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# Ukrainian Narratives about the Outbreak of the War: The Main Themes, Structure and Composition

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**ABSTRACT.** The article aims to consider the main themes and structures of autobiographical narratives by the Ukrainian people about the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war. It analyses narratives of life events becoming the elements of storytelling about the beginning of the war. The article focuses mainly on the plot structure of stories about the war's outbreak, and the narrators' self-presentation strategies.

Folklore tools reveal typical plots of autobiographical narratives about the outbreak of war. The symbolic meanings of oral histories attributed in modern Ukrainian culture to various events, people and things are considered. Methods of structural narratology have

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proven to be advantageous in this research. Autobiographical narratives concerning the outbreak of the war coincide with the five criteria of the eventfulness level by Wolf Schmid: relevance, unpredictability, persistence, irreversibility and non-iterativity. The predominant motifs under consideration include reports regarding the beginning of the war, leaving one's home, seeking refuge in shelters, undergoing evacuation, contemplating the causes of the war, predicting the war, and reflecting on the cruel nature of warfare.

KEYWORDS: Russian-Ukrainian war, autobiographical narrative, oral tradition, folklore.

## Ukrainiečių pasakojimai apie karo pradžią: svarbiausios temos, struktūra, kompozicija

SANTRAUKA. Straipsnio tikslas – aptarti svarbiausias ukrainiečių autobiografinių pasakojimų apie Rusijos karo prieš Ukrainą pradžią temas ir struktūrą. Analizuojami pasakojimai apie gyvenimo įvykius, tampančius sudėtinėmis naratyvo apie karo pradžią dalimis. Daugiausia dėmesio skiriama šių pasakojimų siužetinei linijai ir pasakotojų savireprezentacijos būdams.

Pasitelkus folkloro medžiagą, išskiriami būdingiausi autobiografinių pasakojimų apie karą siužetai. Atsižvelgiama į simbolines prasmes, kurios šiuolaikinei ukrainiečių kultūrai būdinguose žodiniuose pasakojimuose suteikiamos įvairiems įvykiams, žmonėms ir daiktams. Šiame tyrime ypač parankūs pasirodė struktūrinės naratologijos metodai. Autobiografiniai pasakojimai apie karo pradžią atitinka penkis įvykių vaizdavimo kriterijus, išskirtus Wolfo Schmido: svarba, nenuspėjamumas, tęstinumas, neatšaukiamumas ir nepasikartojamumas. Iš vyrujančių motyvų aptariami pasakotojų nusakomi potyriai pačioje karo pradžioje, išvykimas iš namų, prieglaudos paieška, evakuacija, bandymai suvokti karo priežastis, nuspėti karo eigą, taip pat pamąstymai apie karų žiaurumus.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: Rusijos karas prieš Ukrainą, autobiografinis pasakojimas, žodinė tradicija, folkloras.

## INTRODUCTION

On 24 February 2022, the Russian Federation launched a full-scale invasion of the territory of sovereign Ukraine. This date divided the lives of the Ukrainian people into 'before' and 'after' periods. The independence of the Ukrainian state, the very existence of the Ukrainian nation, and the lives of the citizens of Ukraine, were threatened. Thus, the war<sup>1</sup> entered the lives of every Ukrainian to a greater or lesser extent.

The article aims to investigate narratives about the experiences of ordinary people whose lives have been changed by the war. The first step in the research into autobiographical narratives about the outbreak of the war is an investigation of the structural features of these texts.

It should be noted that the generally accepted definition of narratives about war is not appropriate, as a defining element of the structure and pragmatics of any narrative is the end of the story. It is still impossible to record narratives of the war

1 The term 'war' is used in the article to denote the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation in February 2022.

experience, because the war is still going on. There are narratives about the war's outbreak, leaving home, miraculous salvation, predicting the beginning of the war, etc. Stories about occupation, about soldiers who died or were seriously wounded during the hostilities, are now common. These and other micro-themes comprise a variety of war narratives.

Autobiographical narratives about the outbreak of the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion of Ukraine will be examined. The emphasis in this article will be put on structural features of the narratives about the outbreak of the war. The following issues will be discussed in the article:

1. What events of a non-discrete life continuum have become elements of a discrete story (Schmid 2010) about the beginning of the war?
2. How is the plot of the narratives about the outbreak of the war structured?
3. What strategy of self-presentation do the narrators use in their stories?

## RESEARCH METHODS AND MATERIAL

Scientific research into autobiographical narratives about the war in the Ukrainian scientific discourse has been conducted in several anthropological, philological and social disciplines. Recent research on narratives of the Russian-Ukrainian war, i.e. the collection of materials 'War, science and emotions: (not)new concepts and approaches', include investigations on the methodology of narratives by witnesses of the war (Kuzmenko 2022, Makhovska 2023; Коваль-Фучило 2023; Кузьменко 2023; Пастух 2023). Autobiographical narratives as examples of folk prose depicting social and political cataclysms have long attracted the attention of folklorists (Hajduk-Nijakowska 2004; Rzepkowska 2008; Кузьменко 2018; Мишанич 1986). The articles by Annikki Kaivola-Bregenhøj (2006; 2008) and Julia Powles (2004), raising important theoretical and methodological issues in research involving people who have witnessed war, are relevant to our research.

The key categories of the research are *narrative* and *story*, which become the subject of our research in the context of war as a form of manifesting specific memories, experiences and emotions. The narrative was first discussed in the theory of literature as one of the fundamental categories for describing a literary text. It has also quickly become a philosophical, psychological and cultural category (Barthes, Duisit 1975). Katarzyna Rosner views narration as 'the human ability to organise events and actions into comprehensive, meaningful structures that develop over time' (2003: 12). As a result, storytelling plays an important role in the development of identity and autobiographical memories. Storytelling creates a sense of belonging and connectedness, as it links past experiences to the present, and provides a rich resource for emotional coping and psychological resilience

to face life. In analysing narrative data, April R. Trees and Jody Koenig Kellas define two primary functions of storytelling: (1) narratives help people to make sense of difficult experiences; and (2) stories provide an insight into people's conceptualisation of the world (2009: 3). Storytelling can help people form new identities in times of conflict and transform endings to the challenges of life. The lessons learned from stories serve as a protective balm against painful life events. Responses to adversity involve the safety of reflecting and reframing the stories of personal lives (Nguyen et al. 2015: 3).

War brings dramatic changes to the lives of every person living on the territory of a warring country. The transition from peace to war in autobiographical narratives is described in categories of liminality. In anthropology, a classic work on rites of passage is van Gennep's book *Les rites de passage* (1909), where the researcher proposes to consider life cycle rites as rites of passage (Gennep 1960). In addition, Turner (1969: 95) claims that rites of passage do not disappear, but are transformed in modern society. To consider the outbreak of war as a rite of passage would be a significant exaggeration, but it is possible to investigate whether autobiographical narratives about the outbreak of war contain signs of liminality in their structure. His analysis focuses on: 1) subjects' emotional experiences; 2) time categories ('before' and 'after', time discontinuity); and 3) space (one's home/the other side), understanding the world in binary terms (self/other, peaceful/military, our nation/the enemy). Liminal feelings of an individual who has experienced war are described by Jackson (2002). Anniki Kaivola-Bregenhøj (2006) emphasises that war is a turning point in a person's life. Her interviewees include Finnish people who talk about the Russo-Finnish war in the 1940s. This event is still at the centre of autobiographical narratives and writing on local folklore. It is significant that the scholar highlights linguistic and paralinguistic features distinguishing the context of autobiographical narratives. This helps us find out personal emotional responses and the feelings of the interviewees.

For this research, the findings of structural narratology allow us to explain the mechanisms of forming a discrete narrative based on a non-discrete life continuum of situations in which the narrator finds himself applied. The very selection of plot elements for the future plot is already significant: what exactly the narrator remembers, what elements he omits, etc. Modern narratology considers the process of narrative formation to be a result of successive transformations. Schmid proposes to call such models of narrative transformation generative models that reflect certain logical processes but do not represent the process of real construction or the reception of the work. Schmid emphasises that in the analysis of generative models, it is important to identify some operations determining the transition of the material from the story as made up, from one level to the next (Schmid 2010: 94).

Schmid's model of narrative transformation includes four levels: events, history, narration, and the presentation of the narration. Events, according to Schmid, are a set of characters, situations and actions relating to a particular story. However, it would be a mistake to consider events as phenomena synonymous with the infinite indiscrete continuum of existence. Events are discrete phenomena, the result of the purposeful artistic treatment of reality. History is formed based on events. At this stage, the selection of situations, people and their actions, as well as properties and qualities that can be attributed to them, takes place. At the next level of the generative model, a narration is formed based on history, using the techniques of linearisation (the sequential arrangement of simultaneous events) and the permutation of parts of history. The final level is the presentation of the narration. At this stage, the narrative is verbalised and transmitted through language (Schmid 2010: 206). In this research, the presentation of the narration is the text of a recorded and deciphered autobiographical interview, or a conversation with people recorded in a natural and induced situation (Бріцїна 2006).

Schmid argues that the creation of a narrative is a complex multi-level process, which in any case involves at least the basic artistic treatment of reality. The event series of an autobiographical narrative is formed based on two factors: individual life experience and the cultural tradition, determining the nature of perception of a particular life event (Schmid 2010: 2). The relevance of changes in an autobiographical narrative will depend on who the narrator of the story is. Gerard Genette distinguishes two types of story. The first type is when the narrator is absent in the story he tells. The second type is revealed when the narrator is a character in the story he tells. The researcher proposes to call the first type *heterodiegetic*, and the second a *homodiegetic* narration (Genette 1980: 50–51). An autobiographical narrative about the outbreak of war is mostly a homodiegetic story. For the 21<sup>st</sup>-century European, the outbreak of war is an event so unique, tragic and unexpected, so different from the ordinary, that it is in itself a subject for storytelling, no matter what the circumstances are. In a heterodiegetic narrative, a story about *the other*, the narrator's attention is drawn to extraordinary events that differ from everyday ones. These are usually the most heroic or tragic texts. In an autobiographical narrative about the outbreak of war, heterodiegesis is present in a story of the wrong choice, inappropriate behaviour that leads to a dramatic or tragic event (for example, a story about how someone went the wrong way during an evacuation and was injured).

Time is a key category for understanding the nature of narrative transformations from event to history, and from history to narration. Some types of narrative transformation occur in the process of forming history, others only during the formation of the narrative. In the process of the formation of history, the duration

of the presentation of an event is relevant, i. e. what the narrator tells in brief, and what in detail, where the story is interrupted and the narrator's attention is focused on something else, what the narrator avoids telling. In the transition from history to narration, the order of the presentation of events is important, as well as the repetition of the same events in the narrative (Genette 1980: 86–160).

The order of starting episodes in the storytelling, omissions, the recollection of episodes from the prewar past, reflections, and plans for the future, are important to the analysis of the structure of an autobiographical narrative. When characterising the transition from event to story, it is worth paying attention to the detail or brevity of the presentation of certain episodes of the story (the use of stretching and compression techniques).

The article's authors have proven that research methods of narratology, in combination with folklore studies, are fruitful for the investigation of modern material (Labashchuk et al. 2020a; 2020b).

The method of open narrative interview, proposed by researchers of oral history (when the interviewer asks the respondent one open-ended question with a request to share his/her own experience) is the most relevant for our research, as it allows the researcher not to prompt the narrator's answer. From all of their experience, a person chooses only those episodes that are meaningful to him/her.

The material for the research was the recordings of narratives about the outbreak of the war made from March 2022 to May 2023 by the authors of the article and students from the Faculty of Philology and Journalism of Ternopil Volodymyr Hnatiuk National Pedagogical University, mainly in western Ukraine. A total of 127 interviews were recorded. The length of each interview is approximately one to two hours. The interviewees were mostly internally displaced persons (about 60% of the interviewees were displaced persons from the war regions). Five interviews were recorded by people who had been under Russian occupation (in the Kharkiv and Kherson regions). Approximately 85% of the interviews were with men, the rest with women. The interviewees' age range was from 18 to 77, and each age group is proportionally presented in the interview material. A total of 17 interviews are analysed in this article.

#### WHY DO PEOPLE WANT TO TALK ABOUT WAR?

Why are stories about the outbreak of war actively told? What exactly makes the narrator recall the experience again and again? To answer these questions, it is worth considering the criteria of eventfulness that Schmid puts forward. According to him, there are five criteria for the eventfulness degree: relevance, unpredictability, persistence, irreversibility, and non-iterativity (Schmid 2010: 9–12). The beginning

of the full-scale invasion by the Russian Federation of the territory of a sovereign independent European state is such an incredible, unpredictable and irreversible event that it needs to be understood and verbalised. In the lives of our respondents, there was no previous experience of war, they had only heard the accounts of eyewitnesses of the Second World War, read books, or watched movies about it. Suddenly, war entered their lives, and became a part of their lived experience:

You know, it's very hard and painful to remember. On 23 February, I went to visit my boyfriend. We sat, had dinner, and went to bed. And at five a. m., my boyfriend came to me and said that he heard some explosions. I went outside and saw just the red sky towards Kharkiv. I began to panic a bit. We immediately turned on the television, immediately searched for information on the Internet. And the first news was that the war had begun. I ... honestly, I somehow didn't believe, somehow I didn't want to accept it [...] I could not believe that war had begun, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century! What is the point of this war? (S. L., 18, female, Kharkiv region).<sup>2</sup>

Many narratives emphasise the absurdity and impossibility of what was happening. The events seemed so impossible that the interviewees emphasised being unable to believe it:

And for some reason, in the first hours when it all happened [...] we couldn't believe it was really true [...] What shall I do? How will I manage? Will I sleep in my house tomorrow or won't I (I. B., 20, female, Kherson region).

The news about the war became a kind of turning point that divided a person's life into two parts. The following example confirms the awareness of the abruptness and irreversibility of war:

But as it turned out, the war [...] divided my whole life into life before and life after. Because, on 24 February, at about four a. m., my husband woke me up with the words: "Olia, wake up, the war has started" [...] And immediately the explosions began. Well, we, at that moment ... later, we began to realise that these explosions were far away. At that moment, they were loud, scary, and it seemed that they were nearby, although it was not nearby, it was at the other end of the city [...] Everyone talked about suitcases and so on. But to say that [we] were ready, no. We didn't quite believe that it was war (O. K., 42, female, Mykolaiv region).

.....  
 2 The narrator's name and surname (S. L.), the narrator's age at the time of the recording (18), the narrator's sex (female), the area of Ukraine the narrator lived in before the full-scale invasion (Kharkiv region).

The interviewees highlighted the fact that this war is the most terrible thing that has happened in their lives, and, in general, the most terrible event that can happen to any person:

[...] I thought it might not be like the Second World War, so terrible, with all the destruction. No one thought so. And it turned out that the Second World War was not as terrible as this one, because there were no missiles, and missiles are scary. It is impossible to protect yourself against them, they fly at a speed of 4,000 to 12,000 kilometres an hour. They are simply invisible, the hum can simply increase (O. L., 67, male, Mykolaiv region).

The entire month that we lived under occupation was the most frightening month in my life (I. B., 18, female, Kherson region).

Records affirm that warfare represents perhaps the most profound and extreme experience a human can endure. An autobiographical narrative serves as one of the ways through which individuals process and comprehend dramatic or tragic life events.

#### WHAT DO PEOPLE MENTION WHEN THEY TALK ABOUT THE OUTBREAK OF THE WAR?

For survivors who undertake the task of recounting their experiences at the commencement of the war, the focus of their narratives is invariably the life-altering journey they had to endure. Commonly recurring themes include the dissemination of news about the commencement of hostilities, strategies for survival such as procuring food, ensuring adequate heating, preparing meals, seeking shelter from shelling and bombing, evacuating to secure locations, and encounters with the adversary. Additionally, autobiographical narratives often feature accounts of miraculous deliverance, the contemplation of the root causes of the conflict, prophecies and forecasts about war, reflections on the inhumane nature of warfare, and the documentation of the criminal acts perpetrated by the occupying forces, among others.

Most of the narratives studied begin with a climactic portrayal of the most pivotal moment, the outbreak of the war. This introduction is often prompted by an individual's first-hand account of the war's events, or the war's presence is manifested through sensory experiences, such as the reverberating roar of aircraft and thunderous explosions:

Well, bombs were dropped, bombs were dropped a lot. After some time, the planes returned, but not on the side where they flew over us, there were gardens and trees. They



flew to that side, and they turned back [...] We had nowhere to go. We were afraid even in the cellar, because they started to hit hard from our side. It was from there, it was just when we were heading for the bushes, and they took off from the bushes. And that's how the war started in our country (V. R., 77, female, Donetsk region).

Our morning started as usual, we woke up and got ready [we] didn't turn on the television [we] got ready for work [we] got the children to school, well ... [it was] the most usual morning. My mother-in-law called me and said that something was wrong [...] they said there was a war ... Well, we laughed. I said, "Ma, what war...? What are you saying?" Laughter [...] And then we understood: this is no longer training, but war (M. P., 36, female, Kharkiv region).

[...] smoke could be seen from my window, but I didn't understand anything. My mother didn't say anything to me [...] that's the kind of woman she is, she says everything at the last minute. I thought it was bangers or fireworks [...] I opened Tik Tok, and there were all videos about the war: "Oh, war-war." I was in shock, I went to my mother, and said: "Mum, is it war?" She said: "Well, something has started there" (V. K., 18, female, Kherson region).

As Genette notes, 'folkloric narrative follows an order more respectful of the chronology of events than that of the literary tradition inaugurated by the Iliad, with its beginning in medias res and its concluding analepsis' (Genette 1993: 58). Such repeated memories of the past and returning to the moment from which the narrative began are a characteristic feature of a large part of the analysed research material.

In the morning [pause] I was woken up by a call from my daughter in Kyiv. She said to me: "Mum ... the war has started." I thought: "What war? What's the matter with them there?" I thought it might be some kind of war with the son-in-law [...] what kind of war was not clear. But ... then I asked her: "Why did this happen to you?" She said: "It didn't happen to me ... it happened to Ukraine ... Kyiv has been bombed ..." "How could it be bombed?" I asked again: "How did they bomb it? Who bombed it?" She said: "Well, who bombed? Putin's gone crazy" (A. K., 48, female, Chernihiv region).

The theme of the message about the war is so constant that sometimes it may not coincide with the beginning of the narrative. One of the interlocutors recalled that she only realised fully that the war had begun when she was crossing the border and the Polish border guard, in response to a woman who did not have vaccination certificates for her children, exclaimed: 'What vaccination! There's a war on, woman, a war!' (Y. P., 34, female, Volyn region).

One of the themes in the narratives of the respondents is the theme of leaving home:

Going to the country, I really wondered whether I would return to this apartment or not. I was most sorry for the books [...] My heart ached for those books, because they are valuable to me (N. S., 41, female, Khmelnytskyi region).

The interviewees describe in detail the survival strategies of a person who is in extreme life circumstances. The strategy has one aim: to save one's life and one's relatives. The first thing to do is to protect oneself from shelling and bombing, find food, drinking water, and a warm safe place. The following example demonstrates how a person adapts to survive in the extremes of war.

I had to run in the morning, my first thought was to run and buy bread [...] Well, because war means that the shops have to close, there is no food. Well, there might be a famine (V. R., 52, female, Kharkiv region).

The experience of being forced to stay in a shelter is completely new and unpleasant for a person, full of fear, inconvenience and trials:

The first days we slept on chairs. I was just sitting, Polina was in my ... in my arms, and Stas was holding her legs [...] like that, hunched over on a small chair, he was holding her legs so that the child, at least the child would sleep normally [...] But still, it was very cold, very cold. My feet were so cold that I couldn't feel my toes [...] (S. L., 18, female, Kharkiv region).

The first thing people had to face after the outbreak of the war was evacuation to a safe place. Everyone who has the relevant life experience says a lot about this event.

[...] we were driving with my mother and friends. There were about five cars there and [...] there were twenty-eight people there. There were a lot of children [...] We were standing in a queue at the last checkpoint, when the shelling began, there was a field and [...] the road, and they started shelling the positions or [...] the village [...] we were very scared at that time [...] My mother was crying, holding my younger brother because she was very worried [...] Then the shelling also started, then my mother, and grandmother, who had already died, covered me. We had been travelling for three days, stopped many times, spent the night in Kropyvnytskyi<sup>3</sup> and Khmelnytskyi,<sup>4</sup> and then we arrived in Stryi, in the Lviv region... (V. K., 18, female, Kherson region).

A constant theme of the stories is the comparison of two wars, the Second World War and the most recent one:

.....  
3 Kropyvnytskyi is a town in the central part of Ukraine, further from the hostilities.

4 Khmelnytskyi is a town in western Ukraine where there are no hostilities.

Even the old people couldn't bear that sound [...] When a grandmother living on the first floor [...] heard those sirens again, she had a heart attack. An ambulance came to her. It was she who said that in her life ... she hadn't thought ... oh, that something like this could happen [...] I used to watch [...] those war films and, well, I couldn't imagine it. Well, you watched them and you were worried about those heroes [...] But here I've never thought in my life that something like this could happen to you in reality (A. K., 48, female, Chernihiv region).

Another storyteller also used such a comparison with the Second World War or cinema: 'It's like the horror movies,' 'It felt like the Second World War' (S. L., 18, female, Kharkiv region).

The consciousness of an ordinary person needs an explanation as to why the war happened to him or her and his or her loved ones. An explanation for this is found in folklore omens and predictions of the inevitability of war:

Well, our parents once said that if only boys are born, there will be a war. If girls, there won't be a war. Well, it was noticed that in the postwar years [...] in countries where there was a war, in fact, many more boys than girls were born. It is as if it is compensation for the fact that many men have died and boys should be born (V. R., 52, female, Kharkiv region).

A common theme of the narratives is miraculous salvation, when people choose the only right road during evacuation:

When we were staying in Kherson<sup>5</sup> for a day and we were waiting for our volunteer, people were forming convoys and were leaving. One man told us ... he was packing his car with people and children and told us: 'Let's go, join us and leave.' Well, we decided that we would wait for our volunteer with whom we had agreed that he would take us out. When that convoy left forty minutes later, maybe sometime later they returned, it was written on the bus: 'Children.' This bus was fired on outside Kherson. It was very frightening (H. K., 67, female, Kherson region).

In some narratives, there is a reference to the story from the Gospel about Christ feeding the people with five loaves of bread.

God saved many [...] children were sitting with their parents, they went down to the bomb shelter during the alarm. The anxiety began and lasted for a very, very long time.

.....  
5 Kherson is a town in the south of Ukraine which was under Russian occupation at the beginning of the full-scale invasion.

They started bombing. And when our soldiers approached them, they were surprised. They said: ‘You were sitting here so long, are you hungry?’ The people said: ‘No, we are not hungry. We had bread, sweets [...] there was a bottle of water, that’s what we ate’ [...] So God helped (V. R., 52, female, Kharkiv region).

When interviewees were asked how the war started for them, they often expressed their thoughts about the inhumane nature of war. Children and young people destined to go through the experience of war evoke special empathy. The experience of war in this case is something completely uncharacteristic of childhood:

Now my child has gone to school, a smaller boy. And he comes, how much time, how many days have passed, and he comes home and says: “Are we going to be bombed again today?” As the alarm goes off, he says: “Why are we going to be bombed again today? And why do they want me to die? And why do they want to kill me?” How shall I answer the child? (V. R., 52, female, Kharkiv region).

Now people are used to the war [...] How can you live during a war? How can you get used to war? Why do our children have to listen to the sound of a siren and say: “Ah, that’s an alarm – Shaheds<sup>6</sup> are flying?” The child understands what a MiG<sup>7</sup> is [...] what a Shahed is, what a Javelin<sup>8</sup> is, and what a Bayraktar<sup>9</sup> is. Well, is this the kind of childhood we want for our children? Did we want to spend our youth and student years in wartime? Attend classes in a bomb shelter? (I. B., 20, female, Ternopil region).

People get to know about the war either through the senses (the sound of explosions, the observation of fires) or messages from relatives or media channels. Most interviewees highlight the unexpected outbreak of the war, as they did not believe the reliability of this information.

#### WHAT IS THE NARRATOR’S SELF-PRESENTATION?

In analysing autobiographical narratives about the outbreak of the war, it is appropriate to pay attention to the strategy of self-presentation used by the narrator. It is worth noting two polar strategies of self-presentation: *I am a hero* and *I am a victim*. In the narrative *I am a hero*, the narrator emphasises the correctness of the

6 A Shahed is an Iranian military drone used by the Russians to attack Ukrainian ground targets from a distance.

7 A MiG is the Russian MiG-29 fighter plane that can carry hypersonic missiles.

8 A Javelin is a portable anti-tank weapon system designed to penetrate military armour.

9 A Bayraktar is an unmanned combat aerial vehicle (UCAV) manufactured by a Turkish company which can be remotely controlled and flown to perform special military operations.

behavioural strategies chosen. Among the character traits, courage, determination and wisdom in making the right decision are emphasised. For example, here are some extracts from an interview with a Kharkiv resident who managed to successfully evacuate his family from Kharkiv to western Ukraine.

I did most of everything, I took my family out, I did the right thing. On the morning of the 24<sup>th</sup> [...] my wife woke me up, pushed me, and said: 'Thor, what's that?' In the house, the windows began to shake. That's it ... I was pretty well ready, I knew something was going to happen. I said a few words to her [...] "Run! Documents, children, money!" I ran for the car [...] I said: "You don't need anything, take certificates, documents, gold" [...] We had just left and the shelling started on the street [...] That's all (I. P., 36, male, Kharkiv region).

Another strategy of self-presentation in the narrative about the outbreak of the war is the suffering heroisation. An interview with an 18-year-old girl from the Kharkiv region, who had to experience all the horrors of war by herself (hiding in a bomb shelter, the experience of occupation, suffering, and people's deaths), is a vivid example of such a strategy. The narrator describes her experience with such a main plot line, as war is the most terrible thing that she has seen in her life:

It was one of other scary moments when you couldn't drive over the bridges, and there was a young couple and a child, she was one year old, and this car was shot. The man died immediately, the girl was wounded in the stomach and the leg, and the child was saved by people who were nearby. And this girl was brought to our bunker in a kind of rug, and she was placed next to me because there was no room [...] They [...] bandaged her wounds. I remember the screams of her relative, and the girl was young, she was twenty-two years old. And so I lay with her [...] And so this girl died next to me at half-past four in the morning. And so I had to sleep with her until the morning. I woke up and saw her already covered [...].

This ... what happened is just terrible. I mean, a lot of people lost their nerve. There was a grandfather in the bunker and he simply cut his veins because his wife had died under the rubble (S. L., 18, female, Kharkiv region).

Every person has his or her own most terrible experienced event that makes him or her feel helpless:

[...] a rocket flew into the house opposite, somewhere a hundred or a hundred and fifty metres away. That's why the whole house collapsed and only bricks remained. They took away the uncle, who had been lying there for an hour and a half [...] Later, we saw him [the man who was found under the rubble of his own house] a week later when we

were able to leave. We were in a state of shock. When they brought him, he stood and looked at all this pile of bricks and stones where his house had been, maybe he built it himself. He was standing and was so sick and didn't understand what was happening (N. K., 40, female, Kharkiv region).

Sometimes a very simple thing (such as the fact that a dog has died from a shell) may cause the greatest emotional response:

[...] I couldn't even cry. But the only time I cried was when he came ... there, a neighbour somewhere told me that ... right ... near the kennel, a shell exploded and tore the dog apart. That's when I started to cry [...] it's just a terrible feeling. And all those memories ... they just ... burn the soul and burn the heart (A. K., 48, female, Chernihiv region).

The narrator's forms of self-presentation are typical of autobiographical narratives as examples of the oral tradition. The two opposite strategies, *I am a hero* and *I am a victim*, are usually chosen by the interviewees. Male autobiographical narratives are characterised by the *I am a hero* strategy, while female narratives about the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war are represented by two types of self-representation, i. e. *I am a heroine* and *I am a victim*.

## CONCLUSIONS

A humanitarian understanding of the experience of the war in Ukraine is now being actively conducted by scholars from various scientific disciplines. For folklorists who have experience of working with autobiographical narratives, the problem of methodological approaches applied to an analysis of the material is urgent. The use of methodological approaches of structural narratology turns out to be productive. Stories about the outbreak of the war are common because they meet all five criteria for the eventfulness degree: relevance, unpredictability, persistence, irreversibility, and non-iterativity (according to Schmid). The autobiographical narrative begins with the most dramatic moment, the announcement of the beginning of the war, which is often perceived as an incredible, unpredictable event that fundamentally changes the narrator's life. The most typical themes discussed are news of the war, leaving one's home, being in a shelter, evacuation, thinking about the causes of the war, predicting the war, thinking about the inhumane nature of war, etc. The strategies of self-presentation used by the narrator are *I am a hero* and *I am a victim*. The most extensive episodes are the first day of the war, descriptions of the destruction, trials during a stay in a cellar, and the road to a safe place. Among the episodes that do not directly describe the experiences, but occupy an important

place in the narratives, are reflections on the inhumane nature of the war, omens, predictions and prophetic dreams about the war. The analysis allows us to determine the most meaningful themes in the narratives about the outbreak of the war, which can be used for the semantic and pragmatic study of autobiographical stories.

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