Drawn History: Ukrainian Graphic Fiction about National History

Chapter · January 2024

DOI: 10.14361/9783839460771

1 author:

Svitlana Pidoprygora
Petro Mohyla Black Sea National University
22 PUBLICATIONS **1** CITATION

SEE PROFILE

Matthias Schwartz, Nina Weller (eds.)

APPROPRIATING HISTORY

The Soviet Past in Belarusian, Russian and Ukrainian Popular Culture

[transcript] History in Popular Cultures

Matthias Schwartz, Nina Weller (eds.)
Appropriating History

History in Popular Cultures | Volume 21

Editorial

The series **Historische Lebenswelten in populären Wissenskulturen | History in Popular Cultures** provides analyses of popular representations of history from specific and interdisciplinary perspectives (history, literature and media studies, social anthropology, and sociology). The studies focus on the contents, media, genres, as well as functions of contemporary and past historical cultures.
In der Reihe **Historische Lebenswelten in populären Wissenskulturen | History in Popular Cultures** erscheinen Studien, die populäre Geschichtsdarstellungen interdisziplinär oder aus der Perspektive einzelner Fachrichtungen (insbesondere der Geschichts-, Literatur-und Medienwissenschaft sowie der Ethnologie und Soziologie) untersuchen. Im Blickpunkt stehen Inhalte, Medien, Genres und Funktionen heutiger ebenso wie vergangener Geschichtskulturen.
The series is edited by Sylvia Paletschek and Barbara Korte (executives) as well as Judith Schlehe, Wolfgang Hochbruck, Sven Kommer and Hans-Joachim Gehrke.

Matthias Schwartz is head of the project "Adjustment and Radicalisation. Dynamics in Popular Culture(s) in Pre-War Eastern Europe" and co-head of the program area World Literature at the Leibniz Center for Literary and Cultural Research (ZfL), Berlin, Germany. His research interests include the cultural history of Russian and Soviet space flight, adventure literature, science-fiction and science popularisation, Eastern European youth cultures, memory cultures, and contemporary literatures in a globalised world.
Nina Weller is a postdoctoral researcher in the project "Adjustment and Radicalisation" at the Leibniz Center for Literary and Cultural Research. 2018-2022 she was the head of the BMBF project "Designing the Past" at the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder), Germany. Her research focuses on contemporary literature, popular culture, memory studies and representations of history in Eastern European cultures (Belarusia, Russian, Ukrainian).

Matthias Schwartz, Nina Weller (eds.)

Appropriating History

The Soviet Past in Belarusian, Russian and Ukrainian Popular Culture

[transcript]

Our thanks go to the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and Leibniz Collaborative Excellence funding programme of the Leibniz Association for funding this publication. An electronic version of this book is freely available in Open Access thanks to the support of the Leibniz Open Access Monograph Publishing Fund of the Leibniz Association.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at https://dnb.dnb.de/

First published in 2024 by transcript Verlag, Bielefeld

Cover layout: Maria Arndt, Bielefeld
Cover illustration: Illustration from the Ukrainian comic Buiviter, 1995, Konstantin Sulima
Copy-editing: Katharina Kelbler
Proofread: Charlotte Bull and Margarita Schäfer
Printed by: Majuskel Medienproduktion GmbH, Wetzlar
https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839460771
Print-ISBN: 978-3-8376-6077-7
PDF-ISBN: 978-3-8394-6077-1
ISSN of series: 2366-1267
eISSN of series: 2702-9441

Printed on permanent acid-free text paper.

Contents

II. Combat Zones: War Heroes, Resistance Fighters and Joyful Partisans

III. Sites of Trauma: Horror Fantasies, Weird Sceneries and Realms of Terror

Epilogue

Appendix

Chapter 2:

Drawn History

Ukrainian Graphic Fiction about National History

Svitlana Pidoprygora

1. Introduction

For centuries, the history of Ukraine has been the subject of interest for not only writers but also numerous artists, who have drawn upon varied styles, genres, and approaches to interest their readers and acquaint them with the past, draw parallels with the present, and point towards the future.[1] Naturally, the ideological conceptions of such works corresponded to the artists' worldview and the cultural-historical circumstances of their work and, in some instances, they played a key role for constructing an imagined national idea – as was the case with novels by Raisa Ivanchenko, Roman Ivanychuk, Ivan Bilyk, and others. When Soviet-era history books falsified the past, a sense of that history could be drawn from historical fiction. But it was only the boom in mass literature, which started in the early 1990s, that introduced historical images and themes that had otherwise been silenced to a broader public. In particular, Ukrainian crime novels, melodramas, women's literature, and thrillers prevailed and formed the basis for further popular engagement with the topic in comic books and graphic novels or graphic fiction. Thus, in the political circumstances of present-day Ukraine, comic books became a popular platform for the discussion of contested issues and formed a bridge between historical memory and the present through the close intertwining of words and pictures, i.e., visual images.

This trend corresponds to a general tendency in 20th century popular culture, where visual representations became increasingly more important than textual narratives. In a way, the visual became the calling-card of contemporary mass culture, as Fredric Jameson writes, whereas

1 This article uses materials from my monograph *Ukraïnska eksperymentalna proza XX – pochatku XXI stolit: 'nemozhlyva literatura' (Ukrainian Experimental Prose of the 20th and early 21st Centuries: An "Impossible" Literature*, 2018), particularly the sub-chapter "The Experimental Nature of Visual Literature and Graphic Fiction" (221–253).

> the image, now liberated from complex temporalities of a plot you need to read and decipher, to reconstruct at every point, [began] to call for a different kind of visual attention […] projecting something like a visual hermeneutic which the eye scans for ever deeper layers of meaning. (Jameson 1998: 127)

Late 20th century scholarship reacted to this tendency with the new research field of visual studies, which analyses visual artistic works (such as comics, graphic novels, video games, commercial ads, etc.) in relation to its implied ideology, social myths, and economics, focussing on the production and politics of signification within a given cultural context. This is especially true for graphic fiction, including comics and graphic novels, which often use visual metaphors to increase the images' variegated associativity, making them understandable within the context of the cultural, political or sociological situation of their own society. In this essay I will analyse some of these visual constructions of national history in Ukrainian comics and graphic novels as a specific form of national appropriation of the past.

2. The Comic Book. Cossacks in Ukrainian Comic Books

The comic book as drawn history has a long history – scholars trace it back to cave paintings, Egyptian hieroglyphics, Maya codices, medieval miniatures, illustrations of the Bible, and late 18th- early 19th century English political caricatures. The development of comics was enabled by a powerful explosion of mass culture on account of new technology that allowed the mechanical reproduction of images.

For a long time, professional academic analysis of comic books was hindered by the prejudiced opinion of it as a 'low' genre. However, starting from the mid-20th century, the comic book attracted increasing academic attention. We can find the beginnings of intellectual consideration of comic books in the works of such renowned semioticians as Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco. Eco views the comic book in the context of mythological narrative ("The Myth of Superman"). He posits that superhero comics – like ancient visual narratives – are meant to present the protagonist as a paragon of moral virtue and national pride (1979: 107–124). However, this does not preclude the fact that comic books comprise highly motivated signs, images and symbols, which generate meanings in various ways, creating a code for the reader to interpret.

International scholars conceptualise the comic as a 20th century cultural phenomenon that, despite its seemingly primitive nature, deserves serious attention as an indicator of social sentiments and tastes, a powerful tool of influence with profound communicative potential. Comics express the "word – symbol – image interaction" (Booker 2011: 958). They are not mere illustrations of the narrative, not just pictures accompanied by text, but a cohesive unit of word and image, a meaning-making interconnection. "Thanks to the interaction of verbal and nonverbal components," Liubov' Stoliarova notes, "the comic encompasses within itself a high volume of easily decipherable information" (2010: 384).

In the concluding decades of the 20th century, and the early 21st century, comics studies became especially popular in Western academic settings (McCloud 1993; Eisner

2008). A number of studies touched upon the question of the comic's evolution, its expression of national traditions, and view the comic in the context of visual rhetoric, multimodality, mediality and complex artistry.

In recent years, graphic novels especially have become increasingly popular in many countries, gaining recognition also with literary awards and artistic rankings. Also in post-Soviet space, with the lifting of state regulation and censorship, comics and graphic novels are gradually appealing to ever larger numbers of readers. Since 2010, Ukrainian literature has incorporated increasing amounts of various graphic literary works. A recent book market overview of Ukrainian comics lists several works that can compete with international products and are anchored in a national *Weltanschauung* and have a distinctly Ukrainian flavour, as one critique put it (Koval 2017).[2]

This 'Ukrainian flavour' is most clearly manifest in the themes of images in graphic fiction that highlight certain key events (periods) in the national history such as the Cossack age, the early 20th century 'national liberation struggle', the Soviet era or the war in Eastern Ukraine since 2014 to the present.[3] It is notable that not so many comics are dedicated to the treatment of the Soviet era (where national elements are not as prominent). Currently growing in popularity is a series of comics by Oleksandr Koreshkov entitled *Among the sheep* (*Sered ovets'*, 2018). The work's fictional space-time is full of signs marking Soviet realities of the 1950s through the 1970s: slogans like "Forwards to a Bright Future!", "The Party and the People Are One!", "Glory to Toil!", workers' grey uniforms, work passes, vigilantes, 'boy scouts' (pioneers) with red kerchiefs. In a playful, colourful, animation-like form, with animal characters like dogs, pigs or sheep, the comic offers a social satire of the Soviet reality, which, however, could be associated not only with the Soviet order, but with any form of violence against the individual. The anthropomorphism of the work, and the serious problems it touches on, is reminiscent of Art Spiegelman's style in his graphic novel *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (1980). In the first book of Koreshkov's series, the canine protagonist (we are not told his name) is dismissed from factory work for being outraged with the director (a ram) who let him wait at his office door for a long time. He is intercepted and beaten up by vigilantes, asking why he is not at work; he witnesses a car crash when a drunken official (a hog) runs over a child at a station. The driver and the injured child are taken away by an ambulance, while a bystander is blamed in the news. These events force the protagonist to break with the usual scenario of being a silent witness to lies and they force him to overcome his own fear (Koreshkov 2018). In the comic, we trace an allusion to George Orwell's dystopia *Animal Farm* (1945), which uses animal protagonists as well as an allegory to expose the 'Soviet myth' of socialist life. Subsequent issues of Koreshkov's comic (four to date) discuss the protagonist's further resistance to

2 The market overview was done by *Chytomo*, an internet resource that publishes the latest information about the Ukrainian book market, events and projects, as well as analyses the development of Ukrainian book publishing https://chytomo.com/ [30 September 2023].

3 This article was written in November 2021, before the start of the full-scale war of the Russian Federation against Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Therefore, it does not discuss comics that appeared after the large-scale invasion and continue to emerge throughout the war. These comics now represent a significant layer of Ukrainian comic culture as of May 2024.

the system, his transformation from victim to a fighter and defender of others, a transition to active resistance.

Ukrainian contemporary authors of visual stories draw particular inspiration from the Zaporizhian Cossacks from the early modern period, interpreting this period anew in the context of contemporary mass culture. In particular, mythical Cossacks of strong character became the embodiment of the national superhero. Thus, it makes sense to view the comic as a mythological narrative that playfully offers positive role models to society, accumulates patriotism, awakens national pride for days of yore, thus striving to inspire heroic acts also in the present day. In doing so, these comics do not artificially construct a new Ukrainian narrative about the Cossack past, but rather revise and adapt these pre-existing narratives for the present, from post-independence (1991) to wartime (2014 onwards) Ukraine.

Comics dedicated to the fictional, legendary adventures of the Cossacks began to appear in Ukraine already in the 1990s, mostly in children's magazines. Thus, the newspaper *Robitnycha hazeta* (*Worker's Gazette*) published the *Buiviter* comic in 1995, written and drawn by Kostiantyn Sulyma.

In this story everything is aimed at fostering patriotism and praising the protagonists' courage, when the Cossacks in their conflict with *basurmany* (infidels),[4] *yasyr* (booty)[5] or magical monsters at last gain the obligatory victory for good. Accordingly, whereas an infidel gets his magical powers from a monster in exchange for his soul, the Cossack restores his power thanks to his native soil, and the holy cross. The structure of the comic is complicated by its narrative framing: the story of Buiviter's feat is told by a grandfather to his grandchildren, and in the end, it turns out that the grandfather himself is Buiviter's son. The young listeners understand their part in a struggle that is not complete – in the end, evil returns and the boys pick up Buiviter's magic sword. The striking drawings, the non-traditional placement of the frames (one drawing per page), the shading and colours (negative characters are depicted in dark colours, and as doing their dark deeds at nights, whereas Buiviter and the Cossacks are depicted in daylight and in bright colours), the negative caricature-like depiction of the infidel antagonists and the more realistic depiction of the Ukrainian Cossack protagonists, shapes the perception of an antithetical world, divided into good and evil, with Ukrainians standing unquestionably on the side of good. The comic also underscores important words with a larger font such as "Run for your life" and "Time". The rage of Khiz-Gireia and his yearning for revenge is emphasised by writing his remarks in white letters on a black background in the bubbles. This makes reading harder, thus deepening the prejudice against this character. The authors of the article "The history of Ukrainian comics" point out that "Buiviter became a Ukrainian superhero of a Ukrainian epic. The story became extremely popular, because there was no cult of a liberator hero in the country prior to

4 *Basurmany* is an archaic word once used to denote 'infidels', people of non-Christian faith; it was often associated with Tataro-Mongols, who raided Slavic lands, and who were eventually opposed by Cossacks. Later the term came to mean foreign enemies, or enemies of foreign faiths.

5 *Yasyr* is a term used (in the mid-15th to mid-18th centuries) to denote people taken prisoner by Turks and Tatars during fighting or raids on Slavic lands. Prisoners from the *yasyr* were intended to be sold at special markets for the trade of captives.

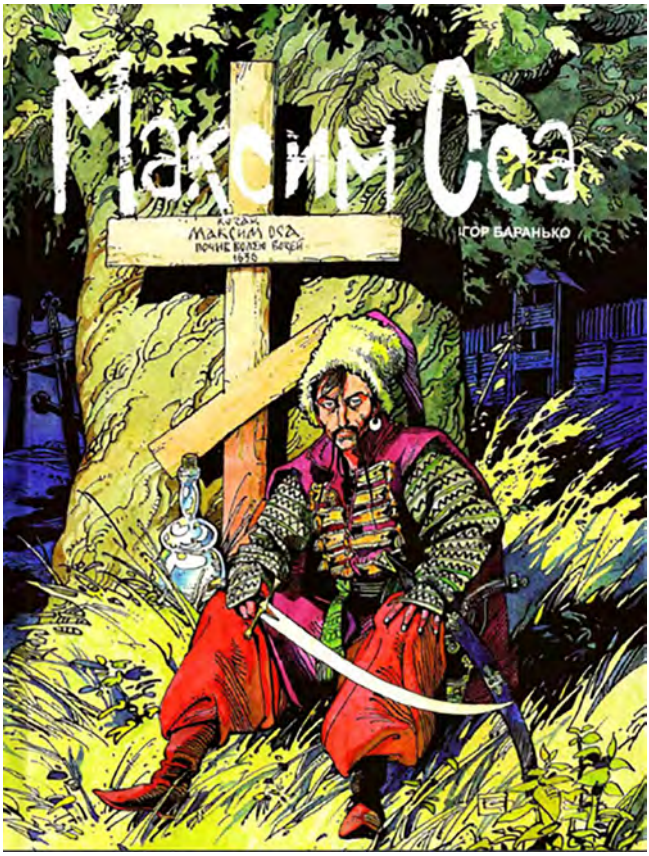
that. The clear image of the Ukrainian Cossack was turned into a superhero" ([Anon.] 2020). It was the first time in the Ukrainian cultural discourse that the Cossacks are viewed through the prism of superhero qualities. However, Buiviter can be seen as a protagonist adapting superhero qualities while not quite fully inhabiting it yet, because he lacks certain features that would allow us to classify him as such.

Figure 2.1: Scene from comic Buiviter *(1995)*

An attempt to publish a caricature comic, where the protagonists act, talk and are depicted in the manner of an animated film, was made by the Kozaky publishing house in 1992 in the comic *Marco Pyrih the Cossack. How Pyrih Became Pyrih* (*Marko Pyrih, zaporozhets'. Iak Pyrih stav Pyrohom*, 1992), written by Vadym Karpenko and drawn by Oleksandr Haiduchenko. The events of the plot are presented through the prism of burlesque humour. The heroes Marko Pyrih, Kharko Zhytymozhna, Koshovyi, Krutyviter, deacon Omel'ko, bard (*kobzar*) Zahrai inhabit an optimistic space, where even adversity is faced with levity and humour. The drawings of this comic are in a conventional style, the narrative is uncomplicated, however the characters seem to talk too much. The text

in the speech bubbles disturbs the images, because at times every character in the frame has something to say on a given matter. The comic looks like a series of sketches from the *Krokodil*[6] and *Perets'* (*Pepper*)[7] magazines. No heroic image of Cossacks is presented here, rather they are shown to drink, play and engage in sport during peacetime, sometimes defending their everyday interests like inventive men who will always find a way.

Figure 2.2: Scene from comic Maksym Osa *(2011)*



A different approach to the topic was chosen by Ihor Baran'ko, who in 2011 published his comic strip novel *Maksym Osa*. Baran'ko is a renowned Ukrainian author of international acclaimed comics, living abroad and working with multiple publishers in different

6 *Krokodil* was a "mass satirical journal founded in Moscow in 1922 as a supplement to the *Worker's Gazette*. From 1933 onwards it was published in the Pravda printing press. The pages of the publication gave the reader humorous and satirical words by I. Il'f and E. Petrov, M. Zoshchenko, V. Maiakovskii […] and others, accompanied with sketches by artists D. Moor, V. Deni, the Kukryniksii group, etc" (Kovaliv 2007a: 533).

7 *Perets'* was a "popular bimonthly humor and satire journal, founded in Kharkiv in 1922 and based in Kyiv after 1941. Its pages […] often contained caricatures" (Kovaliv 2007b: 203).

languages. The Ukrainian publication of the first volume of *Maksym Osa* was awarded the Ukraine-Europe 2011 diploma. The work had previously appeared in French, Polish, and Russian. The story describes the adventures of the eponymous Cossack protagonist. The historical surroundings, modernised by adding a 'whodunit' component makes the comic novel a lively read. Besides his skill as an artist, Baran'ko builds a tense detective narrative, full of intrigue. The quick and observant Maksym Osa cracks a hidden treasure mystery, finds a murderer and saves innocent lives. Essentially, Maksym Osa presents a favourable image of a Ukrainian with exclusively positive characteristics.

Furthermore, the full-colour adventure comic *Daohopak*, consisting of three volumes *Antalya Tour* (*Antaliis'ka hastrol'*, 2012), *Noble Love* (*Shliakhetna liubov*, 2014) and *The Secret of the Cossack Druid* (*Taiemnitsa kozats'koho mol'fara*, 2016), by Maksym Prasolov (script), Oleksii Chebykin (art), Oleh Kolov (text) deals with Cossack themes. The first volume was given the Jury Special Award for Best Illustrated Children's Book at the Book Arsenal festival. The authors of the 'blockbuster comic novel' succeeded in presenting the Cossack context in popular and modern forms. The work modernises national mythology and heritage, particularly the myths and legends of Cossacks with strong character and with special, seemingly mystical abilities. In the comic, three Cossack friends from the "knightly order of sorcerers and martial arts masters of the Zaporizhian Host" experience numerous mind-boggling adventures, endure hard battles and duels, astound enemies with their deftness, bravery, and invention. The work mixes the Ukrainian world with Eastern exoticism of places like Türkiye or Japan. The love story, a relationship between one male protagonist and a ninja woman, provides a clue to the book's title, a portmanteau of a Ukrainian martial art and an East Asian philosophy. The cast of characters is imbued with additional colour by adding talking and highly intelligent animals, such as the gander Husiar II and the tattooed hog Okist (meaning gammon). Animals are also involved in the Cossacks' various adventures. Overall, *Daohopak* is an amalgamation of various genres: adventure, fantasy, mystical, and historical fiction.

3. What is a Ukrainian Superhero Like?

The war in Eastern Ukraine boosted experiments in the superhero genre since 2014. Much like in the United States, in which the patriotic Captain America shows up in the dramatic period of World War II in order to oppose the Hitlerite coalition of powers, in Ukrainian comics, the threat of the conquest of the country by another state brings forth the image of a positive superhero, capable of opposing the military onslaught.

The colouring comic book series *Ukrainian Superheroes* (*Ukrains'ki superheroi*) with the volumes *To Save the Lark* (*Vriatuvaty zhaivoronka*, 2015) and *Invisible Island* (*Nevydymyi ostriv*, 2015) by Lesia Voroniuk uses the genre to educational ends in order to foster patriotism and Ukrainian national pride among children. Because, in addition to being a positive figure, the superhero must necessarily possess a set of qualities – have superpowers, wear a suit setting them apart from the public, and have a secret identity, i.e. lead a double life, hiding one's superhero essence (Duncan et al. 2015: 221–245). But, in contrast to their American models, Ukrainian superheroes often do not hide a secret identity or their

supernatural abilities. Their identity is exclusively a heroic one, which is why they have no names other than the names that mark them as heroes.

Voroniuk's superheroes are faced with a task that is both difficult and ordinary for supermen – to save the Ukrainian world from perdition and to fend off the triumph of the forces of evil. The opposition between the positive and negative images transparently insinuate Ukrainian realities, in particular the Anti-terrorist Operation, which took place in the Donbas region from 2014 on, and the conflict between the national (Ukrainian) and the imperialist (Russian) worlds.

Figure 2.3: Scene from comic To Save the Lark *(2015)*

The names of the superheroes and their supernatural abilities betray the national cultural code, both historically, and in the present. Much like in the *Fantastic Four* of Marvel Comics, Voroniuk's superheroes are also four: Kobzar (Bard, leader of the superheroes who lost his sight as a Cossack on the island of Khortytsia, and has the ability to read minds and communicate telepathically), Vira (a student who believes in the all-conquering power of good), Kiborh (Cyborg, an unbreakable warrior with a human heart from Luhans'k), and Krip (Dill, a herbalist from the Carpathians, who uses herbs to heal or to

make truth or memory potions). The heroes' outfits partially stress their national identity, underscore their abilities, their moral values and mode of being.

They do not, however, change over the course of the story, because life is not divided into 'heroic' and ordinary. Thus, the Kobzar wears a Cossack kaftan and jeans, his instrument, the *kobza*, which he plays when he is free to do so, is a necessary element of his image. The protagonists' blindness is also a homage to the traditional image of the blind *kobzari*, itinerant bards who wandered through Ukrainian lands in the 18th century and kept the memory of the past alive through songs. Krip wears an embroidered shirt and baggy Cossack-like trousers. He holds a dill plant in his hands. In addition to its healing significance, it gains a new connotation in the context of current events in Ukraine: The Russian word for dill, *ukrop*, has been used by Russian proxies to denote Ukrainian soldiers. Along with "ukr", this derogatory name is given a positive association here, with the dill plant that has a number of healing properties, and is an ingredient in many Ukrainian dishes. Kiborh's name and superhero origin story (once human, now a cyborg with a human heart and brain) has to do with events in the Donetsk airport in 2014–2015, where the Ukrainian military put up a defence so unexpectedly vicious that they were called cyborgs for their 'superhuman' strength and resilience. Kiborh, the cyborg, is essentially a robot made out of a super strong alloy, but his human nature is revealed through his heart, which is visible through clear material on the left side of his chest. Only the female character is depicted as wearing different outfits in the two volumes of the comic, which may identify her as a helper to the (male) superheroes. The distinguishing feature in her outfit is its green colour (green dress, green blouse), which symbolises hope, wisdom, calm, and optimism.

The three male protagonists have obvious supernatural powers – telepathy (Kobzar), healing (Krip), extreme physical strength (Kiborh). Their resistance to evil is an active one, they are always *doing* – running, fighting, playing a musical instrument (Kobzar), uncovering the enemy's plans. The female protagonist, by contrast, is static. Additionally, Vira's superpower is not that extraordinary, it is simply the belief in the triumph of good (her name, Vira, means "Faith" in Ukrainian), which all heroes ought to have. Vira accompanies the superheroes, her assistance takes the form of moral support – when Kiborh recalls the death of his wife after having found a "Faithful Heart" pendant he had given to her, Vira consoles him, saying "You did all you could" (Voroniuk 2015a: 10). Likewise, in *To Save the Lark*, it is Vira who figures out the code on the cage and lets the bird free. In *Invisible Island* the superhero men save Vira twice – Vira, again, not particularly strong, but serving here as an embodiment of all those for whose sake the superheroes fight evil, all those whose faith gives them strength.

Whereas the Ukrainian world is primarily represented by human characters, the enemy world is so repulsive and monstrous that it is represented by monsters, rather than people. The names and images of enemy monsters carry also a present-day political subtext. Dvorly [tweagles], the double-headed man-eating eagles, are an allusion to the double-headed eagle in the coat of arms of the Russian Empire and the Russian Federation; Vyrodky [bastards] are people who turned into monsters when they sold their soul and conscience for money. Vyrodky are traitors manipulated by Dvorly, who give them orders to destroy Ukraine. Visually, Vyrodky are reminiscent of Colorado potato beetles. They are also referred to by another name, Kolorady, which is a moniker for pro-Russian

separatists and adherents of the 'Russian World' due to the similarity of the stripes of the St. George Ribbon to the yellow-and-black stripes of the beetle. In *Invisible Island* the superheroes fight a sea monster, Imperukha (a queen who was turned into a river monster for her heinous deeds), which also underscores the imperial ambitions of Ukraine's enemies.

The Ukrainian world is likewise represented through the images of a lark, cranes, Cossacks and a *kobza*, an embroidered shirt.[8] The superheroes make fairly quick work of the objectives facing them – they save the lark so that the sun may always rise above Ukraine; they save the Ukrainian soul embodied in a traditional *vyshyvanka*[9]: "The vyshyvanka is the soul of the Ukrainian people" – says the Cossack Keeper of the Soul, – "as long as we wear vyshyvanky we will be united and unbeatable" (Voroniuk 2015b: 10). The simple plot, clear drawings, the interactive, co-creative possibilities provided by the option of colouring the comic, clearly convey the main idea to the child reader – whatever happens, Good always defeats Evil, and Ukrainians will overcome any obstacles.

In a very similar way, the image of a Ukrainian superhero is modelled in the comic *The Patriot* (*Patriot*, 2016), which was written and drawn by Vadym Nazarov, stylistically resembling DC Action Comics. Notably, the comic is intended for a young adult audience, employing 17+ and 15+ age restrictions, as it features detailed depictions of graphic fight scenes, the cruelty of which is conveyed through torn-off limbs, bashed heads and 'creepy' elements. The comic complies with the three key elements of superhero characters: mission, power, and personality (Coogan 2006). Thus, an ordinary soldier – Sergeant Vidirvenko – gains supernatural abilities when he puts on the Patriot armour. The armour imbues him with extreme strength and speed to overcome evil. In armour, the sergeant also becomes impervious to bullets and able to jump off a helicopter without any harm to himself. But, like Superman, he is threatened by explosions, including grenade explosions: "Oh, damn… I don't like being blown up on grenades… Bullets, lasers, swords – I don't care… but not grenades…" (Nazarov 2017: 26). He performs a pro-social mission, fearlessly helping others as a warrior of light opposing the powers of darkness, which strives to conquer Ukraine, and then the entire world.

8 Linguistically, the comics draw upon Ukrainian folk expressions, sayings and spells ("[…] seeking out herbs, picking good health for the entire year", "come ye cranes, ye brothers, come and help good people", cf. Voroniuk 2015b: 3), which creates a positive national element, appeals to and envelops the reader with historical memory.

9 A *vyshyvanka* is a traditional element of clothing, a men's or women's shirt with ornamental embroidery. In fiction, it often serves the symbolic role of marking and keeping Ukrainian identity.

Figure 2.4: Scene from comic Patriot. Renegade *(2016)*

Whereas American superhero identity usually comprises "the codename and the costume, with the secret identity being a customary counterpart to the codename" (Coogan 2006: 32), in Nazarov's comic, the Patriot denotes the role he plays in the struggle against evil. The Patriot is, first and foremost, a Ukrainian, who loves Ukraine, has the mental fortitude and the belief in victory, which enables him to wear his armour. The Patriot's armour possesses national markers, which become more pronounced with each new issue of the comic. Thus, on the cover of the first issue, *Patriot. Attack of the Clones* (*Patriot. Ataka kloniv*, 2014), the suit is adorned with an abstract flag. In the second and third issues, *Patriot. Renegade* (*Patriot. Renehat*, 2016, 2018), the Patriot's armour exhibits a trident on his helmet, shoulders and chest, as well as the national flag – the armour is yellow and blue. Additionally, his weapon – the "Stinging Trident" sniper rifle – is reminiscent of a trident in shape, while the light billhook resembles the Old Kyivan *kolovorot/kolovrat* (spinning wheel), which hints at the Patriot's connection with ancient Ukrainian powers.

However, in contrast to Voroniuk's *Ukrainian Superheroes*, Nazarov's Patriot has a private identity. In daily life he has the name Sergeant Vidirvenko, which means "the Break-

neck" and suggests the character's risk-friendly nature, his ability to make independent decisions according to the situation, and sometimes to ignore orders from his superiors, which always leads to positive outcomes. Whereas out-of-suit superheroes often feign some sort of weakness, Vidirvenko has no such weaknesses. The sergeant's physical power without his suit (which he must remove in enemy territory because light energy is blocked there, and the suit does not work) is demonstrated when he is depicted shirtless, with clearly defined musculature, and tattoos of a trident and the Kobzar (the 19th century Romantic poet Taras Shevchenko) on his chest. His image is crowned by his *oseledets*, the Cossack hair lock. In addition to his willpower and sense of duty, the sergeant is humble – he does not seek reward for his labours and has a sense of humour.

The three issues of the *Patriot* comic published so far put the struggle between Good and Evil into a more fantastical plane than the one we see in *Ukrainian Superheroes*, and a more large-scale one. The struggle of "Ukrainians against their enemies" becomes the struggle of "earthlings versus aliens". With every new issue, however, events of the comic are increasingly projected onto present-day Ukraine, including the war in the Donbas; and the conditional plane, where events unfold, betrays Ukrainian realities. The author stresses the comic's historical basis and the deliberate parallels with actual events and people with a note on the book's front endpaper: "Similarities to real persons and events in the comic are not always accidental." (Nazarov 2018)

In the first issue, *Patriot. Attack of the Clones* "the story's inception […] both in terms of the style of drawing, and the narrative manner, is reminiscent of a giant cartoon from the Perets' magazine" (Pityk 2019). By alluding directly to a potential real danger, it deals with the question if Ukraine is prepared to resist outside aggression and what is to be done when the threat becomes a reality. Will a hero turn up, one able to resist an invincible enemy? The comic uses humour and sarcasm to attempt to answer these questions. It tells the story of how Sergeant Vidirvenko has to try and infiltrate the enemy space station, "Phobos", which is hanging above Kyiv, and acquires armour and weapons. He even has to fight the clones of historical figures, such as Lenin, Stalin, Mao, as well as robots and aliens. It seems like the author deliberately saturated his comic with diverse antagonists to underline the multifaceted nature of the evil the protagonist is facing, as well as his extraordinary persistence and strength. Only after having overcome all obstacles, the sergeant becomes "the Patriot" – a defender of Ukraine and the entire world from the powers of darkness and evil. In general, as researchers of Ukrainian comics Anatolii and Kateryna Pityk note, "'Patriot. Attack of the Clones' is a sweet, benevolent, and at times naive mockery of the cliches of Communist inheritance and Russian propaganda, a fun black-and-white action comic." (2019)

The second (2016) and third (2018) issues of the *Patriot* comic comprise a separate story, "Renegade", and exhibit metamorphoses both formally, and content-wise. Unlike the first issue, these comics are full-colour, not black-and-white. The quality of drawing and artistic work with colour shows the author's prowess. The third issue opens with information about its characters, which again allows parallels to be drawn with contemporary reality. In particular, members of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and militants of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR in its Ukrainian acronym), whereas the comic itself mentions "ukry" (derogatory term for Ukrainians/Ukrainian military used by separatist militants since 2014), "muscovites", the "ceasefire", the "ghostly peace and the exhausting

invisible war", which situates the narrative clearly in the present. Among the *dramatis personae* are the Patriot, a.k.a. Sergeant Vidirvenko; Leutnant Kvitka, a servicewoman in the Ukrainian Armed Forces, and the Patriot's partner; Agent Franko, an undercover agent in the Ukrainian Armed Forces intelligence and others, who are set against the Bis (demon) – a werewolf and commander of DNR militants or a cap-wearing DNR militant who is a commander of a territorial checkpoint at a temporary frontline. The supervillain – the robotised demon-lord Pu, is not included in the list of characters, because, although he is the initiator of the aliens' attack, and a puppet master of the work's antagonists, he only appears on the final page with a promise to destroy the Patriot, which can be seen as hinting at further conflict, and the fact that the comic is incomplete.

Figure 2.5: Scene from comic Patriot. Renegade *(2018)*

The narrative of the *Patriot* comic clearly separates Ukrainian and enemy forces. Ukrainian forces are represented by people, who embody light, whereas the alien enemies feed on dark energy, turn people into renegades, and are monsters in terms of their physical form. Their misshapen nature is hyperbolised by the fact that they eat human flesh. Thus, Bis says "[…] leave a few warm ones for me […] it's been a while since I've had any fresh meat!" (Nazarov 2016: 130). A renegade in the likeness of a little girl draws in children in order to eat them, and having seized a child, yells: "Won't! Mine! Won't! My toy! Must devour!" (Ibid. 2018: 33).

In general, both visually and verbally, the enemies in the comic are demonised and dehumanised. This shapes an unattractive image of the enemy in the mass consciousness. The antagonists are modelled in such a way as to provoke a negative attitude in the reader, to stress the enemy's physical and moral decrepitude, bizarre nature and opposition to the Ukrainian world. DNR militants are caricatures, their clothes mark the social groups making up their detachments – people with a criminal past (dressed in *vatniks* [cotton wool padded jackets], cigarettes between their teeth), the military (fatigues with no ID markings), Russian *kazaks* (*kubanka hats*). They have no names, only nicknames like "worm", "rat-eater" and the aforementioned "demon". The enemies' language is filled with curse words, criminal argot, *surzhyk*. The Russian language is provided in Ukrainian transcriptions, thus further stressing its 'otherness'. Incorrect speech patterns also stress the ethnic origins of those who fight for the enemy – such as Buryats or Chechens. Hitting the Patriot from a grenade launcher, a little man with a paunch says, in broken Ukrainian: "Take that, Ukropa. Batu[-khan] reward, Batu hero for Ukropa! Kobzon wife, kids shake hand for Ukropa! […] You *shaitan* […] flying Ukropa!!!" (Ibid. 2016: 11). The renegade's dehumanisation is stressed not only through a physical transformation into a monster, but also through the impoverishment of his speech: he speaks in simple sentences consisting of a single verb or noun ("toy", "girlfriend", "devour").

The events of *Patriot. Renegade* unfold in several locations: "Eastern Ukraine. Muscovite-occupied territory", "Department of Military Intelligence and Strategic Planning, Irpin, Ukraine", "somewhere in Kyiv, off the loud streets", "Not far from the frontline", "Armed Forces of Ukraine Military Base seized by pro-Moscow forces, Donetsk", "Somewhere in the nondescript ravines of the Donbas,", "Kremlin. Muscovy". Although the colour scheme of the entire comic is bright, there is still a light vs. dark contrast in the depiction of peaceful Kyiv, and the places where the enemy prevails. Eastern Ukraine is drawn in dark hues, with greens and browns, as a desolate, unpeopled territory – with bare trees, a human skull in the forefront, and a destroyed building in the background, where previously, a truck driver explains, "All this was villages! Neat houses in a row, and gardens blooming" (ibid. 2016: 1). The visual image of the separatist base is also dominated by darker shades, and the malevolent atmosphere of the events unfolding is underlined by making the bubbles red and pointy, rather than round. Red and shades of red accompany the appearance of the renegade in the image of a girl (red sky, red eyes) and his transformation into a red beast that shoots red snot at the Patriot. The Patriot, a warrior of the powers of light, is shaded in blue, yellow and orange hues. He performs his mission – rescuing rays of lights from occupied territory.

Among the comic's female characters, Lieutenant Kvitka (Flower) stands out. She is stereotypically sexually attractive, and lenient about the sergeant's jokes about her re-

lationships with her subordinates. At a checkpoint, the Patriot notes: "You are a harsh mistress to your suitors, Lieutenant. It's a rare occurrence to see such a fine lady standing guard!", to which Kvitka replies: "Better bite your tongue, Sergeant, before I appoint you a costume for the canteen […]" (ibid: 6). Leutnant Kvitka appears in an episode where children are being saved as a helicopter pilot, which causes a boy's admiration ("When I grow up, I'm going to be a pilot, like you!" (ibid. 2018: 40)). She assists the Patriot. However, it seems that the creation of an image of a Ukrainian female superhero is still in the future.

The *Patriot* comic is clearly oriented towards the contemporary political situation in Ukraine and fosters an optimistic agenda in the reader. The superhero lacks a secret identity (it is common knowledge that Sergeant Vidirvenko is the Patriot), which hints at the idea that Ukraine does not require a secret hero, but rather an obvious one, so that every person might believe themselves capable of an extraordinary feat, and that "the superheroes' true heroism is not in any supernatural ability, but in being unshakable in the face of overwhelming hardship" (Duncan et al. 2015: 252). At the same time, the comic divides the world into light and darkness, with the protagonists standing on the side of light, while their enemies represent darkness. This division and character of the struggle implies that the enemy is demonised. As a consequence, shaping a dehumanised version of the enemy also implies that one cannot negotiate with him; the only way to be safe from such an enemy is by destroying him.

A mixture of contemporary and Cossack narratives is also found in the comic *Victory. Savur-Mohyla* (*Zvytiaha. Savur-Mohyla*, 2015) by Denys Fadieiev. The comic deals with the fight for Savur-Mohyla in the summer of 2014, superimposing it on the Cossack age. According to legend, at this place the ottoman Sirko executed people who, after being liberated from Turkish captivity, decided to go back to the Turks rather than return to their homeland. In the comic Sirko judges: "Anyone who has rejected his home country, his native land, has no right to live! For there are no two Gods, no two suns […] no two mothers" (Fadieiev 2015: 17). This exclamation is addressed also to present-day Ukrainians, while his art of combat is understood to inspire heroic acts and reawaken inborn national pride. In the comic, in particular a Cossack sword found during a battle during Ukraine's Anti-terrorist Operation, becomes a magical artifact that awakens national memory and turns ordinary persons of no particular moral courage into brave warriors with Cossack blood running through their veins. Notably, this present-day part of the narrative is told in Russian, whereas the Sirko story is told in Ukrainian.

Denys Fadieiev was also part of a script writing group for two issues of the full-colour comic *Volia: The WILL* (2017, 2018).[10] Rather than Cossack-era themes, this work

10 An entire collective of authors worked on *Volia: The WILL*. The scriptwriting group of the first volume comprised Denys Fadieiev, Oleksandr Fylypovych, and V'iacheslav Buhaiov; Roman Onyshchenko joined them to write dialogue; the group of artists included Oleksii Bondarenko, Maksym Bohdanovsk'yi, and Oleksandr Opara. The second volume was written by Denys Fadieiev, Oleksandr Fylypovych, Ol'ha Vozniuk, V'iacheslav Buhaiov; Anastasiia Fadieieva and Oleksandr Fylypovych joined in the writing of dialogues; the visual narrative was created by Ievhenii Tonchylov. Notably, the comics give separate credits to the artists of the historical pages (Victoriia Ponomarenko for the first volume, Maksym Bohdanovs'kyi – for the second) and historical consultants (Vladyslav Kutsenko, first volume; Ol'ha Vozniuk, second volume). The comic's language is diverse

addresses Ukraine's 'national liberation struggle' of 1917–1920, and projects alternative outcomes for those events. In the comic, the authors bring together a "historical basis, alternate history and superhero elements" (Il'in, 2018) and interrogate what would have happened, had events developed according to a different scenario. Additionally, the comic has no shortage of uncanny facets, portraying extensive steam-punk elements (steam machine technology, Industrial Revolution-era weaponry, the protagonists' clothes) and including various artistic styles, ranging from realism to caricature.

Figure 2.6: Scene from comic Volia: The WILL *(2017)*

The comic's characters include notable figures from Ukraine's history (Hetman Pavlo Skoropads'kyi; leader of an anarchist movement Nestor Makhno; Head of the Central Rada Mykhailo Hrushevs'kyi; first President of the National Academy of Sciences Volodymyr Vernads'kyi, inventor Ihor Sikors'kyi, Vladimir Lenin) who together with several other minor characters serve as recognisable historical figures that act according to widespread stereotypes and dominate the comic's narrative. Thus, the malevolent

and aimed at showing the characters primarily through a national lens. In addition to Ukrainian, the characters also speak Russian, Polish, and English.

nature of Bolshevik power is underscored by the images of Madame Blavatsky, who is brought back to life by magic, while Leon Trotsky resolutely implements the ideals of the October Revolution, by tearing out the hearts of dissenters and raising 'the Red dead' to fight.

These fantastic elements of the comic clash with the drawn parts of factual history – they are grayscale, realist-style sketches. The first volume places such history pages after every episode, the story of the second volume concludes with five history pages. They are meant to introduce little-known historical events, phenomena, inventions, and thus to familiarise the reader with the historical background.

The first part of *Volia: THE WILL* has a well thought out 'national' conception. The story begins on the front endpaper, which depicts an archangel striking a monster with a trident. The accompanying text serves as a starting point for the narrative:

> The young Ukrainian state arose from the ruins of an empire, as did its new and treacherous enemies. At the same time, a great war continues in Europe, the like of which the world had not yet seen, with spy intrigue, new mystical cults, and dangerous military technology. The freedom struggle continues, and the new history of the world begins in these pages. (Buhaiov/Fadieiev 2017)

Each episode of the comic is preceded by a segment of text introducing the reader into the action or foregrounding a key idea. Thus, the first episode opens with a text about World War I and the formation of the Ukrainian state under the leadership of Pavlo Skoropads'kyi. The second episode, "Ghost of the Past" ("Pryvyd mynuloho"), opens with a Ukrainian Sich Riflemen[11] song "Oh Ukraine! Beloved mother". The song's lyrics are a modified text of the *For Ukraine* (*Za Ukrainu*) poem by Mykola Voronyi, one of the founders of the Ukrainian Central Rada. Overall, the second episode, which was drawn by Maksym Bohdanovs'kyi, is executed in a Realist style, with many detailed mass scenes. The words of the song "For Ukraine, for her freedom / For honour and glory, / For the people" become the ideological lodestone of the narrative, which is based on the story of the Crimea Operation of 1918, when Ukrainian troops, headed by Colonel Petro Bolbochan, instituted Ukrainian authority on the peninsula, and created a Ukrainian navy. In the third episode, "A New Enemy", Oleksandr Oles' poem *Chains can never bind Ukraine* (*Vilnu Ukraïnu ne skuiut kaidany*, 1917) stresses the optimism and invincibility of Ukraine's defenders. The second volume has no such introductory element.

The opposition between national and enemy forces is constructed according to the conventions of the superhero genre, with a clear separation between good and evil, heroes, and villains, and with demonisation and dehumanisation of the enemy. On the side of the Ukrainian revolution are powerful weapons, the latest inventions, people with supernatural abilities – all of this is meant to help in the struggle against the Bolsheviks (Soviet Russia), who have mystical connections to evil spirits, can raise the dead as zombies to fight, subjugate the will of the living, and possess fantastical technology. This evil is fought by the Ukrainian 'cyborgs' Sich Riflemen, Maksym Kryvonis, Agnieszka

11 The Sich Riflemen are one of the detachments of the army of the Ukrainian People's Republic, formed in 1917 and notable for its organisation and effectiveness in combat.

the medium, the brilliant Professor Vernadskyi, who is developing a super weapon, and Ukraine's President Mykhailo Hrushevs'kyi, whose weapon is his book "The History of Ukraine-Rus".

In his meditations on the *Volia* comic, Vadym Il'in criticises the voluntarism of its superheroes, as "rather than to solve the problems that led to war, we are given a 'simple' solution – the removal of those problems through exclusively military means, through a superhuman technological effort" (2018). This bears the risk of forming "in the young reader a stereotypical, black-and-white idea of the events that do not actually fit into simple schemes" (ibid.). However, as a work of fiction the comic in no way aims at a truthful representation of real events, but on the contrary at strengthening the idea that victory over the external aggressor is possible, an idea particularly relevant in the political context of today's Ukraine.

4. *Dira (Hole).* A Graphic Novel by Serhii Zakharov

In the broad field of comics, cartoons, drawn picture stories and visual tales with its general orientation towards comicality, simplification and entertainment, it is only since the 1970s a distinct subgenre of the so-called graphic novel emerged, whose authors strove to separate themselves from the earlier genre development, modelling artistic reality in a different set of coordinates from that of the comic. Jan Beatens and Hugo Frey in their introduction to the Graphic Novel (2015) stress that the graphic novel is not merely a genre, but a medium that is part of other cultural fields and practices (graphic literature, visual narrative). They define the graphic novel and comics in general on four levels: 1. form; 2. content; 3. publication format; 4. aspects of production and distribution (cf. Baetens/Frey 2015). For instance, the distinctness of the form of the graphic novel is in the fact that its authors do not follow the established rules of comics, but rather create their own recognisable style, which does not necessarily mean an improvement to the traditional comic style. Authors of graphic novels prefer non-standard layout techniques, disrupting the usual net structure of the comic, or else return to a clear layout, so as not to distract from what they deem the most essential in their work. According to Baetens and Frey, in terms of narrative form, graphic novels often feature a narrator, where comics lack the visible involvement of one. On a content level, graphic novels deal with adult, or serious and complex themes that are largely uninteresting to a teenage audience. Authors stress realism or autobiography (like in *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* by Art Spiegelman, or *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi), turn to historicity and actuality (*In the Shadow of No Towers* by Art Spiegelman, *Last Day in Vietnam* by Will Eisner, etc.), mixing fictional and non-fictional, documentary narrative (ibid.).

One attempt to create a genuine Ukrainian graphic novel is *The Hole* (*Dira*, 2016) authored by the artist Serhii Zakharov, who had witnessed the events in Donetsk that had led to the proclamation of the unrecognised DNR in 2014. In response, Zakharov organised an art collective, entitled *Murzylka*, and created caricatures, street art, and graffiti portraying the infamous representatives of the new authorities. This artistic protest gained a worldwide response when the photographs were posted on the internet. The DNR authorities subsequently arrested Zakharov, imprisoned him and staged a shoot-

ing. But Zakharov managed to escape Donetsk and to move to Kyiv, where he processed his traumatic experience in graphics, which became the start of a graphic novel, and started to collaborate with the writer and journalist Serhii Mazurkevych, with whom he also started to work on the graphic novel *The Hole*.

The Hole was presented in Kyiv in 2016 and accompanied by the opening of an exhibition at the National Museum for the History of Ukraine, entitled *The Hole. 14 August… An Experience of Nonviolent Cultural Resistance*, where works by Zakharov were presented. The book immediately got a broad reception on the internet, underlining the fact that graphic novels disprove the idea that drawings can only entertain and amuse, but can open a much broader circle of subjects: "problems in the family, intolerance, the struggle for rights; genocide, as well as war" (Kalytenko 2017). Zakharov's works contains all central elements of the graphic novel, like a historical basis, autobiographical elements, the scale of the problems touched upon, the large book format (A4), and the orientation towards an adult reader. The topicality of the content in particular brings the work closer to non-fictional literature.

Figure 2.7: Scene from graphic novel The Hole *(2016)*

Particularly impressive is the layout of Zakharov's images, which, as indicated, he only later inserted into a plot in collaboration with Mazurkevich, supplementing them with new ones in order to make a story suitable for the form of a graphic novel. For this reason, the drawings, their situation on the page, their 'framing' are of utmost importance, they create an emotional visual arc, and reveal a person's feelings in a critical situation. In this respect the book cover, in shades of red and black, is impressive.

On an elevation in an urban landscape, a hole is drawn, into which the city is being pulled (high rise buildings, a stadium, train stations), but this process is incomplete. The hole symbolises a transition into a different space, which is likely unfriendly and has no future, which leads to emptiness, which is the unrecognised Donetsk People's Republic (DNR). At the top of the page, *Dira* is written in big black letters, drawn haphazardly – some spots are not filled with colour, the lines are clumsy as if pointing to the author's negative connotation of the word and what it stands for.

The plot is also typical for the graphic novel genre. From the very first pages the reader finds herself thrown into an uncanny world of violence, fear and lawlessness – a spread shows the barrel of a pistol, which conveys the impressions of someone faced with mortal danger. In the face of death, details become blurred, which is shown through a darkened backdrop in hatched lines. The large-scale image has no frame, it occupies the entirety of the available page space, including the margins. This technique of placing a single image on a two-page spread becomes the book's signature, literally signalling the huge scale of the disastrous events that took place in Donetsk in 2014. The blown-up close-ups (open-mouthed person in despair; someone with a gun; a protester, the artist himself; a scene of somebody being beaten up; the face of the victim of the beating) deepen and strengthen the sense of danger that rules in the city.

Another specificity of graphic novels is the framing of how many images are placed on one page, thus accelerating or slowing down the action, stressing at the same time its significance and tension. Scott McCloud distinguishes six types of frames: from moment to moment; from action to action; from object to object; from place to place; from detail to detail; with no visible connection. Whereas action frames predominate in American comics, making the narrative dynamic and keeping the reader in suspense, Japanese comics care more about condition, which is why they also have many "detail to detail" and "no visible connection" frames (McCloud 1993: 74–78). In the graphic novel *The Hole* it is not just the adventure that is of significance, but also the narrator's emotional state, so frames from action to action here alternate with frames that stress detail, and frames with no visible connection. These latter ones show how unbelievable and unreal everything happening to the narrator is, talk of his desire to break out of the closed space of unfreedom. Frames often include meaning breaks, which the reader is forced to fill for herself, thus supplementing events with own reflections and feelings, joining the process of making sense. Also, the shape of the frame matters, whether they are rectangular, star-shaped, heart-shaped, or something else. In *The Hole*, all the drawings are rectangular, however their frames are not differentiated, with them being situated on a black/white backdrop, or on full spreads without a frame, which further emphasises the bleak and depressive atmosphere.

Indeed, the author's use of black-and-white drawing is not accidental. The monochrome palette illustrates the absence of joy and hope, serves as a marker of cruelty, fear, moral degradation, and spiritual downfall. Gray people against the recognisable backdrop of the Lenin monument, with sticks in their hands, hands balled into fists, black mouths open, are reminiscent of a terrifying dark power. The author only captures negative emotions, depicting them schematically through an expressionist-influenced technique of hatching. The reader is faced with "strained hatch lines" and "black-and-

white" silhouettes (Kalytenko 2017), a line technique which is reminiscent of delirium, of a nightmare, the narrator's refusal to believe that all of this is truly happening.

It is in particular the city of Donetsk where the destruction of peacetime life and its replacement with a state of war is happening: a pregnant woman in her kitchen, a grenade on the floor, blown up to an unrealistic size, children playing while a woman talks to an armed man; a person on their knees being beaten by sticks and brass knuckles; a foot on a person's face; drunken people – all of these are apocalyptic scenes that illustrate the arrival of an evil which awakens previously controlled aggression in people. At the centre of this kaleidoscope is a torn white space with a human silhouette in the middle – likely watching and realising the horror brought upon the beloved city This contrasts with the only full-colour object, a Ukrainian flag on the book's last page, which serves as a symbol of return from the 'uncanny valley' to the space of freedom and full-fledged life.

Figure 2.8: Scene from graphic novel The Hole *(2016)*

The narrative (both verbal and non-verbal) of Zakharov's *The Hole* is in the first person, in retrospect. Taking temporal distance from the traumatic events, the protagonist assumes the point of view of an outside observer and analyses the events from a remote perspective, strengthening the impression of the reliability of reported facts with its focus on abuses and human rights violations.

Another characteristic of the graphic novel in contrast to comics with its playful speech bubbles is that text is rather placed separately from the frame or atop the frame. This separation does not actually separate the whole but carries additional meaning. In *The Hole* the clarity of Mazurkevych's text with regard to place, time of action and the novel's protagonists is supplemented by Zakharov's expressive drawings. For instance, writing some phrases in uppercase, such as "It became clear on 12th of May, when the

self-governance 'referendum' was held in the DNR" or "Is that you? Yes, it's me" underscores key plot twists. Moreover, the constant change between white letters at black background and vice versa makes reading harder and forces the reader to concentrate on emotionally challenging events.

Thus, by dealing with recent Ukrainian history, Zakharov's *The Hole* broadened the field of Ukrainian graphic literature both in terms of form and content. In the graphic novel, the narrative takes a serious register, and operates on more complicated levels than we have seen in comics. The work expresses the author's own traumatic experience, which he processes and addresses to an adult audience, an audience with its values and worldview already in place. The novel foregrounds the tragic, rather than the heroic. This, in turn, requires the use of specific artistic techniques, more attuned to tragedy, like the use of zoomed-in close-ups, grayscale, an expressionist drawing style, the lack of speech bubbles and a detached manner of first-person narration.

5. Conclusion

The modern Ukrainian comic is distinguished by original authorial techniques, a thought-out verbal component, as well as its relevance to the current needs of society. The comics make national history, in particular the Cossack past in its historical and mythological guise, but also the national liberation struggle of 1917, the Soviet era, the contemporary war in Eastern Ukraine relevant. They experiment with superhero, adventure, and mystery genres, as well as turning to alternative history and steampunk. A number of comics (*Ukrainian Superheroes*, *Patriot*, *Volia: The WILL*) model the image of a Ukrainian superhero, capable of opposing evil forces, which often carry markers of Russian expansionism. Through a number of visual metaphors and associations, the comics draw parallels to recent Ukrainian history – namely, Ukraine's conflict with the Russian Federation. Essentially, with its hyperbolised rejection of the enemy, the superhero comic serves as an answer to Russian propaganda in the current media communication field. More generally, contemporary Ukrainian comics and graphic novels construct all previous history as a 'national liberation struggle' opposing foreign, Russian oppressors.

The depiction of history through the prism of the struggle between Good and Evil, the separation of characters into clearly positive and negative, ignores the complexity and controversial nature of historical events and figures and contributes to forming a one-dimensional picture of the world in mass consciousness, and dichotomising, simplifying complex relationships. However, this form of national appropriation of history in comics is called to perform a higher-priority task – to create an optimistic and vibrant space for the victory of the national idea.

Whereas comics are distinguished by fantastical, fairy-tale elements and imaginary scenarios, or the modelling of a playful, entertaining representation of history, *The Hole* supplements and deepens the earnestness of its subject – namely the war in Eastern Ukraine, ongoing since 2014, and the proclamation of the unrecognised Donetsk People's Republic – via an autobiographical and 'documentary' narrative, as well as expressive drawings and an unusual page layout, thus addressing an adult audience.

But regardless of all the differences between the more simplistic superhero comics and the serious deeper genre of the graphic novel, they both have in common that they are concerned in depicting national history with the present-day political situation in the country and are intended to form an optimistic agenda among the reader, while bolstering the faith in victory in mass consciousness.

List of Illustrations

References

[Anon.] (2020): "Istoria ukraïns'kykh komiksiv." In: UN (https://uncomics.com/ukranian-comics/) [16 January 2023].

Baran'ko, Ihor (2011): Maksym Osa [2008], Odessa: Ievgenios.

Baetens, Jan/Frey, Hugo (2015): The Graphic Novel: An Introduction, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Booker, Keith M. et al. (eds.) (2011): The Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory in three Volumes, Hoboken: Blackwell.

Buhaiov, V'iacheslav/Fadieiev, Denys et al. (2017): Volia: The WILL, Knyha 1, Mikolaïv: Asgardian Comics.

Buhaiov, V'iacheslav/Fadieiev, Denys et al. (2018): Volia: The WILL, Knyha 2, Kharkiv.

Coogan, Peter (2006): The Superhero. The Secret Origin of a Genre, Austin: Monkey-Brain Books.

Duncan, Randy/Smith, Mattew J./Levutz, Paul (2015): The Power of Comics: History, Form, and Culture [2009], London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Eisner Will (2008): Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practices from the Legendary Cartoonist, New York: W.W. Norton.

Fadieiev, Denys (2015): Zvytiaha. Savur-mohyla, Mikolaïv: Asgardian Comics.

Il'in, Vadym (2018): "Komiks 'Volia: the WILL': nova mifologiia Ukraïns'koï revoliutsiï 1917–1921 rokiv". In: Spil'ne, 14 December 2018 (https://commons.com.ua/uk/komiks-volya-will/) [16 January 2023].

Jameson, Fredric (1998): Cultural Turn. Selected Writings on the Postmodern, London: Verso.

Kalytenko, Tetiana (2017): "Veseli kartynky pro nevesele: 4 komiksy pro viinu". In: Bokmal, 8 May 2017 (https://bokmal.com.ua/books/war-comics/) [15.01.2020].

Karpenko, Vadym/Haiduchenko, Oleksandr (1992): Marko Pyrih, zaporozhets'. IAk Pyrih stav Pyrihom: knykha-komiks, Kyiv: Kozaky.

Koreshkov, Oleksandr (2018): Sered ovets': komiks, Kyiv: Vovkulaka.

Koval', Nata (2017): "Made in Ukraine: komiksy velyki i malen'ki." In: Chtyvo, 25 August, 2017 (http://www.chytomo.com/issued/made-in-ukraine-komiksi-veliki-j-malenki) [16 January 2023].

McCloud, Scott (1993): Understanding Comics: Invisible Art, New York: William Morrow.

Nazarov, Vadym (2014): Patriot. Ataka kloniv: Knykha 1. Navaleo.

Nazarov, Vadym (2016): Patriot. Renehat. Knykha 2. Samvydav.

Nazarov, Vadym (2018): Patriot. Renehat. Knykha 3. Samvydav.

Kovaliv, Iurii (2007a): Literaturoznavcha entsyklopediia: u dvoh tomah. Vol.1. Kyiv: Akademiia.

Kovaliv, Iurii (2007b): Literaturoznavcha entsyklopediia: u dvoh tomah. Vol.2. Kyiv: Akademiia.

Pidopryhora, Svitlana (2018): Ukrainska eksperymentalna proza XX – pochatku XXI stolit: "nemozhlyva" literatura, Mikolaïv.

Pityk, Anatolii/Pityk, Kateryna (2019): "Kvantovyi strybok Kapitana Ukraïna: koly chekaty na zoloty doby ukraïns'kykh komiksiv". In: Chtyvo, 18 March 2019 (https://chytomo.com/kvantovyj-strybok-kapitana-ukrainy-koly-chekaty-na-zolotu-dobu-ukrainskykh-komiksiv/) [16 January 2023].

Prasolov, Maksym/Chebykin, Oleksii/Kolov, Oleh (2012): Daohopak. Knyha I: Antaliis'ka hastrol'. Kyiv: Nebesky.

Prasolov, Maksym/Chebykin, Oleksii/Kolov, Oleh (2014): Daohopak. Knyha II: Shliakhetna liubov. Kyiv: Nebesky.

Prasolov, Maksym/Chebykin, Oleksii /Kolov, Oleh (2016): Daohopak. Knyha III: Taiemnitsa kozats'koho mol'fara, Kyiv: Nebesky.

Stoliarova, Liubov' (2010): "Analiz strukturnykh ėlementov komiksa". In: Izvestia Tul'skogo gosudarstvenogo universiteta. Gumanitarnye nauki 1, pp. 384–389.

Sulyma, Kostiantyn (1995): Buiviter: komiks, Kyiv: Robitnycha hazeta.

Umberto, Eco (1979): The Role of the Reader. Explorations in the Semiotics of text, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Voroniuk, Lesia (2015a): Ukraïns'ki supergeroï. Vriatuvaty zhaivoronka. Vypusk 1, Chernivtsi: Bukrek.

Voroniuk, Lesia (2015b): Ukraïns'ki supergeroï. Nevydymyi ostriv. Vypusk 2, Chernivtsi: Bukrek.

Zakharov, Serhii/Mazurkevych, Serhii (2016): Dira, Kyiv: Luta sprava.