become its own marketing language adapted to signalling trendsetter status. In Ukraine, the popularisation of street art coincided with the postsocialist period of political and economic turmoil, meaning that the new muralism was more naturally associated with the uncertainties of social transformation than with the excitement of trend-chasing.

Ukrainian municipalities began pursuing urban beautification initiatives during the 2000s in an attempt to mitigate pressing social and economic challenges associated with the postsocialist urban condition—privatisation of public spaces, declining maintenance of housing and transportation infrastructure, failure of formerly state-owned industries, collective identity fragmentation, and speculative development heightening economic disparities between central and peripheral districts. Street art had certain advantages that made it an attractive tool for urban renewal. For one thing, spraypaint murals were cheap and simple to implement, especially in comparison to costly Soviet monumental styles, yet still effective in refreshing the appearance of even unmaintained or abandoned structures. For another, street art had a certain cool factor due to its associations with globalisation and youth culture, which could allow localities to present themselves as plugged into international creative trends. Progressive legitimation of spraypaint graffiti resulted in the formation of a market environment for street art, driven forward by professionally curated festivals cosponsored by municipal authorities and featuring lineups of local and international graffiti artists (Olishevska 2020). Even so, conflictual approaches to engagement with the public space did not disappear during the 2000s. Unsanctioned and illegal murals became protest tools for Ukrainian youth asserting a right to the city and fighting for the redistribution of public spaces amidst widening social and economic inequalities (Sanitska 2020).

The use of street art for city branding took a major step forward with the 2012 UEFA European Football Championship in Kyiv, in preparation for which city administrators organised the festival "Muralissimo" to decorate blank walls with large-format commissioned works by Ukrainian and European graffitists. The financing of Ukrainian murals began to become internationalised with French, German, and Polish diplomatic representations joining the Kyiv city administration as festival patrons (Muralissimo Kiev Street Art Festival 2010a). "Muralissimo" murals were essentially apolitical works of urban decoration intended to add new life to grey façades and empty courtyards. Many murals were simple abstract designs in bold contrasting colours (Figure 5); still, there were a few subtle cultural messages to be observed in quotations of Western art movements such as surrealism and fauvism to reference Ukraine or Ukrainians. An abstract geometric composition by French artist Remed of a female figure armed with a sword and shield was a composite image evoking two iconic patronesses of Kyiv, the colossal Motherland monument and Lybid, a princess and legendary city founder commemorated with a monument on the Dnipro bank (Muralissimo Kiev Street Art Festival 2010b).[4] The decision to hire artists like Remed, known for his portfolio of murals in tourism hotspots such as London, Brooklyn, Madrid, and Sao Paolo, communicated the aspirations of Kyiv city administrators to develop the Ukrainian capital into an international destination.

Figure 5. Mural "Optical Illusion" by French artist 2Shy, 2010, made for the Muralissimo festival in Kyiv. Its alternating use of coral and turquoise colours is reminiscent of an arcade game. CC-BY 3.0 (Wikipedia 2019b).

By depicting picturesque and decorative scenes with an ideologically neutral character, authorised street art in the early 2010s was essentially political to the extent that it was not. Decorative murals improved the appearance of cities but also prevented blank wall spaces from being used in other ways, such as for the creation of protest graffiti or unauthorised street art with oppositional themes. In effect, commercial street art papered over the voids left by the postsocialist condition while doing little to actually address pressing social concerns. Events in late 2013 and early 2014 would dramatically interrupt that depoliticised trajectory, as the next section goes on to describe.

5. The Maidan as a Revolution in Ukrainian Visual Culture

The successive traumas of the Maidan revolution, the Russian annexation of Crimea and the territorial conflict in Donbass produced a reawakening of national consciousness that transformed the Ukrainian cultural landscape. The Russia–Ukraine war with language and identity as layers of the conflict prompted a reassessment of Ukrainian historical memory to decouple from Soviet and Russian influences. The reframing of the Soviet period as a colonial experience and consequent search for postcolonial conceptions of Ukrainian identity resulted in a changed relationship with Ukraine's extensive legacy of Soviet monumental propaganda, which activist circles came to regard as symbolising the persistent historical threat of Russian imperialism. Alongside the ideological discrediting of old monuments, a boom in spraypaint murals articulated new visions of national identity. Following the established model of privately financed public art, early conflict murals were produced through professionally curated festivals—yet, in contrast to the apolitical street art of prior years, post-Maidan murals explicitly incorporated ideological messages.

The overarching aim of postcolonial discourse was the rejection of Russian historical dominance over Ukrainian visual culture; any pretence of a single East Slavic civilisation or "Russian world" (*russkiy mir*), whether in the past or present, had to be finally shattered. For Maidan demonstrators and nationalist activists, Moscow's (neo)imperial dominance took on a material body in Vladimir Lenin, whose monumental likeness still presided over hundreds of public squares, transit nodes, and public–administrative complexes across Ukraine. On 8 December 2013, Svoboda party activists theatrically toppled and smashed a granite statue of Lenin on Kyiv's Bessarabska Square; assembled protestors sang the national anthem as a European Union flag was raised atop the bare plinth (zik.ua 2013). This event, documented by photojournalists and broadcast around the world, was the opening act of the *Leninopad* or Lenin-fall, which spread first regionally and then nationally through the spring of 2014 (TSN.ua 2014). Activists pulled down statues in illegal improvised actions or successfully pushed municipalities to remove them with heavy equipment. The figure whom many Ukrainians had ironically called "Uncle Vlad" (*Dyadya Vova*)—an anachronistic yet familiar presence in the background of everyday life—abruptly became an intolerable symbol of foreign oppression.

Artists and cultural critics viewed with concern the increasingly chaotic events unfolding under the direction of patriotic activists. According to progressive circles, Ukraine's search for a new national imaginary had to start from a reckoning with collective traumas by addressing controversial questions of impunity and accountability for crimes and abuses of the 20th century. It was important in their view for Ukraine not to simply become an anti-Russia, trapped in perpetual spirals of cultural identity disputes still dominated by colonial mental frames. To problematise the binary moral-historical construct of Ukrainian victims versus Russo-Soviet aggressors seemingly underlying the activist agenda, Myroslava Hartmond (2016, p. 11) implied a parallel between the *Leninopad* and the primordial myth of Gaia and Uranus. Lenin statues appeared to angry demonstrators as "hateful phallic columns" whose destruction was supposed to liberate the Ukrainian earth mother from her position of nonconsensual domination by the Muscovite titan—yet, just as Gaia gave birth to the son who violated her, Ukrainian citizens had been complicit in upholding the very party-state apparatus that had forcibly imposed these same hateful columns.

There was also the risk of turning Soviet monuments into anti-icons, investing them with a perverse new form of symbolic power through ritualistic acts of destruction. Smashed to bits, once-unremarkable Soviet symbols could become twisted into rare artefacts; Yevgenia Belorusets (2015) uneasily likened Lenin fragments collected as protest souvenirs to shards of ancient Greek vases or precious religious relics, part objects that tantalisingly suggest a whole which is as mentally vivid as it is physically impossible to reconstruct. In sum, progressive critiques of Ukrainian cultural policy through the 2010s held that precisely because the Soviets had sought to monopolise visual culture, it was only through a deliberative and participatory process of reimagining Ukrainianness that the historical legacies of totalitarianism could truly be overcome.

Following the snap presidential and parliamentary elections of 2014, the new Ukrainian government undertook an official intervention in the memoryscape that aimed to systematically reshape the national imaginary from the top down. A legislative package commonly called the "memory laws" sought to unmake Russo-Soviet framings of the Ukrainian past and replace them with nationalised and Europeanised frames of historical remembrance. The memory laws consisted of:

1. Law no. 2558 "On Condemning the Communist and National Socialist (Nazi) Totalitarian Regimes and Prohibiting the Propagation of their Symbols"
2. Law no. 2538-1 "On the Legal Status and Honouring of the Memory of the Fighters for the Independence of Ukraine in the 20th Century"
3. Law no. 2539 "On Remembering the Victory over Nazism in the Second World War"
4. Law no. 2540 "On Access to the Archives of Repressive Bodies of the Communist Totalitarian Regime from 1917–1991"

Together, these laws produced a template for Ukrainian collective self-perception as a nation of heroes and martyrs. The Ukrainian People's Republic (UNR) of 1918–1921 was identified as the origination point of the modern nation and the precedent for contemporary statehood, effectively rejecting the Ukrainian SSR as a historical predecessor. The Ukrainian people became historicised as victims of two morally equivalent totalitarian regimes, the Nazi occupation and the Soviet empire, while resistance to these regimes was associated with heroic status. Importantly, this entailed the elevation of nationalist paramilitaries formed in the early 1940s, the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), to heroic status despite controversies over their crimes during the Second World War. More fundamentally, the war's basic definitional terms were altered to align its name and periodisation with Western European commemorative models and, conversely, away from the Great Patriotic War secularised ancestor cult that had continued to hold sway in post-Soviet Ukraine and still dominates Russian official discourse (Olszański 2017, pp. 26–28). The opening of state security archives likewise had a dual purpose as it both illustrated democratic values of transparency and specifically facilitated the memorialisation of Soviet abuses.

The memory policies of the Poroshenko presidency deliberately advanced a construct of nationalism centred around ethnic and linguistic identity that was at odds with liberal and progressive pleas for a civic nationalism built around the recognition of postcolonial hybridity and multilingualism as core democratic values (Nekoliak 2020). To critics, the memory laws represented a defeat of the Maidan revolution's initial forward-looking impulse to define a fundamentally new Ukrainian identity on its own terms, instead taking a step backwards to defining Ukraine as the victim and antithesis of Russia in oversimplified terms that ironically perpetuated Russian influence over the public sphere. The elevation of a dominant "Ukrainian" ethnolinguistic group was an inversion of Russian identity discourses equating nationality with language and positioning ethnic Russians at the top of the social hierarchy while relegating others to "minority" roles. The reclaiming of the mediaeval Rus' as a specifically Ukrainian state, instead of deconstructing propaganda myths about the common identity of Russians and Ukrainians, merely replaced one politicised historiography with another. Even as its central aim was to reject Russian domination, Ukraine's national imaginary was still ostensibly being written in response to official dis-

courses emanating from Moscow. Although they were not enforced in practice, the threat of legal consequences for individuals who failed to follow the new memory templates appeared at odds with the values of free expression. The memory laws thus represented an effort to shape, not reflect, public opinion that proved controversial from the outset, though there was little material resistance from average citizens more immediately concerned with Ukraine's deteriorating economic situation due to the war.

Law no. 2558's entry into force in May 2015 set in motion a process of "decommunisation" that progressed rapidly over the next year and a half to dramatically alter the material and symbolic landscapes of Ukrainian cities, particularly those in the centre, south, and east of the country (with the obvious exception of territories outside government control). Decommunisation officialised the trend set in motion by the *Leninopad* while greatly expanding its scope and scale. Authorities removed thousands of monuments, memorials, and commemorative plaques, leaving behind conspicuous empty spaces in streets and squares, which were themselves extensively renamed to remove references to Soviet-associated historical figures. Decommunisation presented opportunities for political entrepreneurship at all levels of government, from the federal to the municipal. Public officials angled to build themselves patriotic reputations by waging political campaigns for the removal of Soviet-era symbols. Through the fall of 2015, a number of technically excellent Soviet-era mosaics were summarily covered over or demolished (Kozyirev 2015). Public officials made decisions on the status of mosaics with limited transparency, negligible debate, and scarce consideration of potential artistic value or local sentimental attachments.

Rushed, indiscriminate approaches to decommunisation mobilised Ukrainian historians and curators to advocate for the conservation of skilfully executed mosaics as cultural heritage properties. As they had done with the professionalisation of street art during the early 2010s, international partners played a supporting role in conservation efforts by providing financial support, media exposure, and sometimes exhibition space for the musealisation of Ukrainian Soviet mosaics. Campaigners in Kyiv secured the establishment of an expert committee of historians, architects, and artists to advise the (Kyiv City State Administration 2015), no. 746, on the implementation of decommunisation. Upon the committee's advice, the city administration decided in late 2015 to preserve a number of mosaic panels containing prohibited symbols either by modifying designs to disguise banned motifs like the hammer and sickle and Soviet red banner or, in some cases, preserving them in their integrality due to their outstanding artistic value or the impracticality of modification (Shumikhin 2022).

Younger Ukrainian progressives led campaigns for the preservation of Soviet mosaics, engaging directly with local residents, surviving artists, and local government administrators. The conservation movement was small yet significant as it represented an emerging cultural consciousness of mosaics as having art-historical value beyond their propaganda functions—in other words, an understanding of these material objects as valuable Ukrainian heritage, not mere uncomfortable Soviet legacies. By engaging local residents, conservation campaigns appealed for participatory models of urban governance, which had remained opaque and top-down into the 21st century, with unaccountable private development having taken the place of centralised state planning (Ponomarova et al. 2020). Even before the Maidan, Ukrainian artists had referenced Soviet-era mosaics as sources of inspiration; however, the shock of decommunisation pushed the creative sector as a whole to appreciate mosaics as a national art form, inspiring a number of specialised research publications and curated gallery exhibitions in the late 2010s and early 2020s (Figure 6). The motivations of conservationists were not nostalgic, however; their argument was that, through musealisation, mosaics could be divested of lingering ideological associations and become understood as documents of their time. In fact, the campaign was consciously oriented against repeating the past, opposing ideologically motivated acts of destruction like those committed by the Bolsheviks that had already decimated Ukraine's heritage patrimony.

Figure 6. Sketch for the mosaic panel "Wind" by Alla Gorska, Viktor Zaretsky, and Boris Plaksiy, 1967, exhibited at Kyiv gallery "Dukat" as part of the developing musealisation of Soviet-era mosaics. CC-BY 3.0 (Wikipedia 2021).

Paralleling the desovietisation of the public sphere through decommunisation, urban art actions symbolically renationalised the topography of Ukrainian cities. The quickest and cheapest of these actions was the use of spraypaint graffiti to insert national symbols into built spaces whose architecture and design principles were unmistakably Soviet. For these purposes, size and visual prominence were more important than technical complexity, which could indeed be quite primitive. Implementation of Ukrainian flags and patriotic slogans along the promenade near Kyiv's Dnipro metro station and river bridge, an icon of socialist modern architecture with its distinctive glass-fronted staircases topped by monumental statuary, Ukrainised the space by reclaiming it from association with Soviet communism (Figure 7a). Similar insertions of "Ukrainian" imageries into typically "Soviet" spaces throughout central areas of the capital served alike to rally patriotic sentiment and cosmetically refresh derelict structures. Illegal interventions used spraypaint to vandalise or deface still-standing Soviet monuments—authorities did not consistently remove these graffiti, suggesting a degree of tacit tolerance for such activity (Figure 7b). Spraypaint also served to create informal monuments to new heroes as an intermediate measure until more permanent memorials could be built. On the "Avenue of Heavenly Hundred Heroes" in Kyiv, white outlines on the pavement simulated police chalk markings indicating the locations where the bodies of Maidan protestors had fallen to the ground, killed by sniper fire (Figure 8).

(**a**)

Figure 7. *Cont.*

(**b**)

Figure 7. (**a**,**b**). Graffiti of the Ukrainian flag near the "Dnipro" metro station and river bridge, an icon of socialist-era architectural modernism, symbolically nationalising a distinctively Soviet space. Defacement with red paint of a Soviet-era monument to the Kyiv Arsenal January Uprising of 1918, an armed Bolshevik revolt in support of the Red Army. Author's images (2021).

Figure 8. Spraypainted outlines simulating police chalk markings, memorial steles, and votive gifts come together to create an improvised memorial to fallen demonstrators along the Avenue of Heavenly Hundred Heroes in central Kyiv. Author's image (2021).

6. Kyiv's Post-Maidan "Peace Murals"

Ephemeral spraypaint interventions adapted existing landscapes to the post-Maidan reality. Meanwhile, the world of professional and officially sanctioned Ukrainian street art entered a new era, becoming the tool of choice for creating new symbolic landscapes in Ukrainian cities. On one hand, post-Maidan street art creations were "neo-murals", a term coined by Russian scholars and practitioners of street art to describe large-scale, technically and compositionally complex images implemented in high-traffic urban areas, commissioned by public entities and made with little or no input from local residents (Pilikin 2018, pp. 8–9). The practice of neo-muralism was already present in Ukraine before the Maidan, evident, for instance, in the "Muralissimo" festival. On the other hand, post-Maidan street art comprised "conflict murals", public images appearing in conflict-affected societies that express political and ethno-national beliefs with the intent to actively construct communal identities and ideological messages (Goalwin 2013). It is, therefore, possible to speak of a post-Maidan paradigm of Ukrainian conflict neo-muralism, which has developed in two phases: the first phase, from 2013 to 2022, was primarily concentrated in Kyiv and enacted through the familiar format of professionalised street art festivals; the second phase, beginning with the Russian invasion via the "Special Military Operation", has seen the practice of patriotic street art become decentralised, deprofessionalised, and diffused on a national scale. The street art phenomenon has the central objective of uniting the whole of Ukraine—a large and diverse state in terms of ethnicity, language, religion, and geography—behind a shared understanding of national identity. This goal necessarily involves the reduction of regional differences in visual culture and memory practices—more specifically, the need to reduce the "Sovietness" of symbolic landscapes in the south and east of the country, where major cities like Kharkiv continued to produce street art that closely followed Soviet-era practices of war and ancestor memorialisation (Lubavsky 2021). Ironically, analogous processes of patriotic street art production were unfolding in Russia during the same time, meaning that there were parallel campaigns of state-supported neo-muralism in Russia and Ukraine, occurring under conditions of armed conflict and promoting diametrically opposed discourses of national identity and civilisational belonging (Leahy 2022, p. 112).

As the capital, Kyiv naturally became the centre of the effort to transform the national imaginary through street art. Two major festivals, "City Art" in 2015 and "Art United Us" in 2016–2017, produced scores of large-format murals across central and peripheral districts, primarily portraying subjects related to issues of global conflict resolution and peacebuilding (von Pouke 2017). In other words, the initial phase of post-Maidan murals was first and foremost peace murals, as opposed to more traditional conflict murals that tend to directly depict the armed struggle at hand. The duo of Geo Leros and Iryna Kanyshcheva curated both festivals, meaning that these individuals were vested with significant influence at a pivotal moment in the evolution of Ukrainian visual culture. Although private citizens, they had close ties to the state, particularly Leros, who held advisory appointments with the Kyiv mayoralty and the Ministry of Information Policy in parallel to his curatorship of the festivals, with the result that the Leros–Kanyshcheva duo effectively acted as private agents of official cultural policy (Kovalenko and Zhartovska 2020).[5] A mix of international and local talents participated in the festivals. Artists' identities became integral to the meanings of artworks since artist diversity exhibited Kyiv as a hub of contemporary culture under threat from a historically isolated Russian adversary. In central districts, murals by artists from Europe and North America outnumbered those by Ukrainians (Leahy 2022, p. 135). Participation from abroad was essential for the new Ukrainian model of self-identification as a European and democratic nation.

The purpose of Kyiv street art festivals was to represent an immediately recognisable and internally cohesive vocabulary of Ukrainian symbols, providing a nationwide template for new post-Maidan identities. Most obviously, murals made prominent use of blue and yellow colours, while crimson-red shades associated with the Soviet and

Russian flags were almost totally absent. Murals frequently included representations of the Ukrainian traditional arts of decorative embroidery, national dress, *petrykivka* floral painting, poetry, and music performance. These are traditions associated with Ukrainian peasant culture, marginalised during the Soviet period with its emphasis on Russian-centric high culture and now deliberately reclaimed as a site of resistance to Russian cultural imperialism. Protagonists of Kyiv murals were the new pantheon of Ukrainian heroes and martyrs. Portraits of Maidan "heavenly hundred" martyrs recognised a new generation in the historical tradition of struggle for self-determination, while frequent images of young women and girls symbolised processes of national renewal and rebirth. Ubiquitous depictions of the natural environment conveyed a quasi-mystical reverence for indigenous flora and fauna while expressing the desire for peace with the restoration of territorial integrity. At this point, it is worth considering a few examples of the murals' imagery.

Martyrs for the cause of national independence, during the 'old' national founding of 1918 and the 'new' national founding of 2014, provided heroic models for Ukrainians. A monochrome portrait of Sergei Nigoyan, the first of the "Heavenly Hundred" martyrs, decorated the capital's newly renamed Square of the Heavenly Hundred. Portuguese artist Alexandre Farto created the 100-square-metre sgraffito composition free of charge with supplies financed by local residents. Ukrainian president Poroshenko attended the mural's unveiling in 2015, together with Sergei's father and foreign ambassadors (Kanal 5 2015). At 4 Hrushevsky Street in central Kyiv, the spraypainted triptych "Icons of the Revolution" shows the historical figures Taras Shevchenko, Ivan Franko, and Lesya Ukrainka dressed in the gear of Maidan protesters and medics (Figure 9). Anonymous artist "Sociopath" created the graffiti in 2014 at the height of the Maidan on the wall of what was then a luxury store, whose management painted it over in 2017, considering the graffiti to be of little value. Amidst the ensuing outrage, protesters vandalised the store and the prosecutor's office opened an investigation into the destruction of the graffiti, which was retrospectively found by the Ukrainian Institute for National Memory to have had the status of a protected historical monument. Before the end of the year, the activist group "New Fire" (*Novyi Vogon'*) restored the triptych in its original location in a public action filmed for a documentary (Ukrains'kiy Tyzhden 2017). This sequence of events demonstrated the state's readiness to directly intervene for the protection, preservation, and restoration of street art representing Ukrainian heroes.

Figure 9. Collage of the "Icons of the Revolution" triptych as recreated in 2017 by the activist group Novyi Vogon' at 4 Hrushevsky Street in Kyiv, based on the original 2014 design by artist Sociopath. CC-BY 3.0 (Wikipedia 2017).

As a complement to images of particular historical personalities, generalised allegorical representations of women, folkloric traditions, and indigenous nature formed the other pillar of new Ukrainian identity models. Directly behind Independence Square at 1 Taras Shevchenko Lane, US-based Costa Rican artist Mata Ruda, whose work focuses on marginalised communities and indigenous cultures, created the massive mural "Protectress" in 2016 (Figure 10a). "Protectress" shows the face of Berehynia, a female spirit from Slavic myth reclaimed after 1991 as a mother-protector of the Ukrainian nation—and whose likeness also tops the iconic column erected on Independence Square in 2001. An Azeri immigrant was the model for Berehynia, an artistic choice evocative of Ukraine's diversity (Haden 2016b). A woven shawl covers her hair and sunflowers symbolising Ukrainian agricultural bounty appear on a wreath around her face. Although Ukrainian nature is most often associated with female personifications, "The River Crossing" created in 2016 by Australian artist Fintan Magee is one example of a masculine protagonist shown in relation to the natural world (Figure 10b). Wearing a traditional woven shirt, a young man swims across a river with the aid of a big-antlered deer. Dedicated to the theme of environmental conservation, the image is also an allegory for national identity—appropriate to Ukraine's transitional reality in the conflict period, the opposite bank is not (yet) visible.

In addition to depicting the national identity of the Ukrainian people, murals represented the international orientation of the Ukrainian state. This involved two main ideas, distance from Moscow and proximity to Europe. It has already been noted that murals made before 2022 tended to engage with the theme of conflict indirectly, avoiding explicit depictions of armed struggle with Russia. Instead, street art took an ironic view of the relationship with Russia, turning the construct of a brotherly "Russian world" back against Moscow. French artist MTO stated that the "love-hate relationship" between Russia and Ukraine was the inspiration for his 2016 composition "From Russia With Love", a giant pixellated heart appearing to smash into the side of an apartment building, which represents a "digital love-cannonball sent from Moscow" in the form of a sophisticated cyberattack against Ukraine's power grid on 23 December 2015 by hackers allegedly working for the Russian state (Haden 2016a). The 2015 composition "Gymnast", also by Magee, shows champion rhythmic gymnast Hanna Rizatdinova in the midst of performing a backflip (Figure 11). Rizatdinova, a native of Crimea who opposed the Russian annexation, is shown in a suspended position that is analogous to her homeland's unresolved status (Bartlett 2017, pp. 45–46).

Like the conflict with Russia, street art also represented indirectly the topic of the relationship with the West. Murals by Ukrainian artists subtly referenced Western cultural codes as a means of asserting a European identity. The Western imagery recurring in Kyiv murals included themes of environmentalism and climate solidarity, modernist and cinematic styles of representation, and uses of Latin script (Ospishcheva-Pavlyshyn 2021, p. 27). In a few cases, the West is directly referenced. A mural by American artist BKFoxx in the Pechersk district represents a caretaker's hands sweeping together a pile of dirt and industrial detritus, out of which grows a single, young daisy flower (Figure 12). According to Leros, this was the first spraypaint mural anywhere in the world to have been implemented on a police station (Kuznetsov 2017)—this practice would become commonplace after February 2022, as discussed further in the following section. The song "Rise Up in the Dirt" by American band Voxtrot inspired the composition. Its lyrics included the exhortation:

"I could be your flower, rise up in the dirt

We were born to live here, we were born to die here

And you know this when you work"

Making explicit the connection between the discourses of renewal and westernisation, the composition includes a direct reference to American popular culture with a partial view of a vintage New York state licence plate in the bottom left corner.
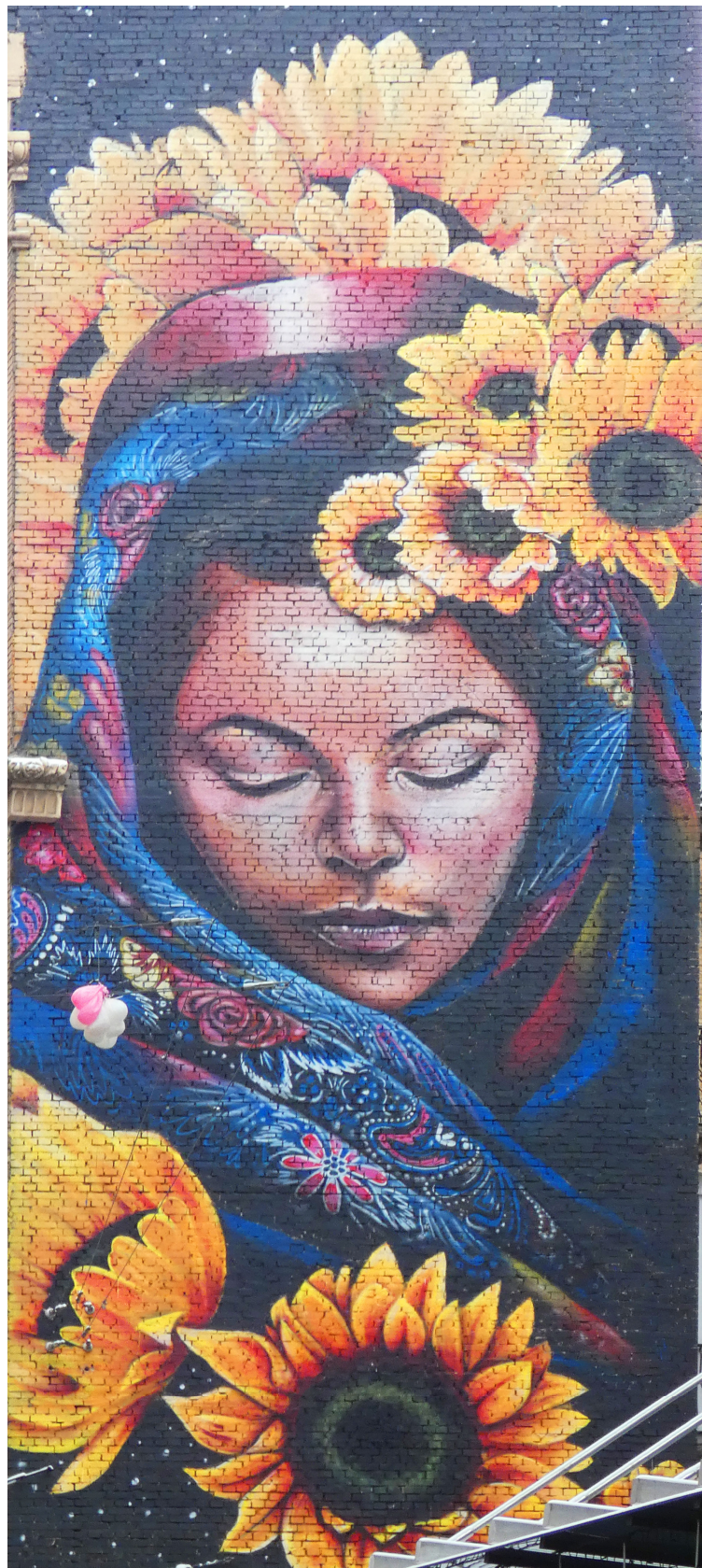
(**a**)

Figure 10. *Cont.*

(**b**)

Figure 10. (**a**,**b**). "Protectress" created in 2016 by Costa Rican artist Mata Ruda at 1 Taras Shevchenko Lane, directly behind the Kyiv Maidan. CC-BY 3.0 (Wikipedia 2019a). "The River Crossing" created in 2016 by Australian artist Fintan Magee. CC-BY 3.0 (Wikipedia 2020c).

The decade since the Maidan has been an extraordinarily active one in Ukrainian visual arts. In urban art, the rise of ideologically themed street art symbolically aligning Ukraine with European and globalised networks of cultural exchange—and just as importantly, removing the country from the civilisational fold of the "Russian world"—has defined the last decade. In the context of the post-2014 frozen conflict in the East, with Ukraine appearing isolated geopolitically and disadvantaged militarily, the narrative emphasis in public murals was on the hope for peace and international solidarity, rather than on the aim of victory. That would change after Russia's February 2022 invasion, which plunged the whole of Ukraine into a state of war and produced yet another profound cultural rupture with transformative effects on the public space.

Figure 11. Mural "Gymnast" created in 2015 by Australian artist Fintan Magee at 12 Striletska Street, Kyiv. CC-BY 3.0 (Wikipedia 2020a).

Figure 12. Mural "Rise Up in the Dirt" created in 2017 by American artist BKFoxx on the police station in Pechersk district, Kyiv. CC BY-SA 4.0 (Wikimedia Commons 2020).

7. Conflict Murals after 24 February 2022

Following Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukrainian murals have progressed from appealing for peace to communicating unyielding resolve for battlefield victory. Ukraine's mural landscape has undergone three types of changes since February 2022: first, destruction of existing images due directly or indirectly to conflict; second, attempts by Russian occupiers to legitimise their presence through public art interventions; third, production of a new wave of patriotic graffiti. Contemporary murals represent themes of protection and salvation with an ever more explicit utilisation of religious imagery; they are in a sense apotropaic talismans against Russian invaders. The war's intensification has, moreover, resulted in a decentralisation of mural production. Whereas the post-2014 generation of conflict murals was professionally curated in major cities with important participation of international artists, post-invasion murals are overwhelmingly made by Ukrainian artists in large cities and small towns across the country, sometimes fulfilling municipal commissions or otherwise created on voluntary or spontaneous bases.

A consensus is emerging that the analysis of user-generated social media images is the best method to research conflict-related changes to Ukraine's symbolic landscape (Lokot 2018; Gabowitsch 2023). Research ethics dictate that studied images should be posted with public permission settings, making it clear that their originators had no expectation of privacy. To protect sensitive user information, posts should be anonymised and cleaned of identifying details. This section analyses images posted in public Telegram groups and reproduced anonymously under fair use principles.[6]

With the war's intensification, the transformation of Ukraine's symbolic landscape initiated by the memory laws has further accelerated. Soviet murals that survived the decommunisation round of 2015–2016 are now being concealed or removed. In Uzhhorod, volunteers replaced the last surviving Lenin portrait with an image of a child framed by indigenous fauna and flora against the backdrop of a Ukrainian flag (Mar'yana 2022). The action evoked the process of a bright national future sweeping away an oppressive colonial past. Even monumental objects preserved by public order for their artistic value have not proven immune to the second round of decommunisation (Shumikhin 2022). Given the post-invasion intensification of anti-communist and anti-Russian sentiment, heritage professionals have recommended covering over mosaic panels containing Soviet symbols, at least as a temporary measure until the war is over.

Ukrainian murals are at risk of destruction as a direct or indirect consequence of armed conflict. Just in the first six months of Russia's invasion, UNESCO (2022) verified damage to 190 Ukrainian cultural sites including architectural landmarks, religious sites, museums, monuments, and archives. Volunteers have mobilised locally to protect cultural property, helping to sandbag statues or relocate paintings to safety, but a coordinated national approach to heritage protection has remained lacking while risks of physical destruction are compounded by shortages of material and human resources necessary for preemptive safeguarding. Ukrainians faced with the urgent need to flee tend to preserve heritage most immediately accessible to them, like personal archives and family photo albums. Artworks on wall surfaces cannot easily be moved and are therefore especially vulnerable to conflict-related destruction. Professional best practices for safeguarding murals with sandbags and wooden retaining walls are, moreover, extremely intensive in terms of material and labour resources (Maniscalco 2007), making them impractical for the Ukrainian context. Shelling in Mariupol during Russia's June 2022 siege severely damaged the celebrated 1967 mosaic "Kestrel" implemented in the former "Ukraine" restaurant by a collective that included noted dissident Alla Gorska (Figure 13a). Given that Ukrainian curators had been planning to transform the building into a museum of mosaics, Kestrel's destruction was a loss not only for Ukraine's historical heritage but also for the potential future development of its cultural ecosystem.

To project the impression of uncontested control over the public sphere, military administrators of Russian-occupied territories systematically buff over Ukrainian patriotic murals (Figure 13b). In their stead, mass-produced occupation murals communicate propaganda nar-

ratives of a common past and future within the *russkiy mir*. In contrast to the future-oriented imagery of Ukrainian patriotic murals, occupation murals typically reference nostalgic subjects drawn from the established repertoires of Russian high culture and Great Patriotic War heroism. Occupation murals make prominent use of the Russian tricolour and textual elements, echoing the familiar compositional format of the Soviet propaganda poster.

Aside from generalised cultural nostalgia, occupation murals also express specific political outcomes pursued by the Russian state. Leading up to internationally disputed Russian referenda in late September 2022 for the accession of four partially occupied Ukrainian regions to the Russian Federation, cheaply executed murals with variations of the Russian flag and slogan "We're returning home!" proliferated on the walls of mass housing districts in high-visibility locations facing major roadways. A mural in Crimean Nizhnegorsky quite literally represents the redrawing of the Russian map with a crane moving the Crimean peninsula into place within the Russian Federation (Figure 14a). The slogan "The foundation of Russia is the labour of professionals" appears alongside representations of aviation, nuclear energy, shipbuilding, and aerospace—heavy industries that are the purported birthright of Crimeans as historical and contemporary Russians. Other occupation murals are formulaic images designed to remind occupied populations of their supposed civilisational belonging to the Russian world. A crudely executed graffiti in a Mariupol school courtyard aims to make future generations identify with Russian invaders against Ukrainian defenders. A victorious Russian soldier cradles a young girl with her stuffed bear, rescued from a Ukrainian Nazi who lies dead and bleeding beneath the Russian's boot (Figure 14b). Occupation murals are supposed to remind Ukrainians of the material and cultural advantages of belonging to Russia, as well as the consequences of resistance to forcible reunification with their Russian "brothers".

(a)

Figure 13. *Cont*.

(**b**)

Figure 13. (**a**,**b**). Damage to the "Kestrel" mosaic in Mariupol, June 2022. Former site of a Ukrainian patriotic mural in Luhansk buffed over with blue paint by Russian occupiers, August 2022. Telegram photos.

Notwithstanding their expansive distribution over some 600,000 square kilometres of urban and rural territory, post-invasion Ukrainian patriotic murals are remarkably cohesive in their graphic style and subject matter. The cohesiveness of Ukrainian conflict imagery is partly thanks to the homogenising influences of viral social media content. A great number of murals represent analogue translations of patriotic meme art. Conflict memes are developed digitally and transnationally before being translated materially and locally in the form of street art. Patterns of displacement from the Ukrainian south and east to the centre and west, and the phenomenon of municipally commissioned pieces by internally displaced artists, also account for the rapid and dramatic reduction in regional differences in visual expression.

First and foremost, second-stage conflict murals heroise the defenders of Ukraine, a deliberately broad category that encompasses not only soldiers but also first responders, civilian volunteers, children, and even animals like the demining dog Patron. Battlefield images may blend fact and fiction, as in portrayals of the mythical Ghost of Kyiv, whose mural in the capital's central Podil district was a composite image of military pilots rather than an individual portrait (Figure 15a). Technically simple large-format graffiti illustrations throughout Ukraine immortalise the siege of the Azovstal plant in Mariupol, which culminated in a Russian victory after 83 days of intensive resistance (Figure 15b). The siege that ended in a Ukrainian defeat is being memorialised as a heroic resistance that portends

the ultimate Ukrainian victory against all odds. Presidential advisor Mykhailo Podolyak called Azovstal "the Thermopylae of the 21st century" (Hopkins et al. 2022), implying that the Russian victory in Mariupol will prove to be a pyrrhic one.

(**a**)

(**b**)

Figure 14. (**a**,**b**). Mural "The foundation of Russia is the labour of professionals" on the endwall of an apartment house in Crimea, May 2022. Graffiti "Soldier and Young Girl" in Mariupol, June 2022. Telegram photos.

(**a**)

Figure 15. *Cont.*

(**b**)

Figure 15. (**a**,**b**). Mural "Ghost of Kyiv" by Andriy Kovtun, Anton Kondrashov, and Grisha Shokom in Podil, Kyiv, August 2022. Mural "Azovstal" by youth volunteers in Lviv, July 2022. Telegram photos.

Gendered dynamics are an essential dimension of post-invasion murals. Men are heroic warriors while girls and young women embody the innocence of Ukrainians as victims of Russia. Conflict murals use gender as an instrument of mobilization, implying male soldiers' obligation to publicly defend the hearths and homes where women privately nurture the nation's future (Rolston 2018). Young girls embody the notion of collective virtue, further reinforced with depictions of madonnas, angels, and saints. This is true, for instance, of Anastasiia Khudiakova's painting of "Ukraine under the omophorion of the Mother of God". Khudiakova made another mural nearby on the wall of a fire station in Uzhhorod. In it, a kneeling firefighter is placed under the protection of a guardian angel who wraps her wings around him. Images of warriors and maidens idealise gendered models of male courage and female virtue in conflict settings that necessarily enter the territory of essentialism. Such representations of women, moreover, conform to gender discourses of "traditional cosmopolitanism" that developed after Ukrainian independence; in conscious opposition to the Soviet ideal of the masculinised working woman, new templates of Ukrainian womanhood blend Western-style empowerment with expressions of femininity rooted in traditional peasant culture (Bazylevych 2010, pp. 14–15). The young women of Ukrainian conflict murals typically wear braided hairstyles, embroidered blouses, and long skirts reminiscent of pre-1917 fashions and are hardly ever shown in modern dress, even if they are positioned in evidently contemporary settings.

Perhaps the most famous utilisation of gendered and religious imagery is the "Saint Javelin" mural, a stylised image of a madonna in military green robes cradling an anti-tank

missile. Created by the Kailas-V collective on a residential house in Kyiv, Saint Javelin exemplifies the intersection of street art with social media (Figure 16). Saint Javelin was originally a meme developed by Canada-based journalist Christian Borys and promoted via Twitter and Reddit to raise money for Ukrainian defence. At the time of the mural's creation in May 2022, sales of Saint Javelin merchandise had exceeded one million US dollars (Vidar 2022). Because of the meme's virality and Kailas-V's prominence in the Ukrainian street art scene, art magazines and international wire services alike covered and photographed the Saint Javelin mural. Despite its popularity with residents, Saint Javelin prompted complaints from religious groups that it irreverently appropriated Orthodox iconography of Mary, Mother of God (Mehta 2022). Municipal workers consequently removed Saint Javelin's blue-and-gold halo, leaving an image that, while still obviously religious in inspiration, was rather evocative of a saint than the madonna. Kailas-V reacted to the mural's modification as "vandalism" and Borys called it "censorship" in a statement posted online (Ekimenko 2022). Through the process of a meme becoming a mural and undergoing subsequent modification, Saint Javelin illustrates how deterritorialised transnational activism shapes contemporary artistic production in ways that can create conflicts with traditional sensibilities. Regardless of the localised controversy over the mural, online fundraising with the Saint Javelin meme continued apace, exceeding two million dollars by the end of 2022 (Saint Javelin—Official 2023). Internet activists even tried to use the mural to further raise the meme's profile. In February 2023, the official @saintjavelin Twitter account posted a viral image of US president Biden in front of the mural. It later emerged that the photo was digitally altered; Biden did travel to Kyiv to mark the first anniversary of the invasion; however, he never visited the mural (Dionis 2023). Saint Javelin exemplifies how physical and digital realms are becoming blurred to the point of near indistinguishability.

Post-invasion street art emphasises linguistic and folkloric features that are uniquely Ukrainian with no Russian pendant. These images assert the autochthony of Ukrainians and depict a vocabulary of cultural codes to supposedly differentiate Ukrainians from Russian interlopers. At a park in Dnipro, a mural cartoonishly represents a blue and yellow bird menacingly raising a pistol and pronouncing the demand, "Say '*palyanitsya*'!" (Figure 17). Aside from its colour scheme, the composition contains additional layers of indigenous symbolism. The bird is a blue tit, a native species, while *palyanitsya* is a Ukrainian flatbread. No mere cultural curiosity, *palyanitsya* doubles as a watchword often mispronounced by native Russian speakers and, consequently, facilitating their unmasking in acts of espionage.

Representations of Western cultural landmarks with distinctively Ukrainian twists reaffirm a European and democratic identity for Ukraine. Quotations of Western imagery have become increasingly explicit, taking advantage of the conflict's social media visibility to represent the war in terms familiar to international audiences. Artists often depict the Ukrainian cause with imagery borrowed from English-language pop culture franchises, mainly Harry Potter and Star Wars, whose plots revolve around the struggle of good against evil (Figure 18a). Ukrainians are the scrappy heroes while Russians appear in the role of imperial antagonists. There is a related tendency to represent symbols of Western democracy outfitted with Ukrainian accessories. A painting of the American Statue of Liberty at a mass housing district in Kropyvnytskyi shows her wearing a sunflower crown and carrying a blue–yellow torch with the legend "Ukraine is freedom" in English and Ukrainian (Figure 18b). A since-removed graffiti near the metallurgical plant in Kryvyi Rih, sponsored by the nonprofit foundation of parliamentarian Oleksiy Goncharenko, depicted former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson with the Ukrainian bicolour (Gorod.dp.ua 2022). Such images position Ukraine on an equal cultural footing with its Western backers, independent of the status of its political bids for NATO and EU accession.

Figure 16. Implementation of the "Saint Javelin" mural by Kailas-V in Obolon, Kyiv, May 2022. CC-BY 3.0 (Wikipedia 2022).

Figure 17. Mural "Say Palyanitsya!" by an unidentified artist in Dnipro, July 2022. Telegram photo.

(**a**)

Figure 18. *Cont.*

(**b**)

Figure 18. (**a**,**b**). Mural of the dog Patron with the legend "Expecto Patronum!", a reference to the Harry Potter series, by an unidentified artist in Zaporizhia, June 2022. Mural "Ukraine is Freedom" by Oleksandr Brytsev in Kropyvnytskyi, August 2022. Telegram photos.

There is a new phenomenon of murals being created in coordinated volunteer actions responding to nationwide appeals. The youth association Building Ukraine Together issued such an appeal for Constitution Day on June 28. Children working under adult supervision painted fences with simple, colourful compositions featuring national symbols and constitutional citations (Nagornaya 2022). Schoolteachers have become volunteer activists, organising their classes to paint schoolyards or fences with patriotic designs. Volunteers often work from templates found online, selected for maximal size and technical ease of execution. Amateurs have not replaced professional street artists but rather act as a complement to them, extending the scope and scale of coverage and facilitating artistic interventions in rural areas.

The current generation of street art directly attests to the civilian displacement caused by Russia's invasion. Internal displacement of artists has, ironically, had the consequence

of homogenising Ukrainian regional languages of visual expression, bringing into direct contact the proverbially divided cultures of East and West. Municipalities in western regions have commissioned displaced artists to create commissioned pieces on the walls of public buildings—schools, police departments, and fire stations. In addition to internal migration dynamics, there are cross-border dimensions of refugee and diaspora art. Graffiti duo We Bad, one of whom became a refugee in Slovakia while the other remained in Ukraine, created a synchronous albeit geographically distant diptych. On the wall of a war-damaged kindergarten in Ozero, a flower appears against a sunny yellow background with the English legend "Nothing will tear us apart" (Figure 19). Twinned with a mural on a schoolhouse in Slovakia, this intervention expresses Ukraine's indivisibility from Europe. Displaced Ukrainians have created urban art interventions in a number of European cities, making their presence visible in the public space. It is not just that Ukraine's public sphere is being reshaped by the war, Ukrainians are also reshaping the European public sphere with visible interventions in the cultural landscape. Urban art actions, displays of Ukrainian flags, and public demonstrations make the war an immediately present feature of the European urban experience rather than a remote reality unfolding elsewhere.

Figure 19. Mural by We Bad on the wall of a damaged school in Ozero, Kyiv oblast, with the legend "Nothing will tear us apart", June 2022. Telegram photo.

International street artists have also engaged with the topic of the war, creating murals with messages of support for Ukraine or antipathy toward Putin in cities as far flung as Los Angeles, Miami, Berlin, and Budapest (Figure 20). It is possible that the development of a professional street art environment in Ukraine over the last decade and a half has contributed to solidarity for the Ukrainian cause among European and North American graffitists. Western artists who may have encountered Ukrainian street art through their professional networks might feel that they can personally relate to the creative values and

Westernising aesthetic of their Ukrainian peers. Ukrainian muralism is evolving into a medium of public diplomacy that is useful for helping to rally international support.

Figure 20. Street art in central Budapest expressing solidarity with Ukraine. Author's image (2022).

All of this contributes to the deterritorialisation and internationalisation of the Ukrainian street art environment. Digital networks are integral to street art as murals are increasingly inspired by online content. The internet also has a vital logistical role in facilitating cross-border fundraising and coordinating volunteer actions across different localities. Social media has become essential to the documentation and publicity of street art, whether through coordinated actions such as the live-streaming of ceremonial unveilings or through decentralised non-simultaneous content uploaded online by individual users. The digital sphere is, moreover, essential to the documentation of mural art as a vulnerable cultural heritage. Digital records stored in servers outside Ukraine have emerged as a more durable form of preservation for physical objects at risk of wartime destruction. Current practices of Ukrainian street art are, in essence, a complex interrelationship of the material with the immaterial, the physical with the digital, and the local with the globalised.

8. Conclusions

The decade-long conflict with Russia has fundamentally changed Ukrainians' ways of engaging with the public sphere. Future research should further explore the reception of street art within this environment. What do Ukrainians think of the street art boom—if they even notice it at all? The extent to which Ukrainians relate to the post-Maidan models of national identity necessarily influences how they perceive conflict murals. Since 2013, geopolitical developments have repeatedly crushed hopes for a liberalisation of memory politics. The wartime state of emergency in effect since February 2022 has imposed further limitations on public speech that restrict the space for civic debate on matters of history, language, and the pantheon of national heroes. Conflict murals are, moreover, associated with intra-elite competition and corruption. Leros was found to have misused public funds intended for murals to finance a lavish lifestyle for himself, while the removal of the Boris Johnson mural in Kryvyi Rih was the result of a power struggle between municipal authorities and its politician funder Goncharenko, who had disregarded local regulations by prominently incorporating his personal branding in the design. Distasteful episodes such as these undermine community engagement and are counterproductive to the democratisation of public space that the underground graffiti movement originally represented. Like Soviet monumental-decorative arts that appropriated folkloric forms to project a veneer of authenticity, there is the risk that spraypaint muralism could become perceived as an ideological instrument with limited credibility.

Ukrainian muralism has had many iterations over the centuries. From its origins as a form of church decoration to its revival as an instrument of Soviet monumental propaganda, muralism has never been entirely distant from questions of state authority and control over the public sphere. Spraypaint graffiti has undergone a remarkable progression from a 20th-century protest tool to a 21st-century, state-sanctioned mass communication medium. Graffiti's rapid evolution is inseparable from the context of political upheaval in Ukraine, with two revolutions and two wars in three decades of independence. Now, conflict murals in schoolyards and parks, on apartment houses and civic buildings, are meant to remind Ukrainians of what they are fighting for—and against.

Nearly two years since Russia's invasion, the symbolic vocabulary of Ukrainian conflict murals has consolidated. The cause of national resistance is represented by saints and archangels, maidens and warriors, children and animals—all of them reminders of youth, innocence, and moral purity—implying a differentiation with Russian decrepitude, corruption, and barbarity. Ukrainian conflict murals convey the unmistakable message that there is nothing left in common between Ukraine and Russia, nor will there be any restoration of the brotherly bond in the future.

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Notes

[1]   Since 2016, the city's name is Dnipro.

[2]   The pursuit of auto-orientalisation was further supported by the theory of dual-faith (*dvoeverie*), which Russian and Soviet ethnographers progressively developed during the 19th and 20th centuries. According to this construct, the Eastern Slavic worldview was characterised by a unique syncretism of imported Orthodox liturgical pageantry with indigenous pagan superstitious practice. *Dvoeverie* supported a claim of pre-Christian origins for the common East Slavic civilisation of Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians. This origin myth had important advantages for the party state: for one thing, it rooted the civilisational legitimacy of the Soviet order in a remote ancient past; for another thing, it made it harder for critics of Soviet power to argue that its repression of Orthodox Christianity amounted to an imperialist oppression of indigenous cultures.

[3]   In the last decade, efforts for the documentation of Soviet-era mosaics have notably included the book *Art for Architecture. Ukraine*, a collaboration of photographer Yevgen Nikiforov with art historian Polina Baitsym, and the digital map project "Soviet Mosaics in Ukraine" by Izolyatsia Foundation.

[4]   Both the Motherland monument and the Monument to the Founders of Kyiv which represents Princess Lybid were late Soviet monumental sculptures that have remained iconic features of Kyiv's 21st-century urban landscape. After 2015, the Motherland monument became an object of political contestation due to its prominent incorporation of communist state symbols which adorned the shield held in the statue's left hand. As of 2023, the Soviet seal has been removed and replaced with the Ukrainian trident (*tryzub*).

[5]   In 2020, Geo Leros suffered a political fall from grace after he was expelled from Zelenskyy's "Servant of the People" party and placed under official investigation on suspicion of embezzlement of public funds intended to be used for mural projects. Leros is also a subject of Russian state sanctions.

[6]   The sample of street art images collected by the author and analysed in this article covers the period from February to September 2022, corresponding to the first six months of the invasion. It includes 103 patriotic murals distributed across 15 Ukrainian oblasts and three Russian-occupied regions.

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