The topos of Mariupol in Ukrainian and Italian military literature: Comparative aspects

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Italian literature. Ukrainian literature. Diary. Russian aggression. Novel.

This article examines the depiction of military events in Mariupol at the onset of the full-scale Russian invasion, comparing Italian and Ukrainian literary narratives. The analysis focuses on two texts: *L'assedio: Il romanzo di Mariupol* (The siege: A novel about Mariupol, 2022) by Andrea Nicastro and *#Mariupol'#Nadiia* (#Mariupol#Hope, 2023) by Nadiia Sukhorukova. Both authors are journalists and eyewitnesses to the events they describe. The research explores how these narratives diverge in their stylistic features, character typologies, and linguistic choices, reflecting broader cultural and societal contexts in Italy and Ukraine.

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The theme of war has always been present in world literature and unfortunately, war-related themes remain highly relevant today. The topic of the war in Ukraine has not disappeared from the media since 2014, after the Russian annexation of the Crimea caused destructions in many spheres of life and became the impetus for social and cultural changes. The beginning of the full-scale war brought Ukraine to the center of the world's attention, and its authors have created texts that serve as evidence of war crimes and function as diaries that document events and convey people's emotions and feelings at the time. Notably, most of these texts dedicated to the war in Ukraine are written by non-professional authors – volunteers, soldiers, doctors, and others – as well as journalists who capture in their work the time, events, and places they experienced, whether physically or emotionally (Sydorenko 2021). One place that became a symbol of Russian aggression and war crimes is the city of Mariupol, which was almost completely destroyed in 2022. The books that form the basis of this article, *L'assedio: Il romanzo di Mariupol* (The siege: A novel about Mariupol, 2022) by Andrea Nicastro and *#Mariupol'#Nadiia* (#Mariupol#Hope, 2023) by Nadiia Sukhorukova, describe the beginning of the full-scale war in Mariupol. Given the similarities between the two texts, a comparative analysis can be made of how places, events, and key concepts are depicted in both books. The primary aim of this article is to explore the differing depictions of the military events in Mariupol in Italian and Ukrainian literature, and to determine how social and literary processes interact. Despite a growing number of literary and discourse studies, comparative analyses of Ukrainian military literature remain limited, and the majority of such research is produced by Ukrainian scholars (Chornyĭ and Malins'ka 2023). While studies on the war in Ukraine also exist internationally – including in Italy – most focus on historical, social, or political dimensions rather than on literary representation (Melotti, Villano and Pivetti 2024). Notably, this research also refers to statistical studies that examine Italian citizens' perceptions of the war in Ukraine (Isernia, Cozzi Fucili and Martini 2023).

As for the methodology of the research, the following analysis employs several methodological approaches: generalization and systematization to identify common stylistic and thematic features in the texts; linguistic cultural analysis (Betsenko 2019) to contextualize literary tendencies within broader sociocultural frameworks; comparative analysis to elucidate stylistic and ideological differences between the two national literatures.

NARRATIVE FORMS

At first glance, the books *L'assedio: Il romanzo di Mariupol* and *#Mariupol'#Nadiia* share numerous similarities. For instance, both texts can be partially classified as diaries, as both Sukhorukova and Nicastro spent the initial days of the full-scale war in Mariupol and documented either firsthand experiences or stories recounted by those they interacted with. This observation corresponds with the analysis presented by Olha Sheliukh, who notes that Ukrainian military literature is frequently structured in the form of diaries or memoirs (Sheliukh and Lehka 2021).

For the Ukrainian reader, the diary is an obvious choice of genre – almost everyone has had some experience of living through war, hearing the sounds of explosions or being forced to leave home. Such works can also be therapeutic for the reader (Chornyĭ and Tereshchenko 2024), who could have had similar experiences to the author's. Unlike Soviet fiction on World War II, which was designed to form a heroic cult of the victorious state, modern literature resorts to a commemorative understanding of the war. In it, the priority is not heroism or victory, but rather the traumatic consequences at the level of specific spaces, generations, individuals, and entire nations (Pukhons'ka 2022).

The title of Sukhorukova's book is symbolic: "Hope" in Ukrainian is *Nadiia*, which is also the author's name. It is based on notes originally published as multiple posts on Facebook, initially intended for family and friends, which eventually reached a wider audience. As a result, the short texts were compiled into a book, which later served as the basis for a documentary film by Maks Lytvynov (Telekanal STB 2023), highlighting the cultural significance of Sukhorukova's work in contemporary Ukraine.

In contrast, Nicastro's book is a novel based on real events. Such fiction with documentary details can seem more convenient and fuller (Polishchuk 2016). Nicastro writes in the preface: "Before letting you read these pages, I have cleaned them of the crudest news because I realize that believing in reality is more difficult than believing in what we create with our imagination. The first displaces us, the second, daughter of experience, we know how to recognize in some way"[1] (2022, 7).

The Italian reader is distant from Ukrainian context, and a detailed description of military events may seem too hard to perceive and may look biased, so the main goal of the author is to make reader believe him. As a result, Nicastro creates a completely new story. His approach reveals a key difference in the target audience: while Ukrainian literature speaks from within the trauma, Italian literature seeks to translate that trauma for an external, less involved readership.

TOPOS OF MARIUPOL

Despite some differences in the writing formats of Sukhorukova and Nicastro, several key concepts, images, and places were selected, the descriptions of which are found in both texts and pertain to the topos of Mariupol.

It is logical to start the analysis with the image of the city of Mariupol itself, which is the main setting. For the Italian readers, Nicastro tries to describe the city as a casual observer, with the aim of giving a realistic picture with a historical background:

> After the Cossack time, after the era of the tsars, Mariupol became ugly, polluted, inhabited by the servants of the Soviets. A city of workers dirty with coal and with short lives like those of the Cossacks, but not at all free. The inhabitants died not from battles, but from diseases that spread in the factory. In Mariupol they set science fiction films, when they had to show a planet destroyed by the greed of man. (2023, 73)

In this description reader can percept rather a negative view of city. Nicastro calls the city "ugly" and compares it to a planet, destroyed by the greed of men.

At the same time, Sukhorukova offers an intimate, nostalgic portrayal of her hometown. She asks her city that she will never be able to see for forgiveness for everything, and at the same time, she accepts it with all the its natural features:

> My beautiful, my unique, my different, my most favorite city. Forgive us. We took you for granted, and you were a great happiness. We walked through your streets and almost did not notice how beautiful you are, what a light and bright character you have. In autumn, you covered everything around with colorful leaves, in winter it snowed, in summer it was decorated with greenery, and in spring it bloomed with tulips and lilacs. (2023, 16)

Probably, the average residents of Mariupol could see all of the disadvantages of their city, but of course, the loss of home causes great pain. The author speaks to Mariupol as to a living creature. There is one more quotation that can describe the relationship between a person and a city: "Many do not like the gentle nickname Marik. The man sometimes asked: 'What kind of Marik? Where did you get this word?' And my adult nephew Danylo calls the city only that way. This nickname was given to Mariupol by those closest to it. Its inhabitants" (28).

The cited passage, referring to the city's affectionate nickname "Marik", demonstrates the verbalization of the conceptual opposition of "own" versus "the other" in relation to the city of Mariupol. Such an opposition may manifest through possessive relationships, particularly in terms of belonging/non-belonging and spiritual affinity/difference (Dubchak 2009). By employing this nickname, the author distinguishes the residents of Mariupol as those who share a unique spiritual connection with the city, thereby identifying them as "own". Such a conceptual opposition is not observed in the Italian book.

Another oppositional concept is the concept of home. Sukhorukova once again reveals her emotional attachment to the city by using the phrase "I want to go home" (2023, 152) at the end of the work, following her descriptions of destruction. Nicastro says in one of the paragraphs, that there is no Mariupol to get back: "'Do you hope to return to Mariupol one day?' 'Mariupol no longer exists'" (2023, 254). All of Sukhorukova's characters dream of returning to their homes, as shown in Maks Lytvynov's documentary film, while Nicastro's characters demonstrate the acceptance of the situation. As in the previous example, Nicastro's writing does not contain emotional coloring and demonstration of attachment to a specific geographical space.

In fact, the emotionality of the narrative is also decisive for determining the role of the author. Although both authors have witnessed the city firsthand, the difference in their roles is evident. According to Alina Chervinchuk (2020), Ukrainian military literature distinguishes between two types of authors: the author-participant (a soldier or combatant) and the author-observer (a journalist or non-combatant). While Chervinchuk classifies journalists as observers, in this case, Sukhorukova can be regarded as a participant, as the city is portrayed through the lens of her personal experience.

The observer's perspective is evident in Nicastro's writing, particularly when he compares the military actions in Ukraine to events such as those in Baghdad or the September 11 attacks: "'They're treating us like the Twin Towers employees,' Ivan observed. 'Don't panic, just stay at your desks and wait for instructions.' Until

everything collapses" (2023, 63). For the Italian reader, these events are likely to be perceived from a distance – as a spectator rather than a participant. In contrast, Sukhorukova draws parallels between current events and World War II, a historical trauma still remembered by the older generation in Ukraine.

REPRESENTATION OF RUSSIAN AND UKRAINIAN CHARACTERS

The next aspect to be analyzed is the representation of Russian and Ukrainian individuals who encounter and confront each other in Mariupol. It is important to note that the Italian perception of these two nationalities – and, more broadly, of the war in Ukraine – remains ambiguous. According to the research of Pierangelo Isernia, Claudio Cozzi Fucili, and Sergio Martini (2023), 80% of Italians in 2022 condemn the Russian attack and 47% of those interviewed blame Putin and Russia for the conflict, but at the same time, 38% thought that Ukraine should surrender. The majority of Italians were against sending weapons to Ukraine, with percentages of those in favor rarely exceeding 45%, and this opposition has remained stable over time. Moreover, according to the article of Gianino Melotti, Paola Villano, and Monica Pivetti, over the last few years, Italian populist parties have had links to the Putin regime, even if the situation changed after the beginning of the full-scale war (2024). As a result, although most Italians express support for the Ukrainians, a part of them tend to sympathize with the Russians at the same time.

The perception of Russian soldiers in the two books can be compared in the depiction of similar events, particularly in describing the moment of leaving Mariupol. The Italian author describes the Russians as surprisingly gentle people:

> Olga, her ex-husband, her father-in-law Panos, and their children Angelika and Misha walked all day and left Mariupol towards the West, not towards Russia. They did not encounter any checkpoints of the defenders of the city, but only of Russian troops. They passed three checkpoints on foot. The soldiers who besieged them read their documents, asked the husband and father-in-law to undress to check whether they had hidden weapons, Nazi tattoos, but they did not ask for money, did not threaten and even gave them water, energy bars and pieces of bread. They were kind, all in all. (Nicastro 2023, 249)

In this passage, Nicastro offers a realistic yet neutral depiction of the checkpoint control process, presented in a manner that is easily accessible to an Italian reader. In contrast, Sukhorukova describes a similar scene in a markedly different way. Russian soldiers are portrayed as entirely negative figures – a perspective that is also emphasized in the corresponding documentary film, which highlights their hypocrisy:

> But the occupiers at the checkpoints were tired and angry. They only glanced at their passports, quickly checked their phones, and barely spoke. […] We were driving in a wrecked car, with no windows and bullet holes. Everyone was shocked and prayed to get to the place we were going to, to survive. The occupiers stopped us and asked us questions that sounded like abuse. "Aren't your children cold in a car with broken glass?" "Cover the windows with something, because the children will catch a cold." "What caring creatures." They launch rockets at residential areas, bomb shelters with women and children, and now they are worried that the children of Mariupol do not get colds! Everything turned upside down in me. Just like from gunshots. (2023, 95)

As shown here, the lexical choices in the two books differ significantly. The Italian book is written in a neutral tone characteristic of contemporary European media. In contrast, the Ukrainian author makes deliberate use of profanity and slang to convey the emotional depth of the individual and national pain experienced during the war. It is important to note that, according to Iryna Tsariova (2023), following the onset of the full-scale invasion, the use of obscene language has become normalized in Ukrainian speech and can be regarded as a distinctive feature of contemporary Ukrainian military discourse. In addition, the Ukrainian author decides to describe the consequences of the shelling to emphasize the consequences of the actions of the Russian soldiers.

Nicastro chose another strategy of writing. During the presentation of the Ukrainian translation of his book in Lviv, he stated:

> We all know, even if it's difficult to say, but we all know that not all the Russians are monsters. We all know, that it's difficult to say here in this moment of history but it's true and in the book, there are Russian characters as well with their own conviction that might be wrong that are subjected to the decision of an authority that does not allow them to decide. But there are Russians that have human feelings as well. And there are Ukrainians who are on the right side of history that behave unproperly, behave in a rough and illegal way, because life is like that. Because life does not mean that since you are a country that has been invaded all the citizens are saints. Unfortunately, it's not true. So, describing the reality, it means to put lots of grain in the picture. Because we know who is right and who is wrong, but inside the picture each person has his own free will and he can decide either to be a good guy or behave like a criminal and could be on the two sides of the barricade. (Biblioteka na Rynku 2023)

In contemporary Ukrainian literature, journalism, and social media, the Russian nation is often portrayed in a highly negative light. In contrast, Italian cultural discourse tends to adopt a more neutral stance, frequently seeking to highlight positive traits even among Russian characters. As Nicastro noted in an interview, he depicts Russians as ordinary, well-meaning individuals – an approach consistent with the tone of modern Italian social media. This reflects a broader sentiment in Europe, where as in Ukraine, there is growing fatigue with the ongoing war. The following citation from his interview further illustrates this perspective:

> I am quite rude, so I'll tell you the truth. The perception of the Ukrainian war in the western environment was very attentive, very passionate and people actually felt a great degree of empathy and sympathy for the Ukrainian struggle. These things are changing. These feelings are changing and changing for political reason, for economical reason and maybe for natural reason because people are tired. Tired like you are tired, but you are forced to fight even if you are tired, instead abroad they have a choice or they think to have a choice. So yes, the attention is decreased. (Biblioteka na Rynku 2023)

In response to the requests of his audience – who appear fatigued by constant attention to Ukraine and the persistent condemnation of Russia – Nicastro introduces Russian characters into his novel. One of the protagonists, Pavel, is a Russian man whose story is told from the perspective of an ordinary individual living under the influence of propaganda and convinced that the Ukrainian government supports

a Nazi regime. The narrative also includes the character of Ylenia, a Ukrainian woman who chooses to collaborate with the enemy. Through these portrayals, Nicastro illustrates that individuals on both sides of the conflict can embody both good and bad qualities. In this way, the author does not distinguish between "own" and "the other" among the characters. However, while it may seem that, unlike Sukhorukova, Nicastro offers a more sympathetic view of Russians, the novel's final line reveals the author's deeper stance. The question "Pavel, what have you done?" (2023, 317) appears as a direct response to Pavel's boast about torturing Ukrainian soldiers. Natasha, Pavel's girlfriend – who initially supports him – ultimately expresses disappointment and condemnation by the end of the narrative.

In Sukhorukova's texts, Ukrainians are mostly depicted as victims. But as in *L'assedio: Il romanzo di Mariupol* as in *#Mariupol'#Nadiia* there is a similar scene, where Ukrainians living outside of Mariupol ask for large amounts of money for essentials, such as food and transport.

THE IMAGE OF A CHILD

Another important aspect to consider is the representation of children, who are often portrayed in media discourse as the first and most vulnerable victims of war. Nicastro depicts them as helpless bystanders who suffer the consequences of the conflict:

> I hope, I pray that the children really didn't realize. Angelica says that the greatest pain was the death of the cat. And then she adds that even leaving her princess fur coat was sad. Misha instead regrets his drone with four propellers and the bedroom that is no longer there. Burned. I really wish that this was all that remained of the siege, but I can't believe it. I know that they suffered, that they saw their grandmother die, carried like a sack of potatoes in the rain, condemned by the absurdity of no longer having a bed. These children walked in a war, with parents, incapable of defending themselves and soldiers ready to kill. How can they be left with only the nostalgia for the cat? (2023, 237)

This detailed portrayal of naïve children conveys the fear and brutality of war, in which adults themselves become "infantilized" – they are no longer able to protect their children, revealing a broader sense of helplessness.

Sukhorukova also expresses her deep sorrow for children, describing the changes in typical childlike behavior: "I felt very sorry for the children. They hardly spoke. But no one spoke, everyone listened to the planes" (2023, 82). Nevertheless, the child is contrasted with the adult in terms of worldview – during the war, both adults and children suffer and behave in strikingly similar ways. Furthermore, the child can also be depicted as a figure of strength, someone who offers hope amidst despair: "Mykyta seems to sense the shelling. A few minutes before it starts, he sobs in a baby bass voice, and then they immediately start shooting. Mykyta warns us. We lie down on the sofa, cover our heads with pillows, and listen to the roar of the plane" (36).

Cultural and literary studies often conceptualize an entire nation as either a child or an adult depending on the contexts. According to Ol'ha Sydorenko (2022), the Revolution of Dignity marked a pivotal moment of mental transformation for the Ukrainian people. The researcher characterizes this shift as "*deinfantilization*" –

a process through which Ukrainians began to view themselves not as passive objects of history but as active creators of it. This strategy of deinfantilization aligns with the role of the author-participant in Sukhorukova's work. In her book, all characters are held accountable for their actions. For instance, the author herself expresses regret for leaving her cat behind in Mariupol out of fear of missing her transportation. Nonetheless, the Russian soldiers are depicted as responsible for the atrocities committed. Nicastro, on the other hand, adopts an entirely different strategy – his discourse is neutral, with both soldiers and civilians relying more on their government than on their personal agency. Thus, the contrasting strategies of infantilization and deinfantilization emerge as a key difference between the two texts, influencing the authors' choices at various levels, including lexicon, imagery, and characterization. Another important distinction, as noted above, lies in the introduction of "own" and "the other" characters in Ukrainian literature, which is aligns with the role of author-participant.

CONCLUSION

Both texts examined in this article possess considerable cultural significance. Each plays a distinct role in documenting the events and social dynamics of the war, shaped by the differing perspectives of their intended audiences – the Italian reader as an observer, and the Ukrainian reader as a participant. Furthermore, both books can be regarded as documentary testimony to wartime atrocities and potential war crimes. Future research could expand the corpus to include a wider range of texts, including poetry or literature from other countries, thereby enriching the comparative framework and deepening the understanding of transnational representations of war.

NOTES

[1] Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Italian and Ukrainian are by the present author.

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