

## Mission accomplished? Ukrainian superhero comics in times of war

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DOI: 10.31577/WLS.2025.17.3.7

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### Mission accomplished? Ukrainian superhero comics in times of war

Superheroes. Comics. Ukraine. War. National identity.

This article examines the emergence and development of the Ukrainian superhero genre, analyzing its origins, creators, and target audience. It focuses on key Ukrainian superhero comics, including Lesia Voroniuk's *Ukrainski Superheroi* (Ukrainian superheroes, 2015), Vadym Nazarov's *Patriot* (2014, 2016, 2018), Leonid Krasnopolskyi's *Okhorontsi Krainy* (Guardians of Country, 2018), and Yaroslav Udodenko's *Svitlanok Heroiv: Kharkiv* (Dawn of heroes: Kharkiv, 2023). The article explores how these comics integrate global superhero conventions with the construction of Ukrainian national identity, particularly in the context of the ongoing war. This research also investigates the visual and narrative strategies used to depict national superheroes and supervillains and examines how these figures embody Ukraine's cultural and historical legacy while addressing contemporary challenges. Additionally, it considers the role of Ukrainian superhero comics in wartime, exploring their function as a means of cultural reflection, a tool for fostering national resilience, and an expression of contemporary societal narratives shaped by public sentiment rather than state directives.

This article has been prepared within the framework of the MSCA4Ukraine fellowship, which is funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are those of the author only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union, the European Research Executive Agency or the MSCA4Ukraine Consortium. Neither the European Union nor the European Research Executive Agency, nor the MSCA4Ukraine Consortium as a whole nor any individual member institutions of the MSCA4Ukraine Consortium can be held responsible for them.

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## FRAMING UKRAINIAN SUPERHERO COMICS IN THE GLOBAL GENRE CONTEXT

The superhero genre, deeply embedded in cultural narratives and myth-making since its origins in the USA in the late 1930s, has firmly established itself as a significant cultural phenomenon worldwide. A superhero can be defined as a fictional character – typically from comics, film, or related media – who possesses extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or exceptional skills and uses them to protect society. The inception of the superhero archetype in comic books coincided with a period of significant social anxiety and upheaval and was not merely for entertainment; rather, it was a response to a palpable societal need for stability and moral clarity during trying times. Superheroes were conceived during the Great Depression and the looming threat of global conflict, times when the fabric of society seemed most fragile. The emergence of characters like Superman in 1938, followed by Batman and others, symbolized the embodiment of societal aspirations – heroes who could overcome insurmountable odds and restore justice in a world teetering on the brink of chaos. Captain America, introduced in 1941 by Marvel Comics creators Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, became an iconic anti-Nazi patriotic hero. In Europe, particularly in Central and Western despite strong American influence, local variants emerged, adapting superhero narratives to regional contexts, such as Astérix (France), Diabolik (Italy), and Captain Britain (UK).

The development of the superhero genre in Eastern European comics presents a distinct trajectory, largely shaped by several countries' membership in the Soviet Union (e.g., Ukraine) or their long-standing Soviet influence as part of the socialist bloc (e.g., Poland). During the Soviet era, the comic genre was largely dismissed in Ukraine as a capitalist element, with little development in this field. However, images similar to comic strips did appear in satirical and children's magazines, often taking the form of illustrated stories.<sup>1</sup> It is also important to mention the work of Anatolii Vasylenko.<sup>2</sup>

With the weakening and eventual collapse of Soviet power (1991), Eastern European and post-Soviet states gained creative freedom and exposure to international influences, especially the Western superhero genre. This global genre had evolved significantly – from hero glorification to anti-heroic narratives and psychological complexity. The Polish comic *Likwidator*, created by Ryszard Dąbrowski, illustrates this hybridization, blending local socio-political realities of the 1990s and 2000s with a darker, anarchistic twist on the superhero tradition. In the case of Ukrainian comics, the first attempts that appeared in the 1990s, drawing on the image of the Cosacks<sup>3</sup> as *proto-superheroes*. These comics were largely individual initiatives by artists responding to newfound creative freedoms. Kostiantyn Sulyma, the author of the comic *Buyviter* (1995), explains his turn to the comic genre as follows: “This was an artistic reaction to the ‘tsunami’ of new information about Ukraine’s history and the new forms of Western mass media that entered our cultural space. [...] There was no publisher or client, and the work was created ‘on speculation’”<sup>4</sup> (Kobza Films 2023).

The full-color adventure comic *Daohopak* (Prasolov, Chebykin, and Kolov 2012, 2014, 2016) also deals with Cossack themes. The authors aim to make a “blockbuster comic novel”, testing out Western comic and manga styles. In these comics, the Cossack myth is reinterpreted as a key element of national identity, contributing to its restoration and reinforcement in the postcolonial context of Ukraine’s first two decades of independence.<sup>5</sup>

The significant shift in Ukrainian superhero comics occurred with Russia’s war against Ukraine, which began in 2014 and escalated into a full-scale invasion in 2022. However, it is still not accurate to state that comics are as widespread or popular in Ukraine as they are in the United States or Western Europe, or even in Poland, but they remain a vital part of the modern Ukrainian cultural space.<sup>6</sup>

Ukrainians first encountered superheroes through DC and Marvel film adaptations and translated foreign comics. The emergence of Ukrainian superheroes was driven by war and political turbulence, fueling the demand for cultural narratives of national strength and heroism. This aligns with comic writer Mark Millar’s observation that superhero stories become particularly relevant during turbulent periods marked by social unrest (cited in DiPaolo 2011, 1).

The aim of this article is to analyze the emergence and development of the Ukrainian superhero genre, focusing on how it integrates global superhero conventions with the construction of Ukrainian national narratives. A particular focus is placed on key Ukrainian superhero comics, in which the central conflict clearly alludes to the ongoing war in Ukraine, such as Lesia Voroniuk’s *Ukrainski superheroi* (Ukrainian superheroes), published in 2015; Vadym Nazarov’s *Patriot*, released in 2014, 2016, and 2018; the series *Okhorontsi Krainy* (Guardians of Country) by Leonid Krasnopolskyi, published in 2018; and *Svitanok heroiv: Kharkiv* (Dawn of heroes: Kharkiv), which came out in 2023 by Yaroslav Udodenko. This analysis investigates the visual and narrative strategies used to depict national superheroes and supervillains, examining how these figures reflect Ukraine’s cultural and historical legacy, and considers the role of Ukrainian superhero comics in wartime.<sup>7</sup>

To explore the superhero genre, a historical approach is applied that situates these comics within broader societal shifts and examines the creators’ backgrounds and publishing contexts. The qualitative analysis focuses on style, themes, symbols, and narrative structures to understand how meaning is constructed. These comics also operate within a postcolonial lens, reinterpreting Ukraine’s colonial past to reclaim national identity.

The superhero genre has been the subject of extensive scholarly analysis, with researchers exploring its evolution, thematic depth, and cultural significance. Key works include Mila Bongco’s *Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books* (2000), Geoff Klock’s *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why* (2002), Peter Coogan’s *The Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* (2006), Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith’s *The Power of Comics: History, Form, and Culture* (2009), Marco Arnaudo’s *The Myth of the Superhero* (2013), and Chris Gavalier’s *Superhero Comics* (2017). There is also a substantial body of scholarly work that examines the genre within political discourse (DiPaolo 2011; Goodnow and Kimble

2017), gender questions (Madrid 2009), postcolonial and decolonial perspectives (Nama 2011; Fawaz 2016).

Although the global academic community has extensively studied the superhero genre, Ukrainian contributions have received little focused attention due to their relatively recent emergence, limited international visibility, and lack of translations. Ukrainian comics studies are still developing, primarily engaging broadly rather than analyzing national superhero narratives specifically (Haiduk 2020; Derkachova 2022; Hudoshnyk 2022; Pidoprygora 2024a; Hudoshnyk 2025). My recent articles have examined Ukrainian superheroes within historical and wartime contexts (2022, 2024b), though not yet in detail with regard to the *Okhorontsi Krainy* and *Svitanok Heroiv: Kharkiv* series. This article aims to further develop the exploration of Ukrainian superhero comics by integrating the global discussions with the insights provided by local researchers, enriching the understanding of how superheroes can embody and reflect the ongoing war.

### FROM CHILDREN'S COLORING BOOKS TO 17+ COMIC NARRATIVES

*Ukrainski superheroi*, a comic series by Lesia Voroniuk and illustrated by Sofia Rozumenko,<sup>8</sup> was launched in 2015 and published by Bukrek in Chernivtsi. Although only two of the planned ten issues were released, they already demonstrated the genre's potential for education and cultural preservation (Fig. 1).

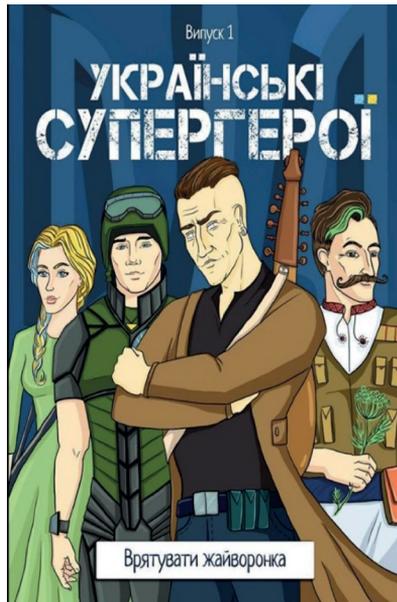


Figure 1: Cover of the comic *Ukrainski superheroi. Vriatuvaty zhaivoronka. Vyp. 1* (To save the lark, Issue 1, 2015)

As Voroniuk explained, the goal of the series was to ensure that Ukrainian children had superheroes they could identify with and admire, while also learning about

Ukrainian traditions and history. In an interview, the author noted that choosing the superhero genre was partly a response to Russian military aggression (Rozenko 2016). Though fictional, the storylines clearly reference real events, with Ukrainian heroes opposing Russian forces. Some characters are based on real prototypes – for example, Kiborg is modeled after a soldier killed defending Donetsk Airport, and Kobzar draws inspiration from Oleksandr Yarmola, the lead singer of the band *Haydamaky*. At the same time each hero is crafted as a composite of real individuals and cultural archetypes. One notable feature of the comics is their interactivity: the panels are designed for children to color, merging the superhero format with that of a coloring book and offering a tactile connection to the story. While the narratives are made accessible to young readers, the creators emphasize the importance of adult guidance during reading.

The three issues of *Patriot – Ataka kloniv* (Attack of the clones) and two volumes of *Renegat* – were entirely created and self-published by Vadym Nazarov. The comic stands out as an alternative superhero comic. The black-and-white first issue, in particular, offers an ironic and kitschy take on Ukrainian reality, blending post-Soviet and postcolonial critique with sharp social commentary and political caricature. Its 15+/17+ rating and playful disclaimer highlight its appeal to a young adult and adult audience.

The first issue of *Patriot* is described by the author as a “sarcastic-humorous tale with elements of dark humor” (Tretia parallel 2016). It revisits the theme of extraterrestrial threats – an idea that had already intrigued Nazarov in his earlier comic *Salo v kosmosi*<sup>9</sup> (Fat in the space, 2005–2006), published on comics.com.ua.<sup>10</sup> In that earlier work, Cossacks battle robot and animal-like invaders over the magical resource Salo, while the hero Ostap – visually reminiscent of Patriot – emerges as a central figure in the resistance, seeking to reclaim his home planet from demonic forces. This continuity is underscored in *Patriot* by the naming of the space mission Salo in space. The action unfolds aboard a spaceship orbiting Earth, where the main villain, a clone of Putin named Utin, plans to conquer Ukraine and dominate the world with help from clones of Stalin and Lenin. The comic also plays with conspiracy theories, suggesting that aliens have long provoked human wars. As they withdraw, they leave behind a high-tech suit of armor for a morally pure Ukrainian sergeant, enabling him to stop the villains’ global conquest.

*Patriot* engages in a form of carnivalization, where oppressive structures – such as Russian imperialism and Soviet totalitarianism – are deconstructed through humor, parody, and grotesque exaggeration. The blending of epochs, the deliberate anachronisms, and the absurd portrayal of historical and contemporary figures reflect a post-Soviet reality that has not yet fully come to terms with its past (Fig. 2). Despite the comic’s playful and ironic elements, its title *Patriot* seems to have been chosen deliberately. The name likely alludes to the Patriot of Ukraine, a Ukrainian ultranationalist semi-military organization founded in 2006 and active until 2014. Such parallels appear intentional, as later issues incorporate symbols associated with this organization. In the author’s final comic remark, Nazarov explicitly references the death of Sashko Bilyi.<sup>11</sup> This provides a stark contrast to the comic’s humor and

satire, reinforcing its deeper engagement with real historical events. The second and third issues, in full color, form a more serious and structured narrative, marking a shift in both content and artistic quality. The story takes place in eastern Ukraine, with clear references to the ongoing war.<sup>12</sup>



Figure 2: Scene from the comic *Patriot. Ataka kloniv* (2014)

The creation of *Okhorontsi Krainy* series (7 issues) was initiated by Leonid Krasnopolskyi and published with the support of the Ministry of Information Policy of Ukraine. At the presentation of the comic series, the author emphasized its dedication to the ongoing war in and the struggle for the de-occupation of Crimea. The superheroes are inspired by real-life figures, including Yuriy Kyslyak, the commander of an armored battery of the 25th Airborne Brigade (Ukrinform 2019). The primary goal of the comic, as stated, is educational – to convey a fictional story in a way that is accessible to children and teenagers, while drawing on real events. The story in each issue ends on a cliffhanger, linking it to the narrative of the next installment. Even the seventh issue concludes with the promise of “to be continued”. However, no further issues were published due to Krasnopolskyi’s tragic death.

The comic’s fictional locations clearly allude to real-world places: Kraina represents Ukraine, FOK (Federatsiia Obiednanykh Komun [Federation of united communes]) stands in for the Russian Federation, Zaokeania refers to the USA, and Kerem symbolizes Crimea. The central conflict centers on FOK’s occupation of Kerem and the need to defend the country. The fast-paced storyline follows heroes in constant motion, with multiple plotlines unfolding across shifting locations. As Oksana Hudoshnyk observes, the characters and plot increasingly surpass the original educational purpose (2022, 55). Consequently, the comic leans more into entertainment, while weaving historical, political, and mythological elements to reinforce national identity.

The first issue of *Svitanok Heroiv: Kharkiv*, written by Yaroslav Udodenko and illustrated by Marina Marchuk, was published in 2023 by Avangard Production (Fig. 3).

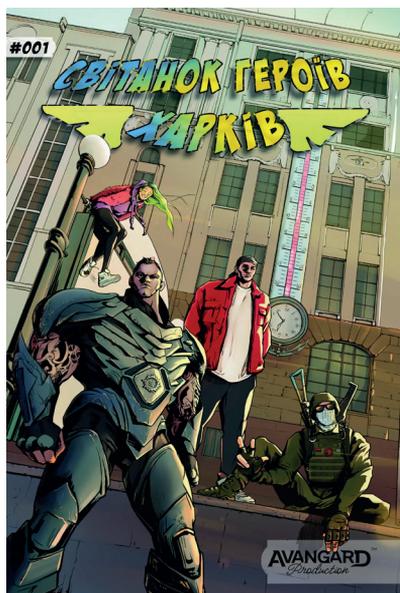


Figure 3: Cover of the comic *Svitanok heroiv: Kharkiv* (2023)

Drawing on the Silver Age superhero tradition in both narrative and visual design, this debut serves primarily as an introduction to the series. The story links the emergence of the main superheroes to the onset of the full-scale war, shifting the action to Kharkiv – connected in the plot to the ancient city of Sharukan<sup>13</sup> and a hidden mythical force. The narrative merges Ukrainian pagan mythology, Slavic gods, and a magical artifact in a classic battle between Good and ancient Evil. While the comic quickly immerses readers in the story, additional context is available on the publisher’s website and Instagram (Avangard Production).

### UKRAINIAN SUPERMEN AND SUPERWOMEN AGAINST SUPERVILLAINS

In discussing the distinct traits of Ukrainian superheroes, my previous article argues that they diverge from the framework of Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith (2009), who have described the superhero as a positive figure with superpowers, a recognizable costume, and a secret identity; their Ukrainian counterparts lack hidden identities or separate ordinary lives, and their powers, costumes, and names are rooted in national cultural codes (Pidoprygora 2024b). The current article expands that analysis by examining *Okhorontsi Krainy* and *Svitanok Heroiv: Kharkiv*, and by offering additional insights into the representation of Ukrainian superheroes.

It is worth noting that the superheroes in Ukrainian comics are introduced directly in action, with little to no backstory explaining their origins or how they acquired

their abilities. This absence is likely due to the fact that none of these series have yet developed into fully structured narratives. One striking pattern across all series, except for *Patriot*, is that the superheroes function as a team of four with men forming the majority. In *Ukrainski superheroi*, male characters are shown actively engaging in battle, while the only female character, Vira, takes on a more observational role. This portrayal likely reflects her role as a character inspired by the collective image of female volunteers who are not engaged in active combat. The male superheroes in *Ukrainski superheroi*, as well as in *Patriot*, are depicted with an emphasis on physical strength, adhering to the traditional representation of superheroes as powerful and imposing figures.

In *Okhorontsi Krainy* national identity is distinctly marked, tying the heroes to the legacy of Kyivan Rus and the legendary foundation of Kyiv by giving them the names Lybid, Kyi, Shchek, and Khoryv.<sup>14</sup> By establishing this connection, the comic presents the symbolic continuation of a long-standing historical tradition. The heroes of this series also do not have dual identities, they do not hide their abilities, nor are they depicted in everyday life – throughout the story, they are always engaged in combat missions. Lybid is a master of combat, wielding scythe-like weapons, Kyi has the ability to see past events by touching objects, and Shchek, a talented programmer, can extract classified information and, despite his frail appearance, possesses extraordinary strength, while Khoryv's abilities remain undisclosed – he is the leader of military operations and the oldest among the guardians. The Crimean Tatars also play a key role in the story, which is the first instance of Crimean Tatars being portrayed as superheroes in a comic book.<sup>15</sup> While on a mission on Kerem, the team is joined by local residents, the siblings Asker and Janike, who have the ability of teleportation, and later their father Mustafa Dzhemil<sup>16</sup> enters the story.

The costumes of Ukrainian superheroes in *Okhorontsi Krainy* do not carry significant symbolic or ideological meaning (Fig. 4). In contrast, the attire of the Crimean Tatar characters has elements of traditional Crimean Tatar clothing. A small emblem, reminiscent of *tamga* (coat of arms), marks them as the defenders of Kerem. Additionally, the female character wears a yellow-and-blue ribbon bracelet on her wrist, subtly reinforcing her connection to Ukraine (Fig. 5). Beyond visual symbolism, the authors use Crimean Tatar characters to voice strong ideological messages, reinforcing the idea that Kerem is part of Kraina, which can be interpreted as affirming that Crimea is an integral part of Ukraine. Women here take on active roles as skilled warriors, standing on equal footing with their male counterparts in battle.

The comic *Svitanok Heroiv: Kharkiv* brings together the ancient warrior Shynn, the military mercenary Sabotazh, the teenage girl Kharkivianka, and the young man Ekso. Notably, both Kharkivianka and Ekso acquire their powers during the shelling of Kharkiv, tying their transformation directly to the realities of war. Sabotazh's role remains ambiguous – rather than being a soldier of the Ukrainian army, he appears to be a volunteer who independently decides whom to help and what actions to take, operating outside formal military structures. Like Vira in *Ukrainski superheroi*, Kharkivianka possesses a form of soft power – the ability to sense and reflect harm. Unlike other superheroes, there are no nationally marked costumes. Instead, they

wear context-driven attire – Sabotazh in military fatigues, Shynn in medieval armor, and others in casual clothing. The absence of national symbols in their outfits shifts the focus to their mission. This could suggest that by 2023, the need to explicitly mark clothing with national symbols has diminished, as national identity has no longer requires constant reaffirmation in the face of external threats or colonial narratives.

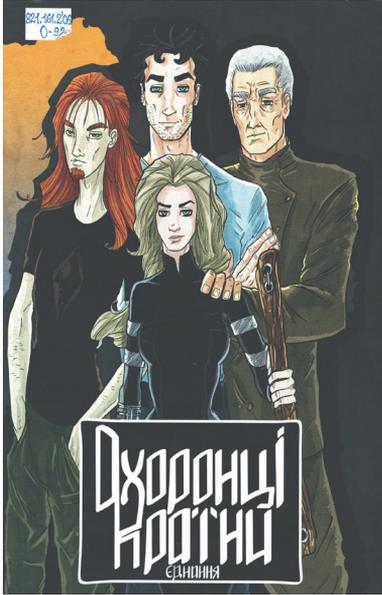


Figure 4: Cover of the comic *Okhorontsi Krainy. Lednannia* (Guardians of Country. Unity, 2018)

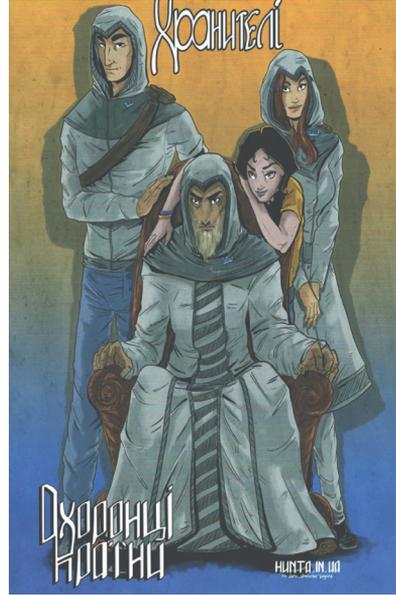


Figure 5: Scene from the comic *Okhorontsi Krainy. Pochatok* (Guardians of Country. Beginning, 2018)

The comic *Patriot* stands out from the previously mentioned works as it focuses solely on a single superhero and embraces a playful, carnivalesque aesthetic. Sergeant Vidirvenko, wears the Patriot armor, gaining extraordinary strength and embodying the traditional depiction of a hyper-masculine superhero. The comic deliberately emphasizes his physical prowess. He is portrayed as an almost mythical figure, capable of hunting a wild boar with his bare hands in the first issue. His exaggerated masculinity is further reinforced through frequent shirtless depictions, often in contexts that seem more symbolic than practical, purely to showcase his physical dominance (Fig. 6).

The comic also draws on classic superhero imagery – just as Superman’s strength is famously introduced through the act of lifting a car, Patriot features a similar scene to underscore his power. However, beyond his physical abilities, Patriot is an over-the-top embodiment of patriotism. His entire persona is saturated with national symbols: he sports tattoos of Taras Shevchenko and the *tryzub* (trident), wears the traditional Cossack hairstyle, and appears in a *vyshyvanka* (embroidered shirt) during military briefings – all infused with a sense of humor and self-awareness. His armor is adorned with multiple *tryzub* symbols and reflects Ukraine’s national colors, re-

enforcing his strong patriotic identity. Even his weapons carry symbolic meaning – the “Stinging Trident” sniper rifle is shaped like Ukraine’s national emblem, while his billhook resembles the *kolovorot* (spinning wheel). My initial interpretation of this imagery was as a reference to Ukraine’s historical legacy, particularly its connection to Kyivan Rus<sup>17</sup> (Fig. 7).



Figure 6: Scene from the comic *Patriot. Renegat. 3* (2018)



Figure 7: Cover of the comic *Patriot. Renegat. 3* (2018)

However, the symbolism of the *kolovorot* is not without controversies, as it has also been associated with far-right movements. The external reviewers of my initial manuscript pointed out an interpretation I had not considered, noting in private correspondence that “the Kolovorot refers to an ultra-nationalist symbol at best, but more probably to a straightforward Neo-Pagan/Neo-Nazi-associated imagery of the eight-armed right-handed version of the Swastika” (Schmäing 2023). This observation has some basis, as I had previously written that the title *Patriot* seems to evoke associations with the nationalistic organization and the *kolovorot* is a variation of the Black Sun. However, within the Ukrainian context, it seems unlikely that the author intended to invoke neo-Nazi symbolism. The emphasis appears to be on national power rather than extremist ideology – a particularly relevant distinction in the context of a former colonial state (see Törnquist-Plewa and Yurchuk 2017).

The world of superheroes is inseparable from that of supervillains, who, in the context of the ongoing war on Ukraine, are unmistakably linked to the Russian Empire, the USSR, or the Russian Federation. In line with global genre conventions, the enemies are often dehumanized – portrayed as monsters, demons, robots, or

aliens – to underscore the inhumanity of their motives and actions. In *Okhorontsi Krainy*, the superheroes battle a force led by Taigan. His key subordinates include Dr. Chornolis; “hospodin” Felix; and Horinych, a ruthless commander overseeing an army of “oprychnyky”.<sup>18</sup> Dr. Chornolis conducts experiments on people, turning them into iron soldiers. These transformed beings – iron-limbed, iron-foreheaded, iron-brained – are not individual characters but soulless tools of destruction, reinforcing the idea of a dehumanization. In *Patriot*, the main villains are Utin in the first issue and Pu in the second and third. The author deliberately emphasizes their connection to the Soviet past, incorporating references to the KGB, the USSR, and Soviet symbolism, such as an inverted hammer and sickle. Pu is depicted as a robotic caricature of Putin, ruling over monsters. His advisors visually resemble Kremlin figures like Lavrov and Peskov, reinforcing the comic’s satirical tone (Fig. 8).



Figure 8: Scene from the comic *Patriot. Renegat. 3* (2018)

Regarding the portrayal of supervillains in *Svitanok Heroiv: Kharkiv*, the first issue does not introduce any distinct antagonist figures – only masked enemy soldiers – and it is likely that the central supervillain will appear in subsequent issues.

The portrayal of villains across all the series is further reinforced by the use of Russian rendered in Ukrainian transliteration. In doing so, the comics transform language into a site of resistance, reducing the imperial aggressor to a subject of phonetic parody. In this satirical mode, linguistic distortion not only signals otherness but also symbolically strips the enemy of authority – suggesting that a foe who sounds ridiculous cannot be truly powerful. At the same time, Ukrainian emerges not merely as the default language of narration, but as a marker of cultural legitimacy and ideological agency – reclaiming its space after centuries of linguis-

tic subordination. This dynamic forms part of a broader postcolonial narrative, in which the reassertion of the Ukrainian language functions as an act of symbolic decolonization and cultural empowerment. An exception to this approach appears in *Okhorontsi Krainy* – Russian here coexists with Ukrainian and is presented without distortion, reflecting the region’s linguistic diversity. It is spoken not only by enemies but also by one of the superheroes, Shchek, and by the residents of Kerem.

## CONCLUSION

So, can we say that the mission of Ukrainian superheroes has been accomplished? In many ways, Ukrainian superhero comics have made impressive progress since 2014. They craft fantastical worlds that nevertheless echo the ongoing war – so that fiction and reality coexist in clear dialogue. Heroes often bear visual resemblances to real figures, and place-names subtly reference actual locations. A political dimension is unavoidable, but it is driven by artists’ own creativity rather than by top-down propaganda. Although some titles have received institutional support, Ukrainian superhero comics have not been systematically co-opted by state policy. Instead, they stand as grassroots cultural responses to the war, led by writers and artists who shape them into instruments for strengthening identity and uniting readers in a shared sense of purpose. However, the lack of sustained funding – whether from the state or civil institutions – and the absence of an established reader base (since Ukrainian society is still developing a comic-reading culture) have directly impeded the completion of planned issues and limited the number of installments released in the series analyzed.

By drawing on Ukrainian cultural traditions, history, and the broader context of resistance against the Russian Empire, Soviet rule, and the modern Russian Federation, these comics assert a strong postcolonial national identity that no longer needs overt symbols to prove its self-sufficiency. Unlike Western superheroes, Ukrainian ones fully embody their heroic roles, do not maintain secret identities, and usually carry out their missions together rather than solo. Gender roles remain largely traditional, with male superheroes associated with physical strength, while female characters embody intuition and moral authority.

Ukrainian superhero comics address readers of all ages – from children’s coloring-book-style issues to Silver Age-inspired adventures and to titles grounded in underground comic traditions aimed at teens and adults. Their tones range from earnest to satirical, often using humor and exaggeration to ridicule and dehumanize the enemy – unmistakably Russia – both visually and verbally.

Yet the story of Ukrainian superhero comics is far from over. With the war still unfolding and Ukrainian society continually adapting, these comics remain a work in progress. New issues continue to respond to fresh challenges, mirroring and shaping the national narrative while bolstering public morale.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Notable examples include the magazines *Veselyie Kartinki*, *Krokodil* and *Perets*, which were popular in the Soviet Union and also in Soviet Ukraine for their illustrated content.
- <sup>2</sup> Anatolii Vasylenko: *Pryhody kota Chornolapenka* (The adventures of the Black-pawed cat, 1983, picture book), *Petryk v kosmosi* (Petryk in space, 1970), *Dobryi robot* (The good robot, 1971), *Smishynky v kartynkakh* (Funny moments in pictures, 1983), *Kraina charivnykiv: Pryhody v komiksakh* (The land of wizards: Adventures in comics, 1992).
- <sup>3</sup> Cossacks were members of semi-military communities, primarily located in the territories of present-day Ukraine, known for their self-governance, martial traditions, and significant role in defending Ukrainian territories from foreign invasions from the 15th to 18th centuries. In the Ukrainian cultural context, they are often portrayed as symbols of freedom, bravery, and national identity.
- <sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Ukrainian are by the present author.
- <sup>5</sup> For more on this, see Stupak 2024.
- <sup>6</sup> Moreover, comics featuring Ukrainian heroes are not well-known among international audiences, largely because they were specifically designed for a Ukrainian context and have not been translated into foreign languages. Currently, only a few have been translated.
- <sup>7</sup> The comic *Ukrmen: Pochatok* (Ukrmen: The beginning, 2018) is not included in this analysis due to the authors' stated intention of keeping the comic free from themes of war, politics, and religion, as clarified in my private talk with Anatolii Tiahur (March 20, 2025) and requires separate research. While I acknowledge the existence of other comics that incorporate elements of the superhero genre along with other elements such as cyberpunk, alternative history, detective, fantasy, and fairy-tale components (e.g. *Volia: The Will*, 2017, 2018); *Peremoha* (Victory, 2022) they are not the focus of this study as they also require separate and detailed research.
- <sup>8</sup> For the second issue, artist Vadym Batrak joined the team.
- <sup>9</sup> Salo – a traditional Ukrainian cured pork fat often associated with national culinary identity – has become a cultural stereotype in both domestic and foreign representations of Ukrainians. Nazarov ironically reimagines it as a valuable cosmic resource, playing with familiar clichés to subvert expectations and infuse national symbolism into a satirical sci-fi setting.
- <sup>10</sup> The platform (2003–2010), which catered to cartoonists and enthusiasts, allowed users to explore new releases and publish their work.
- <sup>11</sup> Sashko Bilyi (Oleksandr Muzychko) was a Ukrainian nationalist and Right Sector member known for his militant activism during the Euromaidan protests. In March 2014, he was killed in a controversial police operation, with some viewing it as an extrajudicial killing. His death became symbolic among nationalist circles, and was seen as part of broader political repression.
- <sup>12</sup> For more on this, see Pidoprygora 2024b.
- <sup>13</sup> Sharukan was a real historical city founded by the Alans and later controlled by the Cumans (Polovtsians) in the second half of the 11th century. Renamed after the Cuman Khan Sharukan, it was located near present-day Kharkiv. In the comic, the authors link Sharukan to Kharkiv's mythic past, anchoring the narrative in local history and collective memory.
- <sup>14</sup> According to legend, Kyiv was established by three brothers, Kyi, Shchek, and Khoryv, along with their sister Lybid, who are believed to have settled on the hills near the Dnipro river, giving rise to a city that later became the heart of Kyivan Rus.
- <sup>15</sup> Since the occupation of Crimea in 2014, the Ukrainian cultural space has increasingly focused on artistic and literary works that highlight the history, resilience, and contributions of the Crimean Tatars in Ukraine's development.
- <sup>16</sup> His name serves as an allusion to Mustafa Dzhemilev – a Crimean Tatar politician, human rights activist, and former head of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People (1991–2013). A Soviet-era dissident, he spent 15 years in prisons and labor camps for advocating the rights of Crimean Tatars. Following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, he became a key voice in defending Crimean Tatar rights and Ukraine's sovereignty.
- <sup>17</sup> Kyivan Rus was a state in Eastern and Northern Europe that existed from the 9th to the 13th century.

<sup>18</sup> The supervillain names in the comic are ideologically and symbolically charged, drawing on mythology, history, and collective memory. “Dr. Chornolis” (black forest) evokes associations with Chornoboh, the Slavic god of misfortune and destruction. “Oprychnyk” reference Ivan the Terrible’s brutal enforcers, rooting the villainous army in a tradition of Russian state terror. “Hospodin Felix” alludes to Felix Dzerzhinsky, founder of the Soviet secret police, with the archaic title “Hospodin” reinforcing authoritarian hierarchy. “Horynych” invokes Zmey Gorynych, a multi-headed dragon from Russian folklore, often defeated by the noble hero.

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