

Smorževs'ka, Oksana Oleksandrivna

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*Religio*. 2023, vol. 31, iss. 1, pp. [9]-31

ISSN 1210-3640 (print); ISSN 2336-4475 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/Rel2023-1-3>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.78382>

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Access Date: 16. 02. 2024

Version: 20230713

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# *The Hero-Warrior in the Worldview and Practice of Contemporary Pagans in Ukraine*

OKSANA SMORZHEVSKA\*

The landscape of contemporary Paganism in Ukraine, the forms of Slavic Native Faith (*Ridnovirsto*)<sup>1</sup> in particular, is a realm of colorful religious and cultural phenomena. The contemporary Pagan communities of Ukraine can be organized into a variety of forms of organizations and associations. Furthermore, every year, we are observing increasing numbers of individual confessors of contemporary Paganism. “Virtual neopaganism” on the Ukrainian Internet is gaining momentum. This broader

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\* I am very grateful to Veronika Bagrii (a student of the Jagiellonian University in Krakow and licensed translator) for her assistance in discussing the text translation, and Scott Simpson (lecturer, Jagiellonian University) for his assistance with English.

1 *Ridnovirstvo* is a contemporary religious and worldview tradition focused on the revival, reconstruction, and continuation of pre-Christian worldview principles and religious practices in modern everyday life. It is one of the streams within contemporary Paganism, widespread in the post-socialist space of Central and Eastern Europe. Among its Ukrainian followers, it is construed as the foundation of national revival and development, a condition for the harmonization of man with the surrounding world. Oksana Smorzhevskaja, “*Ridnovirstvo*” [online], in: *Great Ukrainian Encyclopedia*, <<https://vue.gov.ua/Ріднові́рство>, 5. 1. 2023.



Ukrainian religious landscape also embraces Wiccans<sup>2</sup> and adherents of Scandinavian Heathenry.<sup>3</sup>

Despite such diversity, however, there are shared features which unite contemporary Pagans who live in Ukraine. One such element is the respectful attitude towards the role of the warrior, a defender of one's kind, one's people, one's faith, and one's land. Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine has inevitably and unavoidably brought this role to the fore. I note right away that a 'warrior' is not merely a person with a weapon in their hands who is caught up in a war. To be a true warrior – in the sense of a role and an identity – we expect to see a conscious dedication to ideals and priorities such as honor and perseverance in battle. Thus, not everyone can be a warrior. The nature of a warrior may also be said to be in the blood, on a subconscious level. True warriors, according to the beliefs of many Ukrainian contemporary Pagans, are always present in every nation: "They are genetically programmed to protect the conditions for survival of their peace-loving brothers. And they do it – with or without the blessing of the national center (which should be the state)."<sup>4</sup>

2 Today, Wicca in Ukraine is not a structured and organized movement, nor are its adherents as numerous as in English-speaking countries. Wiccans appear to be more likely to practice as 'solitaries' in Ukraine. One of the best-known Ukrainian Wiccans is Olena Kuzmych. She is a journalist and public activist. For her, Wicca is "a neo-pagan tradition that is based on respect for nature, faith in the forces of nature, faith in the female and male deities." For Elena, the commandment "Do what you want, but remember the law of threefold return: if you do good, good will return to you three times more, if you do evil, evil will also return to you." Olena believes that Wicca is very organic for Ukrainian traditional culture, which is characterized by Pagan-Christian syncretism. Maryna Baldych – Yuliia Karmanska, "Lutska vikkanka rozpovila pro khrystyianstvo ta Rohatoho boha, i shcho u nykh spilnoho" [online], *Hromadske Volyn*, 3. 1. 2019, <<https://hromadske.volyn.ua/lutska-vikkanka-rozpovila-pro-hrystyianstvo-ta-rohatoho-boha-i-scho-u-nyh-spilnoho/>>, 28. 12. 2022.

Wicca and other magical practices in Ukraine are presented in the project of journalist Olena Kuzmych, designers Vitaly Fokova and Olga Skichko "Magical reality. 13 stories of modern Ukrainian witches". Olena Kuzmych – Vitalii Fokov – Olha Skychko, "Mahichna realist. 13 istorii suchasnykh ukrainskykh vidom" [online], TSN. *Televiziina sluzhba novyn*, <<http://tsn.ua/special-projects/witches/>>, 28. 12. 2022.

3 There are both individual followers of Scandinavian forms of contemporary Paganism, and organized communities. For example, the Ukrainian Troth Association. Initially, it was just a group of people who were interested in the Scandinavian epic, sagas, and Viking history. Against the background of such interests, the idea arose to create an official organization for deeper study of the historical period associated with the life and activities of the Vikings. This is especially relevant in connection with the spread of the image of the Vikings through the prism of mass culture, and an extremely simplified understanding of the historical and cultural processes of that time.

4 Kurtiak Volodar, "Liudy iz henamy kshatriia", *Svaroh* 21, 2007, 50-51: 51.

This conspicuous focus on the role of the warrior, military prowess, and honor is one of the essential differences between Ukrainian contemporary Paganism and the varieties of contemporary Paganism which may be observed in the Western world.

This is not to say that the role of the warrior is completely unknown to contemporary Pagans living west of the old Iron Curtain. Stephen McNallen of the very controversial AFA (Asatru Folk Assembly) has written about the warrior model: “Courage is foremost, followed closely by strength, endurance, and agility. With these he does his duties reliably and unhesitatingly.”<sup>5</sup> At a very different end of the North American spectrum, the Canadian Wiccan and former police officer Kerr Cuhulain wrote about the “Wiccan Warrior” as always seeking “right action,” a concept he linked closely with honor in a way that would not seem alien to many in Slavic Native Faith.<sup>6</sup> However, neither the received traditions of Western Paganism, nor the lack of widespread military conflict in their homelands, have made the Warrior as central to most forms of Western Pagan identity as it is today in Ukraine.

In this article, attention will be focused on that form of contemporary Paganism that is known as Ukrainian Native Faith (*ridnovirstvo*).<sup>7</sup> There is a high level of nationalism inherent in Ukrainian Native Faith. Hans Kohn notes that “Nationalism is an idea, an *idée-force*, which fills man’s brain and heart with new thoughts and new sentiments, and drives him to translate his consciousness into deeds of organized action.”<sup>8</sup> And today we see each Native Faith adherent (*ridnovir*) called to “deeds of organized action” in a very real and urgent way.

In his study of Ukrainian Paganism, Adrian Ivakhiv compared the local iteration with North American and Western European Paganism. This researcher emphasized the right-wing political orientation of many post-Soviet contemporary Paganisms, including that of Ukraine, whereas North American and Western European Paganism has influential historical ties to the counterculture of the 1960s and is frequently associated with the political left. “The Nation” is rarely a vital concern. In contrast, Ivakhiv notes that Ukraine can be seen as the geopolitical fulcrum of Eastern

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5 Stephen McNallen, *Thunder from the North: The Way of the Teutonic Warrior*, Nevada City (CA): Asatru Folk Assembly 1993, 4.

6 Kerr Cuhulain, *Wiccan Warrior: Walking a Spiritual Path in a Sometimes Hostile World*, Woodbury (MN): Llewellyn Worldwide 2000, 16.

7 Native faith (gentile faith) is a religious and worldview current, focused on the revival, reconstruction and introduction of pre-Christian worldview principles and religious practices into modern day-to-day life; a trend in neopaganism, widespread in the post-socialist space. O. Smorzhevskya, “Ridnovirstvo...”.

8 Hans Kohn, “The Nature of Nationalism”, *The American Political Science Review* 33/6, 1939, 1001-1021.

Europe, standing between EU-member Slavic brethren like Slovakia and Poland to the west, and the power of Russia and Belarus to the north and east. The traumatic historical past of Ukraine and its status as an independent “post-colonial” state, in his opinion, makes Ukrainian contemporary Paganism especially open to nationalist views. It is important to note that these views range from moderate patriotism, with respect for all nations, to more radical forms of racial identification replete with xenophobia, and everything between. It is a range of positions which share the utmost salience of the concept of the Nation.

Ivakhiv noted the importance of honor, progeny, and being responsible to their ancestors for many Ukrainian Pagans. Often, their participation in one or another neopagan religious community occurs in parallel with their participation in other organizations, such as Cossack fighting clubs and other martial arts groupings, or nationalist right-wing associations. Ivakhiv believes that the best option for studying Ukrainian Native Faith is to consider it as a form of radical conservatism or traditionalism, which goes back to the roots of Romantic European ideas of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, this form of ethnic religion is a kind of response to present and future challenges such as the climate crisis. All these concerns come together as components in a much larger crisis of ethno-cultural survival.<sup>9</sup>

The historian Maryna Hrymych takes the same position. In her opinion, the two pillars of Ukrainian Native Faith which make it unique and distinguish it from other religion-based modern subcultures are: “the cult of ethnicity (in various forms from propaganda of ethnic exclusivity to pan-Slavism) and the cult of nature (also in various forms – from romanticized pantheism, honoring natural “sights” to the ecological culture of traveling tourism)”.<sup>10</sup> Regarding nationalism as a form of protection, Eric Hobsbawm aptly characterised it, calling it “for good or ill, one of the best safeguards against outsiders coming into countries”.<sup>11</sup> This form of nationalism is extremely relevant for today’s Ukraine.

Michael Strmiska has suggested that, on a global scale, contemporary Paganism can be seen as “a spectrum or continuum from totally eclectic, open and universalistic Pagans on the far left to totally ethnic-centered,

9 Adrian Ivakhiv, “Nature and Ethnicity in East European Paganism: An Environmental Ethic of the Religions Right”, *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 7/2, 2005, 194-198.

10 Maryna Hrymych, “Novi stari bohy (Z pryvodu knyhy Marii Lesiv “Povernennia ridnykh bohiv: suchasne ukrainske ridnovirstvo yak alternatyvna viziiia natsii)””, *Etichna istoriia narodiv Yevropy* 43, 2014, 158-162: 161.

11 Eric Hobsbawm, “World Distempers”, *New Left Review* 61/January-February, 2010, 133-150.

and reconstructionist Pagans on the far right”<sup>12</sup>. Strmiska’s conference report on “Paganism and Politics: A View from Central-Eastern Europe” contains a useful outline of the problems of understanding the interaction among contemporary Pagans in different European countries. He observed the way that contemporary Pagans in countries such as the Czech Republic and Lithuania make much of the Pagan role in the historical and cultural developments of their respective states and cultures.<sup>13</sup>

The 2013 book *Modern Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Central and Eastern Europe* studied processes of the formation and development of contemporary Pagan traditions and movements in the post-socialist space, both from a cross-sectional perspective and with respect to individual countries. In it, the editors Aitamurto and Simpson draw attention to the differences between “Western” and “Eastern” (post-socialist) contemporary Paganism, as well as the rich confessional diversity within the region.<sup>14</sup> The coverage of different perspectives on the topic, attention to terminology, and openness to further discussions also shows that academic approaches to the study of this topic can vary significantly.<sup>15</sup> Mariya Lesiv’s chapter “Ukrainian Paganism and Syncretism: ‘This is indeed ours!’” is of special interest here, describing the degrees and streams of syncretism in Ukrainian contemporary Paganism (primarily, in *Ridna Ukrains’ka Natsional’na Vira* RUNVira and *Ob’iednannia Ridnoviriv Ukrainy*). She bases her findings on her own field research and the work of folklorists, sociologists, historians, and religious scholars.<sup>16</sup> This approach, in the context of my research, provides prospects for studying the image of the warrior in Ukrainian contemporary Paganism through the prism of the influence of various religious and cultural traditions and concepts.

Considering the growing popularity and influence of Scandinavian Pagan traditions in Ukraine, Stefanie von Schnurbein’s observations on the intersection of Germanic religion and nationalism are very germane.

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12 Michael Strmiska, “Pagan Politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: ‘Peace and Love’ or ‘Blood and Soil’?”, *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 20/1, 2018, 9.

13 Michael Strmiska, “Paganism and Politics: A View from Central-Eastern Europe?”, *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 19/2, 2017, 166-172.

14 Kaarina Aitamurto – Scott Simpson, “Introduction: modern pagan and native faith movements in Central and Eastern Europe”, in: Kaarina Aitamurto – Scott Simpson (eds.), *Modern Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Central and Eastern Europe*, Durham: Acumen Publishing 2013, 1-9.

15 Kaarina Aitamurto – Scott Simpson, *Modern Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Central and Eastern Europe*, Durham: Acumen Publishing 2013.

16 Mariya Lesiv, “Ukrainian paganism and syncretism: ‘This is indeed ours!’”, in: Kaarina Aitamurto – Scott Simpson (eds.), *Modern Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Central and Eastern Europe*, Durham: Acumen Publishing 2013, 128-145.

Schnurbein brings to the readers' attention the transformation of neo-Germanic Paganism: from German ultra-nationalist and occult movements to the spread of the understanding of the modern world in categories no longer of "race" but of "culture".<sup>17</sup> She also notes a contrast between the stereotype of a more feminine-oriented Western contemporary Paganism with the Viking warrior ethos that gave rise to many Germanic groups active today.<sup>18</sup>

In 2013, Mariya Lesiv's monograph *The Return of Ancestral Gods: Modern Ukrainian Paganism as an Alternative Vision for a Nation* was published, the first book-length discussion of the Ukrainian case in English. The researcher focused on trends in Native Faith in Ukraine and among the Ukrainian diaspora in North America. In particular, she noted the importance of Cossack culture,<sup>19</sup> Cossacks themselves construed as "great warriors and noble defenders of their fatherland", in the current construction of Native Faith aesthetics and ideology.<sup>20</sup>

The ethnographer Liliya Musikhina<sup>21</sup> has written about the image of the warrior in Ukrainian folklore. Considering the degree to which Native Faith relies on folklore and ethnography in building its ideology and practices, her work is helpful in understanding the image of the warrior among Ukrainian contemporary Pagans. Musikhina emphasized the image of the hero-warrior as a positive character in oral folk art. He was a model of: "valor, decency, honesty, courage, prudence, etc. It is important to say that an important feature of the Ukrainian hero-warrior is that, for the most part, he does not wage offensive wars (although, of course, there are excep-

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17 Stefanie von Schnurbein, *Religion als Kulturkritik. Neugermanisches Heidentum im 20. Jahrhundert*, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter GmbH Heidelberg 1999; Stefanie von Schnurbein, *Götterrost in Werdezeiten. Neugermanisches Heidentum zwischen New Age und Rechtsradikalismus*, München: Claudius 1993; Stefanie von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival. Transformations of Germanic Neopaganism*, Leiden: Brill 2016.

18 S. von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival...*, 216.

19 The Cossack era is a period in the history of Ukraine that covers the 15<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, associated with Zaporizhzhya Sich – a kind of military-political formation in the south of Ukraine, manifestation of military culture of Ukrainians. Cossacks are the knights of Ukraine, who had their own principle of social organization, norms of behavior and moral and ethical code of honor. The historical memory of the Cossacks influenced the ideological views of ridnovirs.

20 Mariya Lesiv, *The Return of Ancestral Gods: Modern Ukrainian Paganism as an Alternative Vision for a Nation*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 2013, 87.

21 Liliya Musikhina is a writer, ethnographer, public activist, volunteer, and researcher of folk magic in different regions of Ukraine. Although Liliya Musikhina is not an academic scientist, I consider it necessary to mention her article in the context of this work. All the more so, because as I write this, Liliya defends Ukraine from invaders with a weapon in her hands.

tions), but wars of liberation, connected with the need to liberate his native land/the land of his bride from the enemy”.<sup>22</sup>

In the new context of Russia’s war against Ukraine, the mental image of the warrior in the worldview of Ukrainian Native Faith adherents has suddenly acquired an alarmingly practical embodiment. For many, these tragic events engendered the opportunity (or necessity) to commit themselves as defenders of their native land and their ideals. The theoretical and practical components of the activity of a Native Faith warrior are highlighted in articles by Andriy Kukurudza, Mariya Lesiv and Oksana Smorzhevska.<sup>23</sup>

Many contemporary Ukrainian Pagans became active participants in the “Revolution of Dignity” in 2014, when citizens stood on the Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square, a symbolically-important, central public space) in Kiev against the indignities of Yanukovich’s pro-Russian regime. They faced off against the armed foot-soldiers of the authorities, who were willing to use violence against the protestors. Perhaps unsurprisingly, followers of Ukrainian Native Faith were among those killed during the revolutionary events – now commonly known as the Heavenly Hundred. And when conflict broke out in the east of the country, many from Native Faith volunteered for the front, right from the Maidan.<sup>24</sup>

22 Liliya Musikhina, “Obraz voina v ukrainskomu folklori” [online], *Rid i Vira*, <<https://www.ridivira.com/uk/suspilstvo/obraz-voina-v-ukrainskomu-folklori>>, 12. 12. 2016 [18. 7. 2019].

23 Andriy Kukurudza, “Zakhyst batkivshchyny u vchenni RUNViry ta yii nosiiv v Ukraini (na prykladi ATO)”, *Istoriia religii v Ukraini. Naukovi shchorichnyk* 1, 2015, 624-633; Mariya Lesiv, “Blood Brothers or Blood Enemies: Ukrainian Pagans’ Beliefs and Responses to the Ukraine-Russia Crisis”, in: Kathryn Rountree (ed.), *Cosmopolitanism, Nationalism and Paganism*, London: Palgrave Macmillan Publishers 2017, 133-155; Oksana Smorzhevska, “Voyny-ridnoviry (suchasni yazychnyky, neoiazychnyky): natsionalna ideia zi zbroieiu v rukakh”, in: A. A. Melnychenko – P. V. Kutuiev – A. O. Khomiak, *Velyki viiny, velyki transformatsii, 1918-2018 roky: konflikty ta myr u XX i XXI storichchiakh: Materialy IX mizhnarodnoi naukovo-praktychnoi konferentsii (m. Kyiv, 26-27 lystopada 2018 r.)*, Kyiv 2018, 175-177.

24 The names “Maidan” or “Euromaidan” are often used as shorthand for the mass movement in Ukraine, directed against the arbitrariness of the authorities and their authoritarian grip on power. Also called the ‘Revolution of Dignity’, the citizens’ protest began on 21 November 2013 as a reaction to the government’s decision to suspend the process of preparing to sign the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the European Union. The protestors chose a course of peaceful protest, despite numerous provocations by the authorities. The so-called ‘Dictatorship Laws’ adopted by Yanukovich’s Parliament on 16 January 2014 became the impetus for the transition of the confrontation from peaceful to violent, resulting in the death of the Heavenly Hundred at the hands of the state. The ‘Heavenly Hundred’ is the widely-used name for these deceased Euromaidan participants. The official number of dead is actually slightly higher, 108 people, and according to unofficial data there were probably many additional unrecorded deaths.



Here, we should ask ourselves what drove them to make these sacrifices. What must we know in order to explain the disproportionate response from adherents of this religion in defense of their nation? First, we must study the theoretical development of the Ukrainian Native Faith interpretation of the role and place of the warrior in the history of Ukraine, and in the defense of the native land and native ideals. Second, we must become acquainted with the creative and artistic interpretation of the image of a warrior in the Native Faith environment of Ukraine. The research methodology is directed, first of all, towards an analysis of the theories developed by ideologues and confessors of Ukrainian Native Faith regarding the role and place of the warrior in history. Third, we must monitor the implementation of the role and place of the warrior in specific historical conditions.

The source material for this research is quite extensive. First of all, it includes the works of modern ideologues of Ukrainian Native Faith (such as Volodymyr Shayan, Halyna Lozko, or Svitovyt Pashnyk). In them, we find information about the worldview and moral guidelines for a warrior. For many in Ukrainian Native Faith, the *Book of Veles* is also a sacred text. For the purposes of this article, I will leave aside the controversy surrounding the alleged ancientness of *Book of Veles*. Regardless of its provenance, it is a useful source for studying the worldview of groups and associations currently active in Ukraine. In this text, we also find information about the warrior, military prowess, and honor.

We also learn a lot about the worldview of Ukrainian Native Faith, and specifically about the image of the warrior, by turning to the creativity and art of the believers themselves. Such creativity has produced songs, poems, and prose works which often present romanticized heroic images of soldiers as defenders of Ukraine. There are also Native Faith war songs written in connection with the Russian military aggression against Ukraine.

The relatively small number of interviews conducted with active service military personnel who belong to Native Faith, as well as military chaplains of various denominations, are particularly valuable for the analysis of Native Faith military practice. Attention is also focused on studying the materials of contemporary Pagan websites, as well as groups and pages on Facebook. This broad review of available data allows me to obtain answers about the role and place of the Warrior in the worldview of the contemporary pagans of Ukraine, and to see how the warrior image is formed and changed under the influence of specific historical events.

### Ideological and worldview components of the image of a warrior

For many in Ukrainian Native Faith, reading the works of Volodymyr Shayan<sup>25</sup> (1908-1974) became an impetus for choosing this religion and worldview. This was especially true in the early 1990s, when, among the patriotic Ukrainian intelligentsia, disputes raged about the religious path forward for Ukraine. As the head of the Native Faith Association of Ukraine, Halyna Lozko (also known as Volkhvynya Zoreslava) recalls, Volodymyr Shayan's book *Faith of Our Ancestors* became, for her and her associates, a kind of guide in the early 1990s, a methodological guide to the formation and development of Native Faith.<sup>26</sup> In his writing, Volodymyr Shayan pays a great deal of attention to the image of the warrior as a hero. For him, a warrior is first and foremost a fighter who is noble, fearless, and devoted to serving his people and his land. The work of Shayan is characterized by the use of epithets, metaphors, literary hyperbole, and symbolism, this designed to enhance the emotional message of his ideas and views.

In his brochure "Ukrainian Symbolism" (1954), Shayan talks about the mystical meaning of the colors of the flag of Ukraine, parallel bands of blue and yellow. In his opinion, such a combination gives rise to the type of straight-line warrior-hero who charges headlong towards the enemy. Shayan includes legendary berserkers such as Prince Svyatoslav the Brave,<sup>27</sup> the soldiers at the battles of Kruty and Bazar during the Ukrainian-Soviet War of 1917-1921, and the fighters in the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UIA)<sup>28</sup> in his galaxy of such warrior-heroes. Shayan

25 Volodymyr Shayan is one of the leaders of the Ukrainian nativity movement in the diaspora, philosopher, religious scholar, writer, public figure.

26 Oksana Smorzhevskaya, *Postmodernistski vizii relihiinosti: suchasne yazychnytstvo u miskii kulturi (Ukraina v zahalnoevropeiskomu konteksti)*, Kyiv: Vydavets Oleh Filiuk 2017, 72-73.

27 Prince Svyatoslav the Brave (c. 938 – March 972 CE), Grand Duke of Kyiv (ruling 945-972) from the Rurikid dynasty, son of Prince Igor and Princess Olga. The state policy of Prince Svyatoslav was based on expanding the borders of Rus' and strengthening its international authority. He carried out an administrative reform, dividing his lands among his sons. He died during one of his military campaigns and the exact place of his death is unknown. Despite the fact that his mother, Princess Olga, was a Christian, he refused to accept Christianity, remaining a Pagan for the rest of his life. The Resistance Forces of Ukraine have had a regiment named after Prince Svyatoslav the Brave since 2018.

28 Ukrainian Insurgent Army (1942-late 1950s) was an irregular military-political formation that operated on the territory of Ukraine during the Second World War and in the post-war Soviet period. The members of the UIA fought for the creation of an independent sovereign Ukraine on several fronts. Since 2015, at the legislative level in Ukraine, UIA soldiers have been granted the status of fighters for the independence of Ukraine in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

singles out the hero-fighters of the UIA as a reference point for the creation of a national image of the hero. For such a hero, the highest good is service to the “High Ideal Will and Sovereignty of the Nation”.<sup>29</sup> In the report “Sacred Heroism as the Basis of the Ukrainian National Outlook” (August 1957), Shayan describes the image of a warrior-fighter, a hero-saint. This image is contrasted with hermits, monks and ascetics, because living a full life and worldly action in the struggle to uphold the ideals of one’s nation are no less worthy of respect and honor than the usual image of a Christian saint who withdraws from that world. The struggle for one’s land and country is, according to Shayan, a form of sacred heroism, a worthy example for all mankind.

Shayan envisions the sacred struggle of the statesman-warrior-knight in the name of his state and nation as beginning all the way back at the creation of the state. One of the key early figures in Shayan’s historiography is Prince Svyatoslav the Brave.<sup>30</sup> For Ukrainian Native Faith, this prince is the paragon of the best virtues of the warrior and state-builder, the defender of his native land. Shayan, and those who followed him, have often drawn attention to the religious and ideological beliefs of this figure, who resolutely rejected Christianity in spite of his own mother’s conversion. His wide-ranging military conquests, achieved by means of his close bond with his band of warriors, are romanticized. His image is celebrated in Native Faith poetry and prose – covering everything from his appearance to his actions and deeds.

The spirit of this heroism, the “Spirit of the Nation”, was later picked up by the wandering philosopher Hryhoriy Skovoroda (1722-1794). According to Shayan, Skovoroda in his philosophical reflections formalized the “experience and task of the nation”, thus laying the groundwork for the “real revival of Ukraine”. For Shayan, Skovoroda and his views were the embodiment of a true rebellious spirit: not “passivism” but a complete dedication to work in the world, a “burning will”.

But the most glorious warrior-hero, according to the beliefs of Native Faith – one who wielded the most ruthless weapon of all, the word – was the powerful poet Taras Shevchenko (1814-1861).<sup>31</sup> Shayan portrays him as

29 Volodymyr Shayan, *Ukrainska symbolika*, Hamilton: “Vydavnytstvo Ukrainske vidrodzhennia” pry Obiednanni Ukraintsiv Ridnoi Viry 1990, 24-25.

30 Volodymyr Shayan, *Etychni, sotsiologichni i pedahohichni pohliady Hryhoriia Skovorody. Z nahody 250-littia iz dnia narodzhennia velykoho myslytelia Ukrainy*, London-Toronto: Instytut Volodymyra Shayan 1972, 18; Volodymyr Shayan, *Dzherelo syly ukrainskoi kultury*, London-Toronto 1972, 11-12.

31 Taras Shevchenko (9 March 1814 – 10 March 1861) was a poet, writer, artist, engraver, ethnographer, thinker, public figure, and one of the symbols of Ukraine, a national hero. His poem “Testament” has been translated into 150 languages. In modern Ukraine, the image of Taras Shevchenko has acquired a new sound and power – for

continuing the work of Skovoroda, taking up the “continuous chain of spiritual development”.<sup>32</sup> Shayan wrote about the work of Taras Shevchenko, about his spiritual greatness:

It is Europe that has not yet matured to appreciate Shevchenko.

Because the Hell of a nation enslaved by a nation has not yet become an important ethical and philosophical problem for her.

And only then, when the peoples of Europe will feel this hell in their body and soul, will they understand the greatness of the drama “The Haydamaks”,<sup>33</sup> the greatness of the tragedy of Honta<sup>34</sup>, the power of the silent cry of the martyred churchwarden, and the sanctity of the song of brotherhood sung at the devil’s banquet of the eternal Uman. When the hell of this eternal Uman becomes a living reality for Europe, only then will it bow its head before Shevchenko.<sup>35</sup>

Taras Shevchenko and his creative legacy are sacred for Ukrainian Native Faith. Shevchenko is portrayed first and foremost as a warrior of spirit and indomitability. In the Native Faith community of Ukraine, honoring the memory of Shevchenko alongside honoring soldiers has become an integral part of religious practices. For example, a religious celebration

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example, the image of Taras Shevchenko dressed in the military uniform of a modern soldier of the Ukrainian Resistance Forces. He is often cited in response to the Russian invasion:

Battle on – and win your battle!  
 God Himself will aid you;  
 At your side fight truth and glory  
 Right and holy freedom;  
 And break your heavy chains  
 And water with the tyrants’ blood  
 The freedom you have gained.

- 32 Volodymyr Shayan, *Sviashchennyi heroizm yak osnova ukrainskoho natsionalnoho svitohliadu (Dopovid, vyholoshena na III-omu Zizdi Filii Lehii Ukrainskykh Povstantsiv u Velykii Brytanii, u Oldhami, dnia 24-ho serpnia 1957 r.)*, Vydannia filii Lehii Ukrainskykh Povstantsiv u Velykii Brytanii, 3, 4, 6, 7, 11, 13, 14.
- 33 “Haydamaki” is an epic poem by Taras Shevchenko, dedicated to the Koliivshchyna rebellion, the popular uprising of 1768-1769 in Right Bank Ukraine which was led by Maksym Zaliznyak and Ivan Honta.
- 34 Ivan Honta (?-1768) was one of the leaders of the Koliivshchyna rebellion. He served as a Cossack, a captain. He was betrayed and captured by Russian troops and handed over to the Poles. After prolonged torture, he was condemned to death. In 2015, a monument to Honta and Zaliznyak was opened in the city of Uman. There are many personal monuments to Ivan Honta in Ukraine.
- 35 Volodymyr Shayan, *Osnovna syla tvorchosti Shevchenka*, HO “Rode nash krasnyi”, Lviv 2010, 10.

of the god Perun<sup>36</sup> (Fig. 1) in Zaporizhzhia (the main religious site for the Circle of Rus' People who Praise Gods, the CRPG)<sup>37</sup> took place within a larger event, the Tarasove Zaporizhzhia-2015 festival, which honored Shevchenko's local literary and cultural legacy. In Kyiv, in March of each year, near the monument to Prince Svyatoslav the Brave on Peizazhna Alley, Ridnovirs commemorate Shevchenko (whose birthday was 9 March) and Prince Svyatoslav (the day of his death commemorated on 8 March).



Fig. 1. Perun from artist Viktor-Sonceslav Kryzhanivskiy<sup>38</sup>

- 36 Perun is the ancient Slavic god of lightning and thunder, patron of the prince and his warriors. For Ukrainian Native Faith, Perun also represents the cosmic power embodied in lightning and thunder. He takes care of warriors and helps those who protect their native land from enemies. Perun's day is 20 July. Pashnyk Svitovyt, "Ridni Bohy m. Zaporizhzhia Roku Bozhoho 7531 (2023)" [online], *Ruske Pravoslavne Kolo*, <[https://svit.in.ua/kny/pashnyk/pashnyk\\_bogy.pdf](https://svit.in.ua/kny/pashnyk/pashnyk_bogy.pdf)>, 5. 3. 2023.
- 37 Note that this translation reflects the community's own preferred etymology for their Ukrainian name: *Ruske Pravoslavne Kolo*.
- 38 "Kartyny Sontseslava (Viktora) Kryzhanivskoho" [online], *Ruske Pravoslavne Kolo*, in: Facebook, <<https://www.facebook.com/164656026901985/photos/a.168671189833>>

If we speak of warriors as defenders of the land, people, and traditions with weapons in their hands, then in the worldview of Ukrainian native believers, the doctrine of the Perun's Regiment is widespread. Perun for Ukrainian Native Faith is not only a thunder god. Perun is also "the principle of divine manifestation in thunder and lightning, it is the energy of purification [...] God of military prowess and glory, protector and patron of a male warrior. It is he who forges an invincible sword for the Rus in his heavenly forge, where Father Or was taken – the progenitor of Ukrainians".<sup>39</sup>

Perun's Regiment – that is, soldiers who die on the battlefield – face death without fear because they receive eternal heavenly life in the military struggle. And this heavenly regiment, in case of need, helps the earthly soldiers in their struggle.<sup>40</sup> Svitovyt Pashnyk (the high priest of the CRPG) has written about the warrior-protector and his mortal and posthumous path in his works "The Warrior's Fighting Spirit" (2012-2017) and "The Reincarnation of the Warrior's Soul" (2006, 2012): "The brave warrior awakens in his mind the mighty army of Perun. He is not an ordinary fighter. He is Perun's ally on earth. The earthly and heavenly regiments act as one in the battle with the enemy..."<sup>41</sup>

For Ukrainian Ridnovirs, belief in the reincarnation of the soul is an important component of the worldview. Such a belief unites the past, present and future, concentrated in a person, in his genealogy. The return of the soul to the earth in another body also reflects the ecological views of native believers of Ukraine. After all, you need to nurture your values and your land "not only for our children or grandchildren, but for ourselves, because we will come here again. And what we leave behind is what we will receive in the future. Let us be masters and glorious warriors – grandsons of Dazhboh, and the Gods will be with us!"<sup>42</sup>

The death of a warrior on the battlefield guarantees him entry into Perun's Regiment. It is easy to see the parallels with Scandinavian mythology here. Death on the battlefield opens the way to Valhalla, a heavenly hall for brave warriors. Scandinavian Heathenry has been gaining popularity in Ukraine in recent years, primarily among young people. Images of Vikings as brave and beautiful northerners have been popularized by

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802/168671216500466/?type=3&source=43&paipv=0&eav=Afbp\_uY4Wzqvbv-c5E-QkCXqgNEIG30NBZwJodTnXmIaWPPsQQCwyUIXszA7ju9GESs>, 30. 11. 2010 [9. 3. 2023].

39 Volkhvynia Zoreslava, "Perunuvannia", *Svaroh* 5, 1997, 41.

40 *Velesova knyha: dukhovnyi zapovit predkiv*, Uporiadnyk Yatsenko Borys, Kyiv: Veles 2008, 38, 43.

41 Svitovyt Pashnyk, "Ridni Bohy", *Ruske Pravoslavne Kolo* 2023, 39, <<https://svit.in.ua/kny/Pashnyk.htm>>, 8. 3. 2023.

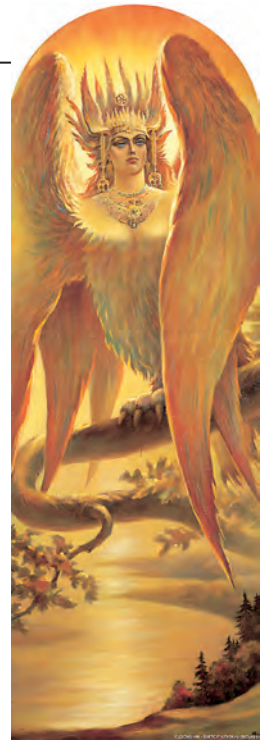
42 Svitovyt Pashnyk, "Boiovyi dukh voina", *Ruske Pravoslavne Kolo* 2023, 46, <<https://svit.in.ua/kny/Pashnyk.htm>>, 8. 3. 2023.



mass culture (TV series such as “American Gods” or “Vikings”). Warriors on the battlefield, according to the ideas of modern Ukrainian pagans, are accompanied and protected by the sacred bird Matir-Sva (Matir-Slava, fig. 2)<sup>43</sup> described in the Book of Veles. This prophetic bird calls for battle and sings of the dead on the battlefield and accompanies them to the Svarog’s Meadows<sup>44</sup>.

The god Veles is highly respected and endowed with great power in the pantheon of Ukrainian Native Faith, and as a guardian of the Dead, he has a special role for those who face death. For a better understanding of his role in the life of the Ukrainian native believer, in particular in conditions of war, we turn to a corresponding prayer. In it, addressing Veles, believers call him to help Ukrainian prisoners return home alive and unharmed:

**Fig. 2. Matir Slava from Viktor-Sonceslav Kryzhanivsky<sup>45</sup>**



- 43 Mother-Glory, Mother-Slava (Perunytsia, Ptitsya Vishcha, Gromovytsia, Magura) is a messenger of the gods who inspires warriors before the battle, mourns the dead on the battlefield, and leads them to the Meadows of Svarog. Appears in the form of a beautiful bird-woman in military armor. Represents the heroic female principle and the Goddess of Victory. “Mother-Slava”, *Association of native believers of Ukraine*, <<https://www.oru.org.ua/index.php/bogoznavstvo/ridni-bogi/552-maty-slava.html>>, 5. 3. 2023.

The image of the Mother-Glory was embodied in his work by the poet, singer, composer, teacher Vasyly-Zhyvosil Lyuty (unfortunately, after receiving a serious concussion during the defense of the city of Bakhmut in the Donetsk region of Ukraine, Vasyly lost his hearing; he is currently undergoing treatment and rehabilitation):

Mother-Glory hovers over the field,  
 In that field of struggle they keep the howls.  
 Beat, beat, do not spare the enemies of Kotorny.  
 They fight, they fight without rest.  
 Mother-Glory gathers on the wings  
 Those who fell, bleeding, she washed with water of life.  
 Yes, she carried the warriors to a whirlwind,  
 To the regiment that dies no more  
 That they gave their lives for the Rus’ state.

(Vasyly-Zhyvosil Lyuty, “Mother-Slava”, *Pisennyk*, <<https://pisennyk.com.ua/vasil-lyuty/mati-slava>>, 5. 3. 2023.)

- 44 S. Pashnyk “Ridni Bohy”....

- 45 Vohnedar, “To Maty Slava bie krylmy pro trudy ratni i slavu voenam...” [online], in: *Obiednannia Ridnoviriv Ukrainy*, <<https://www.oru.org.ua/index.php/bogoznavstvo/>>

Veles, You are the Guide of the secret paths between the worlds.  
 You are the one standing on the edge –  
 You guard the world of Navi,  
 You take care of the world of Pravi  
 You are helping the world of Yavi.  
 Pave the way for the Ukrainians, grandchildren of Dazhboh, who are in enemy captivity, to their native home and family.  
 Clear a path for them to their native Ukraine.  
 Return them to the Motherland alive and unharmed!  
 You, Veles, the Lord of incomprehensible mysteries, fill the souls of our defenders with strength and stability, and our enemies with fear and despair.  
 We acknowledge Your strength and believe in the return of Ukrainian heroes, sons and daughters of the Ukrainian race to the Motherland! Glory to You, Veles!<sup>46</sup>

In addition to invocations of deities, important heroes of the past may take on new meaning in contemporary art. For Ridnovirs, Prince Svyatoslav the Brave embodied courage, heroism, devotion, and loyalty to his ideals. In particular, in Myroslava Gornostaeva's (literary pseudonym of Olga Zuyenko) story "Dazhbozha Krynytsa", according to one of the characters, "Perun sent Svyatoslav to us, but quickly called him to himself again. Because they take away the best".<sup>47</sup> The poetry of modern Ukrainian pagans is imbued with admiration for the valor of Svyatoslav, the desire to bring his spirit back into the lives of Ukrainians: "I'm going to you!" by Ruslan Morozovsky, "The Call of Svyatoslav" by Polyan Yuryk, and "The Betrayer Olga and the Knight" by Velesych Michuda.<sup>48</sup>

The romantic and powerful image of the warrior is also created in Native Faith songwriting. For example, Scandinavian heroic themes interwoven with Slavic mythology are characteristic of the music band Sokyra Peruna (Axe of Perun), popular among neopagan youth. This can be seen in the titles of the songs: "The Road to Valhalla", "The Last Drakkar", "The Unquenchable Flame of Glory", "The Slavs", "Perun's Axe", "Perun's Army" and others.<sup>49</sup> The band "Shyroky Lan" always dedicates the song "Valkyrie"<sup>50</sup> (by Serhiy Skald) to those who died for Ukraine:

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obryadi-ta-zvichayi/532-sviato-materi-slavy.html>, 9. 3. 2023.

46 "Velese, Ty Providnyk shliakhamy taiemnymy mizh svitamy" [chat, online], *Telegram: Kyivska hromada ukrainskykh ridnoviriv*, <<https://t.me/c/1397887112/5364>>, 19. 8. 2022 [8. 3. 2023].

47 Myroslava Gornostaeva, "Dazhbozha krynytsia", *Svaroh* 11-12, 2001, 45-57: 52.

48 O. Smorzhevskaya, *Postmodernistski vizii relihiinosti...*, 96.

49 "Sokyra Peruna" [online], <<http://sokyraperuna.com/albums/>>, 5. 3. 2023.

50 Valkyries are characters of Scandinavian mythology, warlike maidens-goddesses; rode horses on the battlefield and collected the souls of the fallen to bring them to a feast with their father Odin.



... Life is a battle, and death is a victory,  
 In the heart of Odin, in the head of war,<sup>51</sup>  
 But now my earthly journey has ended,  
 And you came, my valkyrie....<sup>52</sup>

But not only mythological and historical subjects have inspired contemporary Pagan creativity; current events in today's Ukraine are deeply intertwined with long past and legendary events. Among the most notable examples, are the song "Angels in camouflage", recorded by the leader of the band "Tin Sontsya" Serhiy Vasylyuk (Novoyar) with Oleksa Byk as part of the "Songs of War" project; and the song "Engraved" by the band "Shyroky Lan", dedicated to Ukrainians who survived captivity.<sup>53</sup> The oeuvre of the folk-metal band Tin Sontsya ("Shadow of the Sun") aptly illustrates the use of Pagan Warrior themes in contemporary music. The band's frontman is Novoyar. The band has its own unique style and performance genre – "Cossack rock". In the work of the band and, in particular, the activities of Novoyar, we can clearly see the embodiment of the key concepts of the native faith "Native Land – Native Language – Native Faith". The song "Sword of Areus" (from the author bard Vasyl-Zhyvosil Luty) is especially popular in the Native Faith community. The song was included in the album "Thunder in the Forge of God" (2014). Tin Sontsya together with the author performed this song during the All-Ukrainian campaign "The First Minute of Peace" on 8 and 9 May 2015. The song has already become legendary in Ukraine, and it was specially updated after 24 February 2022:

Thunder rumbles in God's forge.  
 They are standing shoulder-to-shoulder.  
 The hand of gray-haired Svarog  
 Areus forges a strong sword...  
 In Ukraine, let the enemy [perish]  
 The sword of Areus will return our native flag....<sup>54</sup>

51 Odin is the supreme God of Scandinavian mythology, the god of war and victory, a traveler, and a sage.

52 "Shyrokyi Lan Valkiriia" (Live in ZASHKIV 2019) [video, online], <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zg3cgOpb9Mk>>, 5. 3. 2023.

53 "Pisni viiny" [video, online], *Oleksa Byk – Serhii Vasyliuk, Yanholy v kamufliazhakh (premera)* <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NAyjNWsT6Jo>>, 22. 8. 2017 [8. 3. 2023]; "Shyrokyi Lan", *Zakarlovani* [video, online], <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WPI2p-DpY0A>>, 5. 3. 2023 [8. 3. 2023].

54 Vasyl-Zhyvosil Luty – Tin Sontsia, "Persha khvylyna myru", *Mech Areia, zahalnou krainska aktsiia* [video, online], <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sr27qQg7yik>>, 9. 5. 2015 [8. 3. 2023].

The melody of the “Sword of Areus” is majestic and moving. At the same time, there is no strained pathos in it. The song does not leave anyone indifferent, regardless of religious or other beliefs.

The leader of the band Tin Sontsya, Novoyar, in accordance with the opinion he shares with many in Native Faith that “Ukraine begins with language”, does much to popularize the Ukrainian language through song. It is important for him and his associates to organize concerts and conduct educational activities among the Ukrainian military serving in the east of Ukraine. He also connects the popularization of the Ukrainian language with the improvement of the economy. At the time of writing of this article (early 2023), Novoyar is defending Ukraine from invaders in the ranks of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.<sup>55</sup>

The appeal to culture is a successful means of rallying people around a common idea and ideals. Such references to history, as well as their contemporary Pagan interpretation, are actively used by the leading figures of Ukrainian Native Faith to strengthen the emotional component of the Native Faith worldview. They are especially successful in wartime conditions. The mytho-poetic image of a warrior as a sacred person and of his/her sacred heroism is one of the constituent theological concepts of Ukrainian Native Faith. Defending one’s homeland is a great honor for a warrior. These warriors, having fallen on the battlefield, touched their native land with their wounds. It is this handful of native land that is the token of entry to “Svarog’s Meadows”. Death in defense of the native land gives the warrior’s soul immortality. Therefore, a warrior is not afraid of death, because bravery and courage give him eternal life. Defending our native Ukraine is a great honor for a patriot warrior.

### **Pagan practices today: war**

Various amulets and symbols of higher forces are widely employed in the Native Faith community. The full-scale armed aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine has only increased attention to these aspects of the worldview. In general, in critical moments of crisis, a person turns to belief in the protection offered by mystical forces and demonstrates a desire to protect himself and his loved ones through metaphysical help. This is a normal protective reaction of the psyche to stress. Therefore, it is natural that the current situation gives rise to new amulets and symbols based on the reinterpretation of traditional Ukrainian myths and images of

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55 “U viini ya znakhodzhu rozradu”, Interviu z liderom hurtu “Tin Sontsia”, biitsem 130-ho batalionu TrO Serhiiem Vasyliukom [online], *Novynarnia*, <<https://novynarnia.com/2022/08/31/svasyliuk/>>, 31. 8. 2022 [8. 3. 2023].

Pagan origin. Folkloric motifs, religious beliefs, elements of propaganda, personal memories, and observations can become tightly intertwined in the complex network of a worldview as viewed from a foxhole.

In conditions of war, under fire in the combat zone, banal things acquire a new resonance and meaning. The soldiers themselves, regardless of religion, are frequently reluctant to talk about the various charms, superstitions, and amulets which they carry with them. Therefore, an interview with a contemporary Pagan and Ridnovir, Roman Golub, who was forthcoming about his personal practices, is especially valuable for our inquiry. In his opinion, “there are no different gods in reality. There are simply different ideas of people.” During the war, Golub painted the symbol of Perun in his dugout: “According to tradition, Perun protects against lightning, so I thought that against ‘Grad’ [a multi-launch rocket system] he could also help (laughs). I still had an amulet with me, and once I returned home unharmed, so it means that it helped”.<sup>56</sup>

Over the past 20-25 years, various folk crafts have begun to be revived and gain popularity in Ukraine. Among them, a special place was occupied by the production of *motanka* dolls and various Ukrainian charms. Since 2014, the fashion for hand-made military dolls (crochet, knitted, etc.) has rapidly spread. This belief in the protective functions of various objects is not only an echo of ancient religious and mythological ideas. The war situation heightens the desire to survive, and therefore to find protection in mystical and higher forces. In particular, during the First World War, among British soldiers there was a belief in the protective powers of buttons, dried flowers, books, pebbles from home, medallions with images of certain Christian saints, teddy bears, dolls, etc. For Contemporary Pagans, tattoos of Pagan symbols, primarily Scandinavian, are popular among them. Various runes that cover the body are especially popular.

In general, soldiers, regardless of religion, pay attention to “signs”. These are primarily found in the behavior of animals and birds. Cats and dogs are “faithful companions”, a kind of talisman and charm for fighters.<sup>57</sup> Among soldiers on the front lines, a “bad sign” is the hooting of owls, which foretell injury and death. Indeed, in traditional Ukrainian folk beliefs, these birds were held to herald illness, misfortune, and death. A large number of mice in the trenches is also perceived negatively. In Ukrainian mythology, the mouse is associated with the world of the dead,

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56 Andrii Lysenko, “Nova-stara vira, abo Yazychnyk XXI stolittia” [online], *Vseukrainskyi tyzhnevnyk Ukraina-Tsentr*, 14. 3. 2017, <<http://uc.kr.ua/2017/03/14/nova-stara-vira-abo-yazychnyk-xxi-stolitt/>>, 5. 3. 2023.

57 Serhii Drozd, “Mifolohiia okopnoi viiny” [online], *Obozrevatel*, December 11, 2017, <<https://news.obozrevatel.com/society/mifologiya-okopnoi-vijni.htm>>, 5. 3. 2023.

the afterlife. Mass migrations of these rodents were associated with famine and war in the popular imagination.<sup>58</sup>

Finally, in order to understand the warrior's path in the Native Faith interpretation, I will focus on three specific vignettes of real individuals who have served and died in Ukraine's defense.

The Hero of Ukraine (an award granted posthumously) Serhiy Tabala (Sevier) became the most famous adherent of Native Faith in Ukraine.<sup>59</sup> He acquired his nickname (meaning 'Nordic') on the Maidan in Kyiv, during the Revolution of Dignity, because he was very fond of Scandinavian mythology. During the 2013-2014 events on the Maidan, he led the "Vikings" squad as part of the "Right Sector". His catchphrase "Who, if not us, when, if not now" has already become legendary. Serhiy was an ambiguous personality – a hooligan-nationalist, a "difficult teenager", sharp and hot-tempered, an ardent patriot of Ukraine who loved his family and his native land above all else. A memorial plaque hangs on the wall of the school in Sumy, where he studied. The inscription on the board says: "Graduate of school No. 9, 2002-2011 Tabala Serhii Oleksandrovych. 16. 12. 1995 – 06. 11. 2014. Fighter of 'Right Sector', call sign 'Sevier'. Honorary citizen of Sumy. Heroes do not die!".<sup>60</sup> He died during another "truce" in the tower of the new terminal. They buried the hero in Sumy, on the Alley of Honorable Citizens burials, in a closed coffin because his whole body was torn to pieces. More than two thousand people came to see him on his last journey. Serhiy Tabala became the model for the monument to volunteer battalions, erected on Independence Day in 2016 in the village of Sviatopetrivske of the Kyiv-Sviatoshyn district of the Kyiv region.<sup>61</sup> In August 2015, near the city of Sumy, comrades-in-arms started holding the youth camp "Sevier". The camp is named in memory of Serhiy Tabala.<sup>62</sup>

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58 Olena Talanchuk – Yurii Bedryk, *Sto naividomishykh obraziv ukrainskoi mifolohii*, Kyiv: Avtohrad, Knyzhkovyi dim "Orfei" 2007, 285, 287, 305.

59 "Cyborgs" (a cybernetic organism that combines biological and mechanical or electronic components, human-machines of extreme endurance) – this is the name given to the Ukrainian fighters who defended the Donetsk airport (17. 4. 2014 – 21. 1. 2015) from separatist fighters and the Russian occupying army. The separatists themselves gave them such a name for their exceptional courage and indomitability. In Ukraine, January 20 is the Day of Honoring the Defenders of Donetsk Airport.

60 "Tabala Serhii Oleksandrovych ("Sievier")" [online], *Knyha pamiati polehykh za Ukrainu*, <<https://memorybook.org.ua/22/tabala.htm>>, 5. 3. 2023.

61 Oleksandr Kindsfater, "Shist rokiv tomu v DAPu heroichno zahynuv Serhii Tabala" [online], *Armiia Inform*, 7. 11. 2020, <<http://irpin.org.ua/vidkryly-pamyatnyk-dobrovolchym-bataljonam/>>, 5. 3. 2023.

62 Alla Akimenko, "Na Sumshchyni zapochatkuvaly novyi molodizhnyi nametovyi tabir – na chest zahybloho «kiborha» Serhiia Tabaly" [online], *Den*, 18. 7. 2015, <<https://>

Anton Tsedik (31 July 1987 – 29 August 2014) is another vivid example of a Pagan Warrior. He loved traveling, studying military affairs, history, languages, dance, taekwondo, boxing, and kendo. Eastern philosophical systems and poetry were also among his hobbies. Almost from childhood, he was certain that Russia would attack Ukraine. That is why he prepared for these terrible events. He even dreamed of joining the French Foreign Legion to gain combat experience. He was an active participant in the Revolution of Dignity. His call sign was “Aeneas”. After the events of the Revolution of Dignity, he changed his hairstyle by cutting a herring-shaped forelock, believing that now he had the right to wear it as a real Cossack warrior. After the events of the Revolution of Dignity, he went to the front as a volunteer, joining the ranks of the “Donbas” battalion. Anton-Aeneas’ comrades-in-arms noted his truthfulness and reliability, combined with his creative nature. His military rank and position were junior sergeant, marksman-medical officer. Having fallen into the very epicenter of hostilities in the summer of 2014, Anton-Aeneas understood that he might die. His last post on social networks was: “When you take the sword in your heart, let Odin meet you.” Even before leaving directly for the front, he repeated to his friends that he wanted to die in the war and get to Valhalla, Odin, or Perun. Anton Tsedik died during the battles for Illovaisk (Donetsk region) on 29 August 2014. The soldier was buried in his native Poltava on 8 September 2014, on the Alley of Heroes. By Decree of the President of Ukraine No. 892/2014 dated 27 November 2014, “for personal courage and heroism, shown in the defense of the state sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, loyalty to the military oath”, he was awarded the Order “For Courage” of the third degree (posthumously). The words engraved on his grave: “For Ukraine, for its will, for honor, for truth, for the people!”<sup>63</sup>

The death of the historian, translator, and publicist Serhiy Zaikovskiy (Deimos) on the field in defense of Ukraine was a painful blow for the intellectual community of Ukraine. Serhiy was a representative of the intellectual wing of the Native Faith movement of Ukraine. He went to war as a volunteer and died in a tank battle on 24 March 2022 during the defense of Kyiv near the village of Lukyanivka, on the left bank of the Dnipro. His colleagues from the publishing and promotional literary society “Plomin” will continue his work: publishing books and collections of essays, and holding lectures. By decree of the President of Ukraine

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day.kyiv.ua/uk/news/180615-na-sumshchyni-zapochatkuvaly-novyvy-molodizhnyy-nametovyy-tabir-na-chest-zagyblo>, 5. 3. 2023.

63 Oleksa Koba, “Enej chasiv Maidanu ta Illovaiska” [online], *Ukrainskyi tyzhden*, 26. 9. 2017, <<https://tyzhden.ua/enj-chasiv-majdanu-ta-ilovajska/>>, 5. 3. 2023.

Volodymyr Zelenskyi dated 6 June 2022, Serhiy Zaikovskiy was awarded the Order “For Courage” of the third degree (posthumously).<sup>64</sup>

As can be seen from the above examples, in the worldview of Native Faith, those who undertake the path of the warrior-defender see their roles as intertwined with Slavic and Scandinavian mythological ideas, as well as with elements of Eastern philosophical systems, a fascination with martial arts, history, romanticization of the historical past, and patriotism.

War involves killing and dying. That is why every Pagan Warrior thinks in advance about what his fate will be in case of death. For a believer in Ukrainian Native Faith, the fallout from their death will also have a practical dimension. They wish to be buried according to the Ridnovirstvo tradition. In practice, many deceased Ridnovirs have been buried according to a Christian rite. Living relatives of the deceased have often insisted on this, even against the will of the deceased. In order to prevent such situations, a number of Native Faith organizations have worked together. For example, in September 2014, the Resolution of the Seventh Council of the Native Faith Association of Ukraine (ORU) was: “[to] recommend to Ridnovirs who, in the event of death, wish to be buried according to the custom of their Ancestors, to make a written will that clearly states how the funeral should happen and what not to do during the burial (for example, Native Faith itself may prohibit in advance the presence or any ritual actions of priests and other ministers of the Christian cult, the use of Christian crosses, etc.)”.<sup>65</sup>

In general, after 24 February 2022, the image of the warrior and the understanding of the warrior’s path and his role in society became shockingly relevant in Ukraine. This applied not only to the Native Faith religious environment, but to society in general. The slogan “I believe in the Armed Forces of Ukraine!”<sup>66</sup> became a kind of mantra for millions of Ukrainian men and women. One of the symptoms of the modern Russian-Ukrainian war is its incessant manifestation in the cognitive space of Ukrainian citizens, an omnipresence of the idea of war in ideology, culture, and religion. The new military mythology is based on a web of images of modern culture, the history of Ukraine, and archaic ideas. This mythology has named authors but also quickly acquires the status of broadly-circulating folklore. All these images are intended to demonstrate

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64 “Pid Kyievom zahynuv istoryk Serhiy Zaikovskiy” [online], *Istorychna pravda*, March 2022, <<https://www.istpravda.com.ua/short/2022/03/26/161118/>>, 5. 3. 2023.

65 “...I prybudemo do Luk Yoho Raiskykh” [online], *Obiednannia ridnoviriv Ukrainy*, <<http://www.oru.org.ua/index.php/bogoznavstvo/statti/482-zrazok-zapovovitu.html>>, 5. 3. 2023.

66 Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) – in general, this is the generalized name of all defenders of Ukraine. The term Defense Forces is still used. But it is less common.



the strength, power, reliability and nobility of the defenders of Ukraine, to evoke a sense of pride and patriotism. And Native Faith beliefs about the image of a warrior, about his functions and roles in society, fit very well into the current context and necessities of modern Ukrainian history.

### **Concluding remarks**

Native Faith is dynamic, diverse, and multifaceted. It is not only a component of the religious life of Ukraine, but also something that has taken its place in music, cinematography, the visual arts, and fiction; it has become part of the cultural and social life of Ukraine in general.

For Ukrainian Ridnovirs, the image of a warrior is closely interwoven both with historical events and persons, and with mythic and poetic images. Such weaving has formed a romantic image of a courageous warrior-hero, called by higher forces (Perun, Mother-Slava, Odin, the Valkyries) to defend his native land and to be happy to die for it. Many new manifestations of old Pagan culture are observed directly in the daily lives of soldiers, regardless of their religion or atheistic beliefs. We observe belief in various “signs” and in the protective power of amulets, charms, prayers, etc. For Ridnovirs serving on the front lines, an important component of their religious practice is honoring the god Perun, who, among other functions, is their patron of protective warriors.

The ideological platform for emphasizing the important role of the hero-warrior in the life of society is based on romantic and poetic ideas about the glorious warriors of the past, especially Prince Svyatoslav the Brave, the Cossacks, and the soldiers of the UIA. A special place belongs to Taras Shevchenko as a spiritual warrior. His main weapon was the word.

Building on one’s religious and worldview beliefs to frame events in the history of Ukraine, and their specific interpretation in favor of one’s vision and understanding, is an excellent ideological foundation for maintaining the fighting spirit and substantiating the durability of the tradition. Consider the now internationally-known rallying cry “Slava Ukraini!”, which was born in the midst of the tumultuous events of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and was later inscribed into the military salute of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and the National Police. With its echoes of ancient sagas and the poetry of Shevchenko, it too reflects the Contemporary Pagan vision of the role and place of the warrior in the life of a society that defends its existence on its own territory.

## SUMMARY

**The Hero-Warrior in the Worldview and Practice of Contemporary Pagans in Ukraine**

Russia's military aggression against Ukraine has actualized the ideological Native Faith understanding of the role of the warrior, and his sacred duty as a defender of his native land and his ideals. For a Ukrainian Native Faith adherent (a Ridnovir), a warrior is not merely a person with a weapon in his hands who is serving in the military. The image of the warrior is closely intertwined both with historical events and persons, and with mythic and poetic images, primarily from Slavic and Scandinavian mythology. This forms a romantic image of a brave warrior-hero who is called by higher forces (Perun, Matir-Slava, Odin, the Valkyries) to defend his native land and to be happy to die for it. A special place belongs to Taras Shevchenko, a spiritual warrior whose weapon was the word. Relying on one's religious beliefs and worldview in order to interpret selected events in the history of Ukraine (the life of Prince Svyatoslav the Brave, the Cossack era, the struggles of the UIA) is an excellent ideological foundation for maintaining the fighting spirit and substantiating the tradition. Among the Ridnovirs who have died defending Ukraine's freedom, we may pick out the examples of Serhiy Tabala, Anton Tsedik and Serhiy Zaikovsky.

**Keywords:** Ridnovirstvo; contemporary Paganism; Slavic Native Faith; native beliefs; hero-warrior; Russian invasion of Ukraine

Faculty of History  
Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv  
str. Volodymyrska 60  
01033 Kyiv  
Ukraine

OKSANA SMORZHEVSKA  
smorzhevskao@knu.ua