

Visual symbols of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and their deconstruction in Perets Vesela Respublika magazine cartoons (2022 – 2024 pp.)

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Abstract.

The purpose of the article is to examine the historical deployment of ‘Z’ and ‘V’ symbols as propaganda tools to legitimize the invasion of Ukraine. It traces their functional evolution and analyzes the unique strategies of ideological deconstruction employed within Ukrainian political cartooning to neutralize these symbols. **The methodological framework** for analyzing the symbolic content of ‘Z’ and ‘V’ symbols and their reception relies on W. J. T. Mitchell’s theories regarding the social life of images. Following Mitchell, this study interprets the ridicule of these symbols in Ukrainian cartoons as active iconoclasm. This strategy neutralizes ideological threats by dismantling the fear that their visual power inspires. Furthermore, Nicholas Mirzoeff’s concept of visibility serves as the basis for explaining how ‘Z’ and ‘V’ exert control over Russian citizens, while framing their deconstruction in cartoons as a tactical resistance to the totalizing power of visibility during wartime. **The scientific novelty** of this research consists of a comprehensive analysis of ‘Z’ and ‘V’ symbols throughout their entire trajectory: from their emergence as tools of Russian military mobilization to their ideological degradation and symbolic destruction within the pages of Perets Vesela Respublika magazine. This study unravels the specific mechanisms of deconstruction that transform these propaganda markers into objects of ridicule. **Conclusions.** The ‘Z’ and ‘V’ symbols originated without any inherent ideological or cultural-historical foundation. Their semantic vacuum, coupled with aggressive state popularization, transformed these signs into primitive yet potent instruments of mobilization. Consequently, the Russian authorities weaponized this visual simplicity to exert control over the public consciousness during the invasion. At the same time, these symbols became targets for counter-visual reinterpretation and deconstruction through Ukrainian cartoons. Cartoons destroy the ideological pathos of this propaganda product, both in terms of analyzing the causes and consequences of the war and the concepts of the ‘Russian world’ and Rashism. The ‘Z’ symbol serves as the semantic center of satirical criticism, functioning as both a marker of aggression and a visual identity code for the average Russian. By exposing the striking parallels between the visual aesthetics of twentieth-century totalitarianism and modern Russia, cartoonists highlight their shared ideological continuity in fostering imperial narratives and maintaining hypocritical pacifist rhetoric amidst militaristic expansion. By employing the ‘war – peace’ dichotomy, cartoonists indict the Russian Federation for unleashing aggression against Ukraine. This artistic strategy underscores the purely destructive role of the ‘Z’ and ‘V’ propaganda symbols, revealing them as catalysts for the erosion of global peace.

Keywords: Perets Vesela Respublika magazine, 21st century history, cartoon, propaganda, Russian-Ukrainian war, ‘V’ symbol, ‘Z’ symbol.

Візуальна символіка російського вторгнення в Україну та її деконструкція у карикатурі журналу «Перець. Весела республіка» (2022 – 2024)

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Анотація.

Метою статті є аналіз використання російською пропагандою символів «Z» і «V» як інструменту легітимації вторгнення в Україну, їх функціональної еволюції, особливостей репрезентації та деконструкції в українській карикатуристиці. **Методологія дослідження** символічного змісту зображень (знаків «Z» і «V» та карикатур, які їх репрезентують) і ефектів, які вони справляють на реципієнта, базується на працях В. Дж. Мітчелла, присвячених взаємодії малюнків і образів, які вони створюють, їх функціонуванню у соціальному просторі. Відповідно до теорії Мітчелла, здійснення нейтралізації загроз від «Z» і «V» шляхом висміювання в українській карикатурі розцінюється як активне іконоборство і знищення страху перед силою їх зображень. Концепція візуальності Н. Мірзоева стала підґрунтям для пояснення ефекту впливу символіки «Z» і «V» на російського обивателя і розуміння її деконструкції в карикатурах як опору тотальній владі візуальності як формі контролю у період війни. **Наукова новизна** полягає у детальному аналізі знаків «Z» і «V» як символів російського вторгнення в Україну від їх появи і масового використання в Росії до деградації через ідейну деконструкцію у карикатурах журналу «Перець. Весела республіка». **Висновки.** Походження символів «Z» і «V» не мало ні ідеологічного, ні культурно-історичного підґрунтя. Семантична порожнеча і популяризація пропагандою перетворила їх на примітивні, але ефективні символи мобілізації суспільства на підтримку війни, інструменти візуального контролю з боку влади РФ. Водночас ці символи стали мішенню для контрвізуального переосмислення і деконструкції засобами української карикатури. Карикатури руйнують ідеологічний пафос цього пропагандистського продукту як у контексті причин і наслідків війни, так і концептів «руського міра» і рашизму. Смисловим центром сатиричної критики став символ «Z» як маркер агресії і візуальний код ідентичності пересічного росіянина. Ефективним прийомом став показ схожості візуальної естетики тоталітарних режимів XX ст. і сучасної Росії, їх ідеологічної тягlosti у сфері плекання імперських наративів, лицемірної пацифістської риторики на тлі мілітаристичної політики.

Ключові слова: журнал «Перець. Весела республіка», історія XXI століття, карикатура, пропаганда, російсько-українська війна, символ «V», символ «Z»

Problem statement. Visual symbols emerged as a primary instrument for legitimizing the aggression among the domestic Russian audience within the broader propaganda discourse accompanying the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Initially utilitarian, the letters 'Z' and 'V' were repurposed by propaganda into symbols of allegiance to the military aggression and the Russian regime.

The symbols 'Z' and 'V' underwent a critical reinterpretation within the Ukrainian media space, particularly through political cartoons. The mechanisms of Russian propagandistic construction and the ideological deconstruction of the symbols 'Z' and 'V' within Ukrainian visual satire warrant further systematic investigation.

Analysis of sources and recent research. Founded in 1922, *Perets* has dominated the Ukrainian satirical landscape for decades. Although it functioned as a vehicle for state ideology in the USSR, it transitioned toward thematic and aesthetic autonomy following Ukraine's independence. Following a period of financial instability and a hiatus from 2014 to 2016, the magazine resumed publication in 2017 under the title *Perets. Vesela Respublika (PVR)*. Since 2020, the magazine has transitioned exclusively to a digital format. (<https://www.perets.org.ua>; <https://www.facebook.com/PerecRepublic>). Its graphic content demonstrates a keen responsiveness to the evolving domestic and international political landscape (Pytllovana, 2022, p. 244).

From 2022 to 2024, cartoonists, including O. Konovalenko, V. Momot, Y. Kogan, D. Kryvonos, O. Kudin, S. Fedko, and V. Chmyrov (among others), constructed compelling visual metaphors of Ukrainian resistance. By subverting Russian propaganda and imperial ideologies, these artists

effectively exposed the contradictions within the enemy's strategic goals and intentions (Perets. Vesela Respublika).

The analysis comprised a sample of 200 cartoons from the magazine featuring the symbols 'Z' and 'V'. The infrequent appearance of the letter 'V' (occurring in only 5 out of 200 instances (2.5 %) corresponds with the limited prevalence of this symbol in the Russian public sphere compared to 'Z'. However, despite the declining visibility of the 'Z' symbol in Russia since early 2023, it remained a persistent subject in Ukrainian cartoons throughout 2023–2024. Based on their thematic content, imagery, and visual semantics, the cartoons were classified into 25 overlapping categories. Since many illustrations fall into multiple thematic groups, the total number of categorical assignments exceeds 200. The distribution across key categories is as follows: Putin (74); ordinary Russian citizens and propaganda (56); triumphalist sentiment (48); death (47); the Russian military (43); associations with Nazi symbolism (33); and the 'Russian World' concept (33). Other notable themes include references to the 'Great Patriotic War' and St. George's ribbon (19), the Ukrainian flag (13), and literary or artistic allusions (11). (The full distribution of thematic categories is presented in Table 1.).

Table 1.

Thematic categorization and frequency of symbols 'Z' and 'V' in PVR cartoons (2022–2024)¹

Thematic Cluster	Specific Category / Motif	Frequency (n)
Political figures and actors	Putin	74
	ordinary Russian citizens	56
	the Russian military	43
	historic figures (Napoleon, Stalin, the Tsar)	13
	international actors (EU, US, NATO, international organizations)	19
Ideological frameworks	propaganda and triumphalist sentiment	104
	Nazi analogies and symbolism	33
	The 'Russian world' concept	33
	'Great patriotic war' references (St. George's ribbon)	19
	religious themes (Russian Orthodox Church)	5
Existential and visual metaphors	mortality and death imagery	47
	global and nuclear threats	13
	cultural and artistic allusions (literature, art)	11
	demonic imagery ('evil forces')	2
	Ukrainian national symbols (the flag)	13
National contexts	children as subjects	9
	scatological humor ('toilet-related topics')	2
	economic tools (gas blackmail)	1

This article analyzes selected cartoons from the most prominent thematic categories to illustrate how artists dismantle the ideological constructs strategically established by Russian propaganda via 'Z' and 'V' symbolism.

While the Russian invasion has generated extensive media discourse surrounding the symbols 'Z' and 'V', comprehensive academic analyses of their ideological and utilitarian roles within Russian society remain limited. In this context, the scholarly contributions of K. Yeremeyeva (2018), A. Voynarovsky, and N. Zhmud (2024) are instrumental for understanding the historical trajectory and thematic evolution of the magazine under study.

L. Yakubova (2023) analyzes how Russian propaganda operationalizes the 'Z' symbol by linking it to the Soviet 'Victory Myth' of 1945 and the broader ideological framework of Rashism. T. Pavlenko interprets 'Z' and 'V' as core components of Rashist symbolism, highlighting its appropriation of Nazi practices and identifying mechanisms to counteract the proliferation of the aggressor's symbols (Pavlenko, 2023).

¹ The total number of categorical assignments exceeds 200 due to the multisemic nature of the cartoons, where a single image often belongs to several categories simultaneously.

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L. Pytlova (2022, 2024) has examined both the overarching characteristics of PVR cartoons during the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war and specific thematic issues, such as artistic strategies for representing the enemy and V. Putin, the continuity of Ukrainian military traditions, and the debunking of Russian propaganda. Her research further analyzes cartoons featuring 'Z' symbols, interpreting them as visual markers of the 'Russian World' and Rashism. Building upon these foundations, this article aims to provide a systematic analysis of PVR magazine cartoons that incorporate symbols of the Russian invasion, specifically focusing on the mechanisms of their ideological deconstruction.

The research methodology. The methodology for analyzing the symbolic content of the 'Z' and 'V' signs is grounded in the theoretical framework of W. J. T. Mitchell (1987, 2005), specifically his insights into the interplay between images and the social spaces they inhabit. Applying Mitchell's theory, the neutralization of the threats posed by 'Z' and 'V' through ridicule in Ukrainian cartoons is conceptualized as active iconoclasm. Indeed, the latter relies on sacralization and the prohibition of criticism or ridicule, as any form of satirical subversion is perceived as a direct threat to the regime's ideological stability.

Nicholas Mirzoeff's methodology for studying visuality (Mirzoeff, 2011; 2012; 2016) conceptualizes it as a "medium for the transmission and dissemination of authority, and a means for the mediation of those subject to that authority" (Mirzoeff, 2011, p. XV). This framework provides the analytical key to interpreting the psychological and political impact of 'Z' and 'V' symbols on Russian citizenry. According to Mirzoeff, the critique of these symbols through graphic satire represents the right to political resistance against the totalizing power of visuality as a mechanism of control in an era of systemic violence (Mirzoeff, 2011, p. 4).

Mirzoeff's analysis of the Iraq war through the prism of global visual culture explains the weaponization of 'Z' and 'V' symbols as core components of a contemporary military-visual complex.

The purpose of the article. The purpose of this study is to investigate how Russian state propaganda deployed the letters 'Z' and 'V' to legitimize the invasion of Ukraine, examining their functional evolution, representational strategies, and subsequent ideological deconstruction within Ukrainian caricature.

The results of the research. Since 2022, the theme of war has emerged as the dominant focus in the materials of the PVR. By employing a wide range of visual metaphors, techniques, and methods of influence designed for emotional expressiveness, cartoonists seek to guide readers toward evaluative judgments regarding Russian aggression in Ukraine.

A significant number of cartoons depict scenes that incorporate letter symbols associated with the Russian invasion. Originally, these Latin letters had a purely utilitarian purpose, serving as tactical markings; the most widely held view is that their purpose was to identify units and prevent friendly fire, since the opposing sides used similar armored vehicles and transport. Additionally, alternative interpretations exist, such as designating the direction of movement, military districts, or branches of the armed forces. While the letter 'Z' was the most prevalent symbol, 'V' appeared significantly less frequently, whereas 'O', 'X', and 'A' were exceptionally rare. Typically, 'Z' was applied to equipment belonging to forces advancing from Belarus, while 'V' denoted units operating in the south.

In April 2022, responding to an inquiry from a member of the Moscow City Duma, the Russian Ministry of Defense maintained that the 'Z' and 'V' symbols were not official military insignia and lacked specific standing. Simultaneously, the Ministry acknowledged that these symbols had gained widespread recognition and were favorably perceived by both military personnel and the civilian population (The Russian Ministry of Defense stated...).

Constructed through state propaganda, these symbols rapidly evolved into indicators of loyalty to Vladimir Putin's regime and public support for the so-called 'special military operation' (SMO). Their presence became ubiquitous, spanning building facades, vehicles, social media, television broadcasts, and organized flash mobs. The absence of a coherent rationale for the war was obscured by the 'Z' symbol, which was elevated to quasi-mystical status despite lacking intrinsic semantic content. Furthermore, the proliferation of divergent interpretations only highlighted the fundamental lack of a rational basis for the conflict (Z – a 'half-swastika'). The replication of the 'Z' and 'V' symbols within the visual sphere has desensitized the emotional and political perception of the 'SMO' as a conventional war. It has eroded the Russian public's capacity to formulate a coherent or critical response to the conflict.

The substitution of the term 'war' with 'SMO' and its letter symbols 'Z' and 'V' has become a feature of Putin's Newspeak. Following Orwell's conceptualization, the objective of such controlled language is to reduce the number of ideologically neutral words to a degree rendering the expression of heretical or dissident thoughts impossible. The language of totalitarian regimes constrains and reconfigures the meanings of words, stripping them of their inherent associations and exhibiting a distinct propensity for creating abbreviations (Orwell, 2015, p. 281-293).

The aestheticization of invasion symbols as war-themed design through state propaganda proved to be a straightforward yet effective strategy that resonated with the predispositions of a

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 significant portion of the population. Throughout the conflict, the letters 'Z' and 'V' have constructed what Nicholas Mirzoeff terms the 'banality of images'. Mirzoeff draws upon Hannah Arendt's concept of the 'banality of evil', developed in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, to illustrate how absolute evil can manifest through the mundanity of everyday routine. He demonstrates how a continuous stream of repetitive imagery within the media numbs emotional and political perceptions of war. Proponents of the conflict deploy an oversaturation strategy when the average individual, bombarded by the ubiquitous 'Z' and 'V' symbols, loses the capacity to engage with or discern the actual reality of the war. The circulation of decontextualized images – which saturate the senses with vacuous imagery and facilitate information manipulation – is the direct result of deliberate efforts by those conducting the war (Mirzoeff, 2012, p. 14).

State authorities immediately capitalized on the widespread recognition of the 'SMO' symbols. The Russian Ministry of Defense introduced the following interpretations: 'Z' as "For victory" (Za pobedu), "For the guys" (Za patsanov), "We are ending the war" (Zakanchivaiem voiny), "For the children of Donbas" (Za dietiei Donbassa); while 'V' represented "Strength in truth" (V pravdie sila), "The task will be accomplished" (Zadaniie budiet Vypolnieno) and "We don't abandon our own" (Svoikh nie brosaem). Propaganda media amplified this narrative, decisively stripping the symbols of their original neutrality.

Functionally, the 'Z' and 'V' symbols facilitated social mobilization in support of the 'SMO', cultivating an 'aggressively passive' majority while fostering the narratives of a Russian liberation mission and the defense of Orthodoxy. The 'Z' symbol evolved into a sacralized emblem of a 'righteous cause' – a deliberate allusion to Vyacheslav Molotov's 1941 address to the Soviet people following the German invasion. Within the mundane sphere, the 'Z' symbol functions as a marker of distinction, demarcating the boundary between 'us' and 'them', or between 'patriots' and 'traitors' ("foreign agents" (inoahienty)).

The use of Latin letters rather than the Cyrillic alphabet underscored the inherent incongruity of the 'SMO' symbolism. Strained assertions that these characters represented the early Cyrillic letters 'zemlia' and 'izhitsa' failed to gain traction, even within propagandistic discourse. Nevertheless, the Russian public showed little resistance to these contradictions, as evidenced by the widespread adoption of this symbolism in daily life since 2022 (Yakubova, 2023, p. 85).

Boris Groys interprets the Latin 'Z' as an emblem of cultural and political decline, suggesting that Russia has fallen into a strategic trap. He argues that, despite strenuous efforts to sever ties with the West, Russia remains intrinsically linked to it and is therefore becoming increasingly isolated (Arkhanhielskii, 2023). The prevalence of the 'Z' symbol in Russia demonstrates the functional capacity of a totalitarian state whose language exerts sufficient coercive force to regulate and subjugate society (Groys, 2009, p. XXI–XXIV).

Ukraine confronts Russian aggression not only on the battlefield but also within the informational domain. On May 22, 2022, the Verkhovna Rada enacted legislation banning the use and promotion of the 'Z' and 'V' symbols, codifying them as emblems of a terrorist regime (Law of Ukraine...). For Ukrainians, these characters signify armed aggression, occupation, and the systemic atrocities committed by the Russian military.

Beyond official prohibitions, the ideological deconstruction of the 'Z' and 'V' symbols remains imperative, with political cartooning serving as a potent analytical tool. Exploiting the geometric and coloristic affinities between the 'Z' and the swastika, artists draw explicit parallels between the Nazi regime and Putin's Russia. V. Chmyrov equates the image of Vladimir Putin with the notorious dictators of the twentieth century (Chmyrov, 2022). He recontextualizes the 1939–1940 French postcard 'La Proie et l'Ombre' (attributed to Paul Barbier), which originally was a reflection on the signing of the Ribbentrop – Molotov Pact.

The composition depicts Hitler behind a podium emblazoned with a swastika, parodying him as an 'innocent victim' with a halo inscribed with the word 'Pax'. The imagery of the plucked dove and the fractured olive branch exposes the inherent hypocrisy of his pacifist rhetoric, occurring precisely as Germany accelerated its preparations for war. Stalin, identified by his distinctive mustache and the Soviet hammer and sickle, looms over the Führer. His predatory expression underscores his ambition for territorial expansion, mirroring his counterpart's expansionist goals. The title of the original postcard references the French idiom "lâcher la proie pour l'ombre" (to let go of the prey for the shadow) from La Fontaine's fable *The Dog and Its Shadow*. This allusion implies that the peace promised by Hitler was a mere illusion, affecting both Europe and the USSR, the latter of which ultimately succumbed to Nazi aggression.

V. Chmyrov integrates V. Putin into this historical lineage, depicting him alongside his ideological precursors. While Stalin appears in monochromatic tones, echoing the aesthetic of the original 1930s poster, the vivid coloration of both Hitler and Putin underscores a disturbing contemporary parallel. This artistic choice suggests that Putin's current policies resonate more profoundly with the actions of the Nazi leader (Pytlova, 2022, p. 254–255).

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The depiction of Hitler with a swastika alongside Putin brandishing a nuclear missile – rendered in a stark black, white, and red palette – establishes a profound visual equivalence. By adopting the aesthetic signifiers of the Russian nuclear arsenal, the artist aligns Putin's geopolitical strategy with the totalitarian tenets of interwar Europe: a cult of personality, militant ideologization, and a systemic disregard for human life. The juxtaposition of Hitler's Nazi swastika with the 'Z' symbol in Putin's hand reconfigures the latter into a contemporary emblem of state-sanctioned atrocities. By coupling the atomic bomb with the 'Z', the artist constructs an image of a leader who monopolizes both the physical capacity for mass destruction and the ideological framework necessary to legitimize its deployment.

By positioning Putin alongside these two dictators, the artist constructs a moral typology that compels a collective condemnation of all three figures. This framing contextualizes current events within the historical memory of Stalinism and Nazism as the primary catalysts for imperial aggression. The 'Z' symbol concludes this visual cycle, aligning the past and present on a single ideological axis, where Russian aggression appears not as an isolated incident, but as a calculated reenactment of twentieth-century totalitarianism.

While drawing parallels between the existential threats symbolized by the swastika and the 'Z', V. Chmyriev simultaneously subverts Putin's persona through caustic satire. By depicting him with diminutive stature, ill-fitting attire, and a caricatured sternness reminiscent of Stalin, the artist relegates the Russian leader to a pale imitation of his predecessors. This visual ridicule effectively deconstructs the myth of the modern formidable dictator (Pytlova, 2022, p. 255).

By linking the swastika with the 'Z', the artist reconfigures the latter into a potent symbol of both aggression and ignominy, while integrating Soviet propagandistic tropes to amplify the satirical bite. Simultaneously, transforming the 'Z' into an object of ridicule effectively deconstructs the symbol, thereby neutralizing its psychological impact and eroding the coercive power it seeks to exert.

The cartoon "The Armed Forces of Ukraine Invite Orcs to a Photo Shoot!" (Kudin, 2022) combines elements of satire, propaganda, and visual metaphors of war. Stylized as a photograph, the cartoon depicts Scythe-wielding Death, alongside a photo stand-in of a Russian soldier, marked with a 'Z' symbol on a dog tag.

The Grim Reaper – a traditional allegory of Death – is the central figure of the image; he personifies the inevitable outcome for anyone standing beside him. The invitation for the 'orcs' to place their faces into the frame of their own demise is a potent ironic device employed by the author.

The 'Z' dog tag serves as the primary symbolic element in the drawing. On one hand, it functions as an identifier that concretizes the photo stand-in figure, transforming it from an abstract representation into a specific Russian soldier. On the other hand, the 'Z' symbol establishes an immediate semantic and ideological connection, framing the Russian invader as the antagonist.

The cartoon demonstrates how, within Ukrainian visual culture, the 'Z' symbol – which in Russia serves as a marker of support for the war – undergoes a semantic inversion. It transforms into a sign of voluntary participation in criminal aggression, acting as a stigma of condemnation that adds a moral dimension to the 'invitation' to a photo shoot with Death. The use of the dehumanizing term 'orcs' establishes a cross-cultural analogy between Russian soldiers and the antagonistic characters of J. R. R. Tolkien's legendarium. Consequently, the cartoon articulates a narrative of moral justification for resisting the invasion, framing the conflict as a struggle between good and evil.

The photo stand-in, as a symbol of carnivalesque mass culture, transforms the reality of war into a macabre attraction. Simultaneously, the 'Z' symbolism encapsulates the inherent fatality of the Russian soldier's choice. The artist portrays the soldier as a figure who has already embraced his own demise before placing his face into the stand-in's opening.

V. Kudin's polysymbolic 'Z' signifies aggression, propaganda, and the inherent moral fallacy of war. 'Z' symbol dog tag automatically designates its owner as a candidate for a fatal encounter with Death.

L. Dudnik's cartoon offers a critique of Russia's social structure and state propaganda (Dudnik, 2024). It depicts a group of zoomorphic, swine-like figures – representing Russian citizens – huddled around a fire. The artist dresses the figures in winter attire: one in traditional bast shoes (lapti) and a tricolor hat, and an elderly woman in a headscarf clutching an Orthodox icon. In the background, dilapidated and unlit buildings stand without heat, as the heating pipes have frozen and ruptured. The city residents' desperate cry for help incorporates the 'Z' symbol of the invasion, transforming the word 'Zamierzaem' (We are freezing) into a pro-war signifier.

Here, the 'Z' as a symbol of triumphant imperialistic rhetoric contrasts sharply with the grim reality of the populace; it appears utterly absurd against the backdrop of existential hardships, the bitter cold, and the erosion of basic living conditions.

The collective portrait of the townspeople serves as a visual manifestation of the pervasive archaism of the Russian hinterland. Their appearance connotes systemic poverty and provincialism, underscoring a state of civilizational deprivation and the absence of basic modern amenities. Nevertheless, these people are willing to embrace grandiose declarations of Russia's greatness and

endure hardships to sustain this narrative. The depicted icon reinforces the doctrine promoted by the Russian Orthodox Church that “God rewards patience” thereby framing jingoistic patriotism as a divinely sanctioned virtue. In this context, religion serves as a powerful instrument for legitimizing both social passivity and state aggression. By sacralizing the populace’s hardships, the Church transforms systemic neglect into a ‘spiritual’ virtue, while simultaneously providing a divine mandate for the invasion.

The frozen city, with its leaning buildings and unlit windows, contrasts sharply with the ‘Z’ symbol rendered in the colors of the St. George’s ribbon – a hallmark of mythologized greatness and ‘holy’ war. This visual dichotomy reveals that while the state directs monumental resources toward military aggression, it remains fundamentally incapable of ensuring the basic well-being of its own citizens.

The Dudnik’s technique – juxtaposing the dire socio-economic reality of the Russian citizen with the ‘Z’ symbol – demythologizes and desacralizes the latter, reducing it to a hollow label of ‘patriotism’ for a state unable to provide basic infrastructure. Consequently, the emblem of militaristic pathos is transformed into a testament to systemic deprivation.

One of the few cartoons to feature both ‘Z’ and ‘V’ is entirely devoid of a mocking tone. Instead, it serves as a visual indictment, accusing Russia of crimes against peace (Fedko, 2023). Notably, this charge constituted one of the primary counts against Nazi war criminals during the Nuremberg Trials of 1945–1946.

The composition juxtaposes the zoomorphic images of a dove and a vulture. In the public consciousness, the dove evokes Pablo Picasso’s iconic 1949 lithograph, which serves as a universal symbol of postwar aspirations that the catastrophe of World War II would never be repeated. The artist depicts a chalk silhouette of a dove on the ground, evoking the forensic outlines typically used to secure a crime scene. This visual device signifies the demise of peace, suggesting that it has not merely been disturbed, but extinguished.

Caution tape in the colors of the Russian tricolor cordons off the crime scene. Three vultures perch upon it: the one on the left bears a ‘Z’ on its chest, the one on the right displays a ‘V’, and the central figure wears a St. George’s ribbon.

As scavengers, vultures carry predominantly negative connotations in cultural memory. Their reliance on carrion inextricably links them to death, decay, and moral corruption. Furthermore, Eastern and classical mythologies often employ the vulture as a metaphor for insatiable greed and the predatory nature of war.

Each vulture in the cartoon bears a distinct symbol, yet they form a cohesive, logical, and ideological construct. While ‘Z’ and ‘V’ function as markers of military expansion, the St. George’s ribbon provides a historical legitimization for state-sanctioned violence. Russian propaganda discourse actively portrays the ‘Great Patriotic War’ as a sacred struggle, thereby transforming this historical segment of World War II into a foundational myth. The St. George’s ribbon, a military decoration dating back to the Tsarist era, attained its status as a supreme symbol of military valor primarily after 1945. Consequently, the Kremlin appropriates this historical prestige to frame the aggression against Ukraine as a morally righteous crusade.

The artist strategically places the vulture wearing the St. George’s ribbon at the center of the group to underscore a crucial point: sacralized memory and mythologized history form the ideological core of the ‘Z’ and ‘V’ symbols in contemporary Russian discourse.

The Russian tricolor on the barrier tape immediately identifies the party responsible for the killing. The vultures await the opportune moment to scavenge the dove’s remains; they thrive on the consequences of Russia’s crime against peace, thereby acting as accomplices to the aggression.

Conclusions. One may conclude that, before the propaganda machine incorporated them into broader public discourse, letter symbols of the Russian invasion served a purely utilitarian function of marking military equipment; their origins lacked any ideological, cultural-historical, or linguistic foundation. This absence of inherent meaning, coupled with systemic dissemination, enabled arbitrary interpretations and saturated these symbols with jingoistic slogans. Consequently, they evolved into primitive yet effective tools for mobilizing society in support of the invasion. The symbols ‘Z’ and ‘V’ evolved into markers of loyalty and engagement with the regime’s policies, providing a moral justification for violence. For the average Russian, these signs reduced the complexity of war to a simplified ‘us versus them’ dichotomy, transforming the visual landscape into a potent tool for state domination and control.

Paradoxically, the semantic vacuum, artificiality, and over-integration of ‘Z’ and ‘V’ into Russian propaganda rendered these symbols vulnerable to counter-visual reinterpretation. Consequently, Ukrainian artists and the public appropriated these signs to deconstruct them through political caricature and critical subversion.

The 200 selected cartoons from PVR magazine demonstrate a clear visual isomorphism. Despite their thematic and compositional diversity, these works share a unified conceptual framework centered on the deconstruction of the 'Z' and 'V' symbols.

A detailed analysis of these illustrations demonstrates the immense capacity of visual satire to neutralize the ideological toxicity of 'Z' and 'V' symbols. By deconstructing these signs, the cartoons strip them of their mobilizing power and expose their true destructive nature. This systematic reevaluation contextualizes the causes and consequences of the war within the broader ideological frameworks of the 'Russian World' and 'Rashism'. By intertwining 'Z' and 'V' symbols with the St. George's ribbon, these cartoons shatter the myth of continuity between the 'Great Patriotic War' and the invasion of Ukraine. Consequently, they deconstruct the narrative of a 'just' war and neutralize the Kremlin's attempt to legitimize a policy of violence historically.

The 'Z' symbol serves as the focal point of satirical criticism, which cartoonists interpret as a marker of aggression and a code of identity for the average Russian. These cartoons systematically undermine the ideological grandiosity of the symbol, illustrating how rapidly this propaganda construct degrades and crumbles when confronted with the brutal reality of war.

By paralleling the 'Z' symbol with Nazi iconography and aligning Vladimir Putin with Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin, cartoonists employ a highly effective artistic strategy. This technique exposes the striking isomorphism in the visual aesthetics of totalitarian regimes, revealing their shared ideological continuity in fostering imperial, anti-human narratives and maintaining hypocritical pacifist rhetoric amidst militaristic expansion.

On the one hand, by ironically highlighting the stark disconnect between the 'Z' and 'V' symbols and the grim realities of the battlefield – including Russian casualties and domestic social unrest – these cartoons transform these markers into emblems of absurdity and senselessness. On the other hand, they construct a systematic chain of responsibility, linking the soldier executing criminal orders, the ordinary citizen silently endorsing propaganda, and the political regime acting as the primary architect of the invasion.

By reinterpreting the symbolism of the invasion, artists leverage the 'war – peace' dichotomy to indict the Russian authorities for systematically dismantling global peace. Within this framework, they expose how the propaganda symbols 'Z' and 'V' act as catalysts for destruction, rather than mere markers of military presence.

Ultimately, Ukrainian political caricature transforms the 'Z' and 'V' symbols from tools of imperial mobilization into visual evidence of a dying ideology. By stripping these signs of their manufactured sacrality, artists demonstrate that no amount of mythologized history can mask the criminal nature of the invasion, effectively neutralizing the aggressor's visual weapons and asserting the moral superiority of truth over propaganda.

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The European identity of Ukrainians: origins and transformations in a historical perspective

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Abstract.

The purpose of the article is to analyse the historical evolution and transformation of Ukrainian European identity, adopting a *longue durée* perspective and the mechanisms through which ideas of Europeanness were constructed, transmitted, and reinterpreted across different historical periods. **Research methodology.** The study is based on an interdisciplinary methodological framework that combines historical analysis with the theory of social constructivism and the concept of imagined communities. It demonstrates that an interdisciplinary approach enables the reconstruction of the historical origins and transformations of identity and the assessment of its impact on contemporary cultural and political orientations, as well as social relations in Ukraine. The application of social constructivist theories and the concept of imagined communities explains how Ukrainians perceived themselves as part of the European cultural space in various historical configurations. **Scientific novelty.** The novelty of the study is the understanding of European identity as a historically shaped and evolving phenomenon based on earlier political, cultural, and civilizational interactions with Europe, rather than as a result of contemporary European integration. Accordingly, the research provides a comprehensive perspective on identity analysis by uniting regional, social, intellectual factors within a European historical context. **Conclusions.** The study demonstrates that Ukrainian European identity emerged under both internal and external influences and was formed through historical events that involved inclusion and exclusion in European political and cultural domains. Therefore, the process of identity formation involves three dimensions, which include political, cultural, and value-based elements that people use to define themselves. At the same time, it is examined how historical and contemporary factors at both the local and international levels, affect the development of identity. In this context, the study shows that the formation and transformation of European identity across successive historical periods – particularly in light of the current security and political context – play a significant role in shaping Ukrainians' contemporary foreign policy orientations.

Keywords: European identity, Ukrainian society, social constructivism, the concept of imagined communities, European integration, democratic transformations.