Tetiana Zinovieva

This article delves into the historical and cultural significance of vertep*, a traditional Ukrainian portable Christmas puppet theatre, specifically focusing on a character known as Moskal.* Vertep*, with its multi-tiered structure, showcases both sacred and profane characters, embodying societal and cultural archetypes and stereotypes. Representing a national-ethnic identity, Moskal has a dynamic, often shifting, role within the performance, determined by contextual associations. The following discussion traces the evolution of the Moskal character in traditional Nativity plays, highlighting changing perceptions in light of modern events in Ukraine, particularly the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war since 2014. The focus of the research is on reassessing the portrayal of Moskal in Ukrainian Nativity plays, specifically the populist interpretation of the character within the contemporary context of Russian aggression, while shedding light on its symbolic implications amid the conflict.*

Dr. Tetiana Zinovieva *is Associate Professor at Odesa Polytechnic National University, (Ukraine), Information Activity and Media Communications Department. She is the Deputy Director of the Institute of Humanities. Her research interests include social communications, gamification in education and communications, visual communication, data journalism, storytelling, and folklore.*

Introduction

This article reinterprets the historical and cultural significance of *vertep*, a traditional Ukrainian portable puppet Nativity. The main focus of the article is the character named Moskal, or Muscovite in colloquial Ukrainian. In the puppet theatre, this character has personified a typical resident of the Russian Empire. The study traces the evolution of the Moskal character in traditional nativity plays from, initially, representing one of Herod's soldiers to, later, symbolizing a defender of the Ukrainian homeland. It

highlights the changes in how this character has come to be perceived in light of current events in Ukraine, in particular the Russian-Ukrainian war, which has been ongoing since 2014.

The v*ertep* tradition traces its roots back to the 16th and 17th centuries, blending elements of religious symbolism with folk artistry. Central to its narrative is the depiction of the nativity play, intertwined with allegorical representations of historical and mythical figures. Throughout its history, *vertep* has served as a vehicle for cultural expression, reflecting and commenting on the social, political, and religious dynamics of the time.

The tradition has been widespread in Eastern Ukraine since the sixteenth century. While nativity plays were common throughout Europe, such as the Belarusian *batlejka* and the Polish *szopka*, the Ukrainian *vertep* is unique because of its use of a two-tiered stage that showcase various domestic scenes on its lower level, while the upper level depicts the story of the birth of Jesus.[2]

The theatrical performance features two distinct categories of characters: the sacred and the profane. The Holy Family appears on the upper level of the stage, while on the lower level are featured the story of Herod and the Massacre of the Innocents, followed by unrelated comic scenes with characters such as Klym, his wife, Moskal (the Muscovite), Darya Ivanovna, Polyak (the Pole), and others. Audiences could readily recognize aspects of themselves, their neighbors, friends, and adversaries in the characters depicted in these everyday scenarios. The profane characters served as representations of social archetypes and national or ethnic types (Luhova 2018). Historically, the majority of the comic domestic scenes in v*ertep* revolved around dance performances. Characters, such as Grandfather and Grandmother, Moskal and Darya Ivanovna, Hungarians, Magyars, Poles, and Gypsies (the Roma), among others, engaged in various dance sequences.

The examination of characters depicted in the Ukrainian nativity play has been

extensively explored by many puppetry scholars.[3] The primary emphasis has been placed on the central protagonist of the everyday aspect of the nativity play, specifically the Zaporozhets, or Ukrainian Cossack character. This is done typically with the aim of analyzing v*ertep* performance texts and drawing comparisons with figures from the genre known as "school drama"—a form of Latin-language religious drama that emerged in the late fifteenth to early sixteenth centuries in Western European countries. I explored the Moskal character from this perspective in my earlier research (Zinovieva 2008; Zinovieva 2004; Zinovieva 2003; Luhova 2018). However, this subject has taken on new implications in the context of the Russian Federation's military aggression in Ukrainian territory, which commenced in 2014, escalated in February 2022, and persists to this day.

A Note on the Names of the Characters of the Ukrainian Nativity Puppet Theatre

Most of the names of the profane comic characters on the lower level of the Ukrainian *vertep* are based on stereotypes: Lyach, a Polish character; Yiddish, a Jewish character; Moskal, a Russian character; Pip or Dyak, a Ukrainian priest. Moskal (Ukrainian *москаль*, Belarusian *maskal*, Polish *moskal*, Romanian and Hungarian *muscal*, Lithuanian *maskolis*) is a historical name, and unofficially a household name for a Russian in Ukraine. This term is also used for military personnel and for Muscovites (Rusanivskyi 2015-2023). Cossacks and Ukrainian burghers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries used this word as a derogatory designation for the nobility of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

Lyákhy (Лѧховѣ) is the name of a Slavic tribe mentioned in the "Tale of Medieval Years" (Yaremenka 1990). According to Yaremenka'sinterpretation, the ancestors of the Lyákhy or Lyakh had first lived on the Danube (probably the territory of Pannonia, a province of the Roman Empire, which included the modern regions of western Hungary, western Slovakia, eastern Austria, northern Croatia, north-western Serbia, northern Slovenia, and northern Bosnia and Herzegovina), but due to the invasion of the Vlachs, they were

forced to move north where they settled in the Vistula basin (the longest river in Poland). According to legend, Lyakh was one of the brothers who founded three Slavic states (see Rus, Lyakh and Czech). As Harshav writes, "Once there lived three brothers: Lyakh, Czech and Rus. One day they set off to find the lands of their future states. Lyakh liked one place. He settled in the place where the city of Krakow would later appear. Czech went further south and founded Prague, and Rus [traveled] to the east, where Kyiv later appeared" (Harshav 1986).[1]

Classification of Characters of the Ukrainian nativity play

Each character in the nativity play performed its role based upon certain distinct categories:

Sacred: Holy Family
Biblical: shepherds, Three Magi, Rachel, King Herod, others
Domestic: Klym with his wife, inebriated Khoma, others
Social: peasant, "*Uniatsky pip*"[2] (a Ukrainian Orthodox clergyman), "Dyak," "Soldier," "Gendarme," "Doctor," "Landlord," "Mercenary," others
Folk: embodied by "Grandfather" and "Baba" (a young woman)
National-ethnic: represented by "Zaporozhets," "Moskal," "Poles," "Jews," "Gypsies," "Hungarians," others

Notably, a given character could simultaneously embody various types. For instance, the ordinary character "Klym" was, socially, a representative of the peasantry, while, ethnically and nationally, he identified as Ukrainian. Similarly, the "Soldier" could adopt distinct ethnic traits, such as "Moskal," "Hussar," or "Hungarian" interchangeably. The assigned typological affiliation of each Nativity-scene character was underscored by their names: domestic characters had specific names, while generalized names denoted national-ethnic and social figures. For instance, a "Zaporozhets" bore the name Ivan Vynogura, but was identified by its ethnicity. Likewise, the "Soldier" had a personal name in the Sokyryn nativity playtext, Ivan Petrovich, while in Markevich's text, the name of this character was Ignatius Paramonovych; and yet the character remained

fixed as a social image. Ultimately, the character's inherent nature and stage role determined the naming conventions associated with each one.

The personas in Nativity theatres were distinguished not solely by their names but also by their actions, as portrayed in violent skits and symbolic presentations. These portrayals conveyed the attitudes of both puppeteers and the audience toward individuals of various nationalities, evident through the distinctive traits of each character.

Characters are also defined by their language: including onomatopoeic techniques and borrowings; sprinklings of words characteristic of other national languages; the presence or absence of dialogue. Moskal's speech, for instance, is marked by the use of onomatopoeia. His pronunciation contains numerous Russian *surzhik*, a pidgin language used in certain regions, with the characteristic accent on the vowel sound "a" typical of Muscovites: "Я с*а*лд*а*т пр*а*стой, не богослов, не знаю кр*а*сных слов <…> Читать і писать не вмєю, а г*а*в*а*ру, што р*а*зумєю." Translated as: "I'm a simple soldier, not a theologian, I don't know beautiful words […] I can't read or write, but I say what I mean" (Kisil 1918, 42).

The presentation sequences featuring characters from Nativity plays, including the introduction of puppets, depicted distinctive traits of individuals, constructing generalized representations of specific nationalities and reflecting prevalent stereotypes in the public perception of various ethnic groups. These portrayals encompassed the hero's behavior, thoughts, lifestyle, and challenges. Domestic figures enacted typical scenes from everyday life, social characters reproduced episodes addressing societal issues, and national-ethnic protagonists raised questions about ethnic identity, intergroup relations, and national self-affirmation. These characters exemplified the stereotypes embedded in people's perceptions of individuals from different ethnic backgrounds. The goal of these puppet representations was to convey universally recognizable archetypes. To contemporary audiences, these vicious ethnic stereotypes would be considered offensive.[3] Ivan Franko, a distinguished Ukrainian

poet, novelist, playwright, and scholar from the nineteenth century, referred to individuals from various nationalities and social classes as enduring elements intrinsic to folk comedy in general, and specifically to puppet theatre (Franko 1982, 285).

The characters representing daily life in the nativity plays served as symbolic representations of "each facet of the collective 'we' within the culture" (Naidorf 2002, 25). They personified the most distinctive, albeit not necessarily ideal, features of the community from a Christian Ukrainian perspective, allowing them to seamlessly transition into contemporary anecdotes.

Transformation in the Appraisal of Moskal's Role in the nativity plays over Time

In v*ertep* stage fight sequences, the assessment of characters relied on binary oppositions such as "bad" versus "good," with the victor being considered good. Conversely, stage symbolism involved a description of the character's attributes, making it challenging to distinctly categorize them as good or bad. Consequently, the nature of violent scenes conveyed the social roles of the heroes, while some scenes predominantly highlighted ethnic differences. The positive or negative portrayal of Nativity characters was entirely contingent on the perspectives of their creators, who, as acknowledged, staunchly advocated for the stance of nationalism relating to local community contexts. Nationalism is an ideology, directed by the politics of the times, the basic principle of which is the thesis about the value of the nation as the highest form of social unity and its primacy in the state-building process. This distinguishes nationalism from other ideologies—liberalism, conservatism, social democracy, anarchism, communism, and fascism. Folk puppeteers are reacting to both forces when creating characters in the *vertep* tradition.

In addition, the interpretation of the play's characters was shaped by the unique attributes of the era itself. Therefore, any flaws or vices of a positive hero were perceived positively, taking into account the specifics of the time. For example, the

Zaporozhets's addiction to honey-vodka (a Ukrainian alcoholic drink like mead) and his poverty, which is considered unacceptable nowadays, were perceived as original comic characteristics in traditional Nativity plays and were not condemned. So, these phenomena were ambivalent, contextual, and dependent upon the situation and populist logic of local systems of power.

Characters of different ethnic origins often became stereotypes, whether they were Poles, Moskal, Jews, Gypsies, Hungarians, or Germans. The binary opposition "one of us" versus "alien" consistently arose in numerous scenes involving Zaporozhets and any other ethnic character. The Zaporozhian, who is the central hero in the secular part of the nativity play s, was consistently depicted as a hero, a defender, and a knight, "one of us."

Interestingly, extant Nativity texts never depict a direct confrontation between the Zaporozhets and the Moskal as binary oppositional characters. Instead, they seem to operate in parallel worlds. Most likely, this was due to Russian censorship of Nativity text editions of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (for example, Galagan 1986; Malinka 1897; Markovsky 1929; Chalyi 1889), which made it impossible to portray Moskal as a negative character. The Moskal, much like the Roma (Gypsy) character, pertains to those figures whose positive or negative assessment fluctuates based on the contextual intricacies of the plot. They can switch between being "good" and "bad," thus playing roles on different sides of the divide. It totally depended upon with whom these characters were performing. For example, if a Roma happened to be next to a Zaporozhets, then the Ukrainian spectator's sympathy was on the side of the Zaporozhets. If a Jew, Latvian, or Moskal was shown alongside a Roma, preference was given to the Roma.

It is interesting to note that interpreting the character of Moskal in the Ukrainian Nativity theatre depended upon the regions where it was performed. In western Ukraine, Moskal was often portrayed as a negative figure, while in the east, he was seen as more neutral. This division in audience preference persisted in Ukraine for centuries, until the

Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. In eastern Ukraine, attitudes towards Russians were twofold, depending on official policy. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, school dramas reflected Ukraine's official position towards Russia. Ukrainian linguist and folklorist, Pavlo Zhitecki, described the Moskal character as positive in Dovgalevsky's and Konyssky's Christmas dramas. According to Zhitecki, Moskal is depicted as an almighty and stormy force before whom Lyakh humbles himself, a character who gives people confidence in their strength. The determining factor in these plays is whoever wins is therefore the best. In Dovgalevsky's fourth Christmas drama, Moskal defeats the priests, while in Konyssky's first scene, he drives away everyone—the peasants, the woman, and even the priest himself (Zhytetskyi 1892, 169).

Public attitude towards the Moskal was somewhat different. For example, Oleksii Levshyn, a traveler in Ukraine at the end of the eighteenth to the beginning of the nineteenth century, emphasized "their [that is, Ukrainians'] dislike for Russians." He wrote that children were frightened by the Moskal, and "at this name a frightened child stops screaming;" he was also heard to respond: "A good man, but a Moskal" (Levshyn 1816). Oleksa Voropai connects the appearance of the Moskal character with the events of the early eighteenth century, after the defeat at Poltava in 1709, when there were "stations" of Russian troops in Ukraine, which "were very annoying to our population." However, the researcher emphasizes that "although the population was dissatisfied with the Muscovites, in the Sokyryn nativity plays, we do not encounter such a sharply negative attitude of the characters toward the Moskal as they do toward the Poles. This is obviously because the Moskal, as the Russian occupiers of Ukraine, could control public speech. In addition, religious motives distinguishing characters in regard to the Orthodox faith also played a role here (Voropai 1999, 6).

The interpretation of nativity plays was constructed under the prevailing scholarly conventions of the era. Thus, during Soviet times, the Ukrainian scholar-folklorist Varvara Khomenko writes: "the comedy in the depiction of the Soldier and the Zaporozhian is aimed at evoking approval, admiration for the actions and deeds of

these heroes, pride for their courage, bravery, and their skills give a worthy rebuff to the representatives of the ruling classes" (Khomenko 1965, 303).

The ambiguous assessment of the puppet "Moskal" becomes justified: on the one hand, he is the occupier of Ukraine, who drives away Grandfather and Grandmother, and on the other hand, he is a "Fatherland Protector," "a representative of the Orthodox faith" (Markovsky 1929, 64). The influence of school drama on the v*ertep*, as well as the later influence of Soviet scholarship on how the culture of the past was to be interpreted, should not be excluded.

In the text of a Sokyryna *vertep* play of the eighteenth century, the Moskal character was associated with Herod's Soldier, who stabs Rachel's child (Markovsky 1929, 153; Chalyi 1889; Arkhimovych 1989). In the text of the Slavutyn nativity plays, recorded by V. Prus in 1928, it was constantly emphasized how a soldier kills a child: "a soldier with a spear, lifts the baby on the spear […] the baby and leaves, holding the child on the spear […] The soldier shows the child to Herod, holding the child on a spear, and returns him to his mother" (Markovsky 1929, 147). It should not be forgotten that the soldiers in the plot are carrying out Herod's orders. They are not performing an independent, but a mechanical function; they are puppets, not only in the hands of the puppeteer but also of Herod, and, therefore, even in words they show themselves as mindless workers: "Our sovereign / Why do you need us / We are here / We have always been there / And our duty / Before you / We have performed exactly" (Markovsky 1929, 51). In the nativity plays, it is the Soldier who commits a terrible, bloody crime against the mother and child: "Herod is not satisfied and orders to kill / and the warrior tortures and kills, and kills" (Markovsky 1929, 54).

The perception of the Muscovite Soldier's scene is inextricably linked to the theme of childhood and motherhood. One of the components of the story about Herod is the plot of the murder of Rachel's child. The drama of the Massacre of the Innocents has come down to us in four texts: two in manuscripts of the eleventh and twelfth centuries (St. Martial and Freising) and two from the thirteenth century (Laon and Fleury). The central

scene is the episode of Rachel's weeping. In the nativity plays, this scene is nothing more than the use of an already-formed stage type based on local material. The song, "Don't Cry, Rachel," is the most dramatic of the Ukrainian *vertep*. The image of Rachel comes from the Old Testament prophecy of Jeremiah, where she, as the foremother of Israel, mourns for her people. There are words in the Gospel of Matthew that directly mention her name [Mv 2:18]. However, in the nativity plays, this story becomes a scene from the life of the Ukrainian people, and Rachel is depicted as a Ukrainian woman dressed in national clothing. Pavlo Zhytetskyi (Павло Житецький) also remarked that in the nativity plays we see a real mother devastated by grief for a lost child: in fact, she is a simple village woman who has only the one name, Rachel. Herod's soldiers use the derogatory Russian word, "baba," which means "a woman" (Zhitetskyi 1882, 6).

Each new socio-political situation led to a different ending of the Nativity portion of the v*ertep* plays. In the Sokyryn nativity play of the eighteenth century, the performance ended with the singing of the carol, *Mother of God, the Virgin Mary gave birth to Jesus Christ* (Markovsky 1929, 111). In the nineteenth century, some Nativity performances, such as Sokyrynsk in the recording by Shcherbin (1843), Turivsk's v*ertep* (1848), and Novgorod-Siversk's *vertep* (1874), ended with the Russian Empire's national anthem.

It is noteworthy to draw a parallel between the new names of modern Russian propaganda (for example, not "war" but "special operation," not "explosion" but "clapping," in Russian, "*khlopok*") and the play of words in traditional Ukrainian Nativity plays. For example, in the manuscript by Shcherbin and Markevich, after the scene with Savochka, Artillery and Muzhik (Man-Ukrainian peasant) appear. The Muzhik was carrying a gun. The Artillery teases him: "Don't talk back." The man replies: "But I already have that kushka!" ("*kushka*" was a paraphrase of the word "gun," "*pushka*"). The Artillery character fires a cannon, saying, "Vivat, Lords!" and the choir behind the stage sings a traditional holiday song, "Many years!" (*Mnohaia lita*) (Markovsky 1929, 64), which was the way of honoring emperors. Evgeny Markovsky points out that in the text of I. Shcherbin, there was a note about the play on the two words "*cannon*" and

"*kushka*" (*pushka-kushka*). "*Kushka*" is a wooden vessel used during the harvest. It stores water, sand, stone, and a board for sharpening the scythe (Markovsky 1929, 111). We recall that, in the European mind, the scythe is a universal symbol of death. It is likely that this wordplay highlighted the Ukrainian view of Russia's wars. The Moskal *vertep* character embodies adaptability to political forces, aligning cultural traditions with prevailing ideologies to reinforce authority, while also emphasizing centralized power and a militarized identity through the repurposing of symbols and narratives.

A Contemporary Perspective on the *Vertep* from the Context of the War Between Russia and Ukraine

Due to the upheaval caused by the modern war in Ukraine, the performances of the v*ertep* were interrupted, which led to the suspension of the tradition. However, the spirit of resilience endures, with efforts underway to preserve and revive this cherished Ukrainian cultural heritage. But even in these conditions, Ukrainian v*ertep* has evolved to reflect the tumultuous geopolitical landscape of modern times. Amid the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, v*ertep*'s portrayal of historical and contemporary figures has taken on profound significance, offering insights into the complexities of the ongoing struggle.

Twenty-first century "Post-Nativity" and postmodern performance are embodied in nativity plays by means of the multi-interpretation of a well-known theme and the creation of a "collage" or collision of several themes of parallel plots. Now, instead of Herod, the character "Putin" is often depicted in Ukrainian nativity plays. There are numerous examples of this. Figure 1 shows the performances of a popular live-actor version of *vertep*, performed here by the Gloria Theater (2024).

Figure 1. *Nativity Play on Stilts* by Gloria Theater (screenshots of the video accessed 2024, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cpZ6VvZ5fuA).

The Odesa Puppet Theater created a short film, *Putin in Hell*, in the style of video games based on the traditional *vertep* story (Odesa Puppet Theater, 2022). Screenshots of the video are presented in Figure 2.

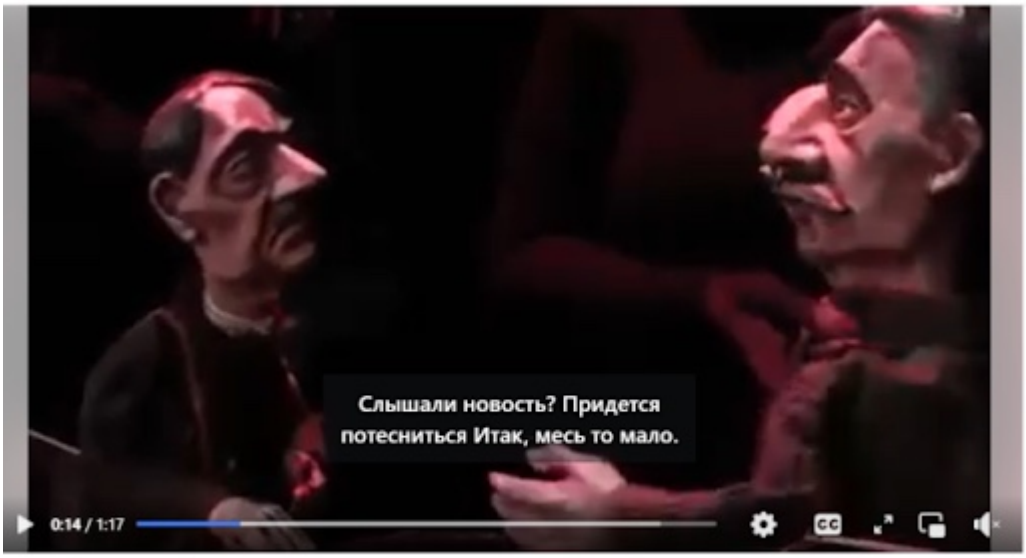

Figure 2. *Putin in Hell* by Odesa Puppet Theater (https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=4958574337584099)

Interestingly, the character of Putin appeared in live actor *vertep* performances long before the full-scale invasion of Russia into Ukraine. Already in 2015, a year after the annexation of Crimea and the launch of Russian aggression in Donbas, a performance was held in Volyn (Figure 3). The *vertep* scene featuring Herod took on a new twist that year with the addition of some unexpected characters. Besides the traditional heroes, there were now protective Ukrainian warriors, angels, aunts, and separatists, opposed to Putin and his supporters. In the story, Putin, donning the Tsar Herod's crown, attempts to conquer Ukraine with Corruption, Crisis, and Death as his allies (Tymoshchuk 2015).

Figure 3. Volyn *vertep* 2015. The Volyn website screenshot with news about the Nativity play. (https://www.volyn.com.ua/news/49316-teper-zamistb-iroda-u-vertepi-putin.html

Similarly, in 2015, Putin appeared in the role of Herod in *vertep* shows performed in Lviv (Figure 4). The main characters in the scene were King Herod, Putin, who tried to kidnap little Jesus, and several Ukrainian soldiers, who did not allow him to do so. The costumes of the dramatis personae also correspond to reality: one of the defenders of Ukraine was in the form of cyborgs from the Donetsk airport, the other had the "UKROP" chevron[4] (Bachynska 2015).

In *vertep* today, Putin is often depicted as the epitome of evil. Since 2014, the Zaparozhets has symbolized the fighter against terrorism in the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) in Eastern Ukraine. During the full-scale invasion, this character became a soldier of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. The Ukrainian *vertep* always reacts to the political situation (Public Radio 2017).

In the image of Putin-Herod, there is a kind of desacralization of earthly power. This is

evidenced by the fact that Herod's traditional attribute is a crown. Assuming the crown symbolizes power (Paulus 2017), its absence or rejection can be interpreted as a step toward the desacralization of power in the public consciousness, signaling a shift away from viewing authority as divinely ordained or absolute.

Given the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, the *vertep*'s portrayal of characters, such as the Russian tsar-dictator and the Ukrainian Zaporozhets, has taken on a symbolic and prophetic meaning due to it denoting the historical conflict between Russia and Ukraine. The modern reinterpretation of the *vertep* amid the Russo-Ukrainian war serves as a tool to critique oppression, censorship, propaganda and to strengthen identity, foster unity, and provide insights for diagnosing social conflicts and understanding war.

In the context of the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, *vertep*'s relevance has intensified. This reinterpretation serves as a commentary on the political landscape, highlighting the enduring struggle for Ukrainian sovereignty and autonomy. The religious segment of the Nativity play is a crucial factor to many local people and their faith in ensuring the unbroken existence of the tradition, while new interpretations continue to revitalize it in reaction to contextual forces.

Conclusion

The balance of dualites constitutes a foundational characteristic of the Nativity play in Ukraine. This is evident through the incorporation of a two-tiered stage, dividing the nativity play into realms of the sacred and the profane. The binary essence is conveyed through the representation of the Virgin Mary, Joseph, angels, shepherds, and magi above, symbolizing the celestial realm, and Rachel, her baby, Herod, his soldiers, and Death below, signifying the earthly domain. The scene underscores the authoritative power of Christ as the true heavenly figure, in contrast to the corrupt earthly authority embodied by Herod. In the current context, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the traditional image of Moskal, previously viewed as an ethnic-social

representation of a Russian in general, takes on a much more powerful significance. This view prompts new inquiries into the historical censorship imposed by the Russian-Soviet authorities on the various editions of Ukrainian Nativity texts. There is a need to study further these texts for any potential expressions of popular resistance as well as for information regarding the cultural dimension, and especially concerning Russian influence in Ukraine.

The public assessment of Moskal's character was characterized by ambiguity, a territorial determinant based upon fear of the Russian outsider, the influence of school drama, and the russification of the Ukrainian space. The texts of Nativity plays did not present a visible confrontation between Zaporozhets and Moskal character types as essentially opposing heroes, although nativity plays contained the potential for conflict as suggested through the symbolic dramaturgy, thus indicating the conflict that we are experiencing today. There is an association connecting Moskal's character with Herod's soldiers' violence and the present conflict persists.

The study of the Ukrainian Nativity puppet theatre, *vertep*, as a phenomenon characterized not only by formal features and its national-cultural context but also saturated with semantic and pragmatic aspects, requires a broad cultural approach for the understanding of symbolic content and stylistic and artistic structures. These systems of power and contextual forces around identities, both permitted and censored, are manifested in the architecture of the two-tiered *vertep* booth theatre structure, in its dramaturgy and characters, as well as at the level of socio-cultural "niches" and tensions representing everyday life in these nativity plays.

References

Arkhimovych, L. B. 1989. *People's Theater. History of Ukrainian music [Narodnyi teatr. Istoriia ukrainskoi muzyky].*(Vol. 1. From the earliest times to the middle of the 19th century). Kyiv: Naukova dumka.

Bachynska, K. 2015. *Botox king Herod [Botoksnyi tsar Irod]*. Ukraina

moloda. https://umoloda.kyiv.ua/number/2589/116/91236/, accessed April 24, 2024.

Chalyi, M. K. 1889. “Memories” [Vospomynanyia]. *Kyevskaia staryna*, XXIV(1), 1–40.

Drahomanov, M. P. 1883. “To the question of nativity comedy in Ukraine” [K voprosu o Vertepnoi komedyy na Ukrayne]. *Kyevskaia staryna*. (12), 547–555.

Franko, I. Y. 1982. “To the history of the Ukrainian nativity scene of the 18th century.” In *Collected works*, Vol. 36. Kyiv: Naukova dumka, 170–375.

Galagan, H. P. 1986. Malorusskyi «Vertep» yly Vertepnaia rozhdestvenskaia drama: Explanatory text with notes and a picture of a box for presentation.” *Kyevskaia staryna*, IV, 38, XXXVI.

Gloria Theater. 2024. *Nativity scene on stilts. Gloria Theater. Putin, how do you feel about the role? [Vertep na khoduliakh. Teatr Hloriia. putin yak vam vykonana rol?]*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cpZ6VvZ5fuA, accessed January 18, 2024.

Harshav, B. 1986. *American Yiddish Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology.* California: University of California Press.

Hrytsai, M. S., V. L. Mykytas, and F. Y. Sholom. 1978. “Nativity scene [Vertepna drama].” In M. S. Gritsaya, eds. *Ancient Ukrainian literature [Davnia ukrainska literatura]*. Kyiv: Vyshcha shkola, 320–331.

Khomenko, V. G. 1965. “Folk drama” [Narodna drama]. In *Ukrainian folk poetic creativity [Ukrainska narodna poetychna tvorchist]*. Kyiv: Radianska shkola, 296–305.

Kisil, O. G. 1918. *Ukrainian nativity scene: Text, pictures, sheet music. With an introductory article by Ol. Kisilya [Ukrainskyi Vertep: Tekst, maliunky, noty].* Kyiv.

Levshyn, A. I. 1816. *Letters from Malorossyy.* Kharkov: V unyversytetskoi

typohrafyy.https://kp.nlu.org.ua/item/2484.

Luhova, T. A.2018. *Ukrainian nativity scene: syntax, semantics, pragmatics, dynamics* (http://surl.li/optkc ed.). Beau bassin: LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing.

Malinka, A. N. (1897).“To the history of the people’s theater. I. A living nativity scene” [Kystoryy narodnoho teatra. I. Zhyvoi Vertep]. Ethnographic review,(4), 37–56.

Markovsky, E. M. 1929. *Ukrainian nativity scene: Explorations and texts [Ukrainskyi Vertep: Rozvidky y teksty]*, Vol. 1. IV. Kyiv: Print. VUAN.

Naidorf, M. I. 2002. *Introduction to the theory of culture*. Odessa: Optimum.

Odesa Puppet Theater. *“Putin in Hell” The Odessa Puppet Theater made an interesting video in connection with the recent events ... [“putin v pekli” Odeskyi teatr lialok zrobyv tsikavyi rolyk u zviazku z ostannimy podiiamy...].* Facebook, UNIA, Ukrainian news, (2022, 04 22). https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=4958574337584099, accessed April 24, 2024.

Panasenko, H. S. n.d. *Archive “Vertep”. The text of the Kupyan nativity scene*. FDMTMiK Ukr, R. – 10831.

Paulus, D. I. (2017). “From Charlemagne to Hitler: The Imperial Crown of the Holy Roman Empire and Its Symbolism. Charlemagne. A European Icon.” [*UCL Discovery*, open access repository], 1–17.

Rusanivskyi, V. M., ed. *Moskal.* Online Ukrainian language dictionary, 2015-2023. https://sum20ua.com/Entry/index?wordid=52579&page=1675, accessed 2023.

Smith, M., T. V. Rozova, N. V. Borodina, and T. S. Ovcharenko. (2023). “Puppet theater in the face of war.” *Cultural almanac*, (2), 276–288.

The Ukrainian nativity scene always reacts to the political situation – a researcher Bohdan Polishchuk [podcast]. Public Radio [Hromadske radio]. https://hromadske.radio/podcasts/hromadska-hvylya/ukrayinskyy-Vertep-zavzhdy-reaguye-na-politychnu-sytuaciyu-doslidnyk, accessed January 8, 2017.

Tymoshchuk, Y. *putin is now instead of herod in the ceremony [TEPER ZAMIST IRODA U VertepI — PUTIN]*. Volyn. https://www.volyn.com.ua/news/49316-teper-zamistb-iroda-u-Vertepi-putin.html, accessed January 15, 2015.

Voropai, O. (1999). "Customs of our people. Nativity scene" [Zvychai nashoho narodu. Vertep]. *Women's world[Zhinochyi svit],* (11–12), 5–7.

Yaremenka, V. V., ed. 1990. *The story of the ancient years: Chronicle (According to the Ipat list) [Povist vremianykh lit: Litopys (Za Ipatskym spyskom)]*. Kyiv: Radianskyi pysmennyk.

Zhitetsky, P. I. (1882). "Preliminary remarks" [Predvarytelnыe zamechanyia]. *Kyevskaia staryna*, IV, 1–8.

———. (1892). "Malorusskye vyrshy nravoopysatelnaho soderzhanyia" [Ukrainian poems of moral content]. *Kyevskaia staryna*, XXXVII(5), 157–175.

Zinovieva, T. A. (2003). "The cultural role of Cossacks and its awareness in the Ukrainian nativity scene." *Issues of cultural studies. Coll. of science works*, (19), 18–25.

———. (2004). "Three female archetypes of the Eastern Ukrainian nativity scene." *Arcadia*. *3*(5), 5–9.

———. (2008). "On the question of interpretation of the evaluation of the national heroes of the Ukrainian doll nativity scene." *Arcadia*. 2(20), 30–35.

[1] In order to comply with the principle of historicity in the research of traditional Nativity theatre performances, I have retained the historical names, without modernization and translation.

[2] The name “Uniatsky pip” comes from the Union of Berestei (1596), the union of the Orthodox and Catholic churches on the initiative of the Ukrainian Orthodox clergy with the support of Polish Jesuit circles. The Union caused a confrontation between the Orthodox and Unionists in Kyiv and the mission of Theophanes III in Ukraine. Ukrainian historian Orest Subtelnyi wrote about it. (See: Subtelnyi, Orest. 1993. *Ukraine: A History*. Translated from English into Ukrainian by Y. Shevchuk. 3rd edition. Kyiv: Lybid (Publishing House).)

[3] Zinovieva, T. (2004). “Three female archetypes of the Eastern Ukrainian Vertepю.” *Arkadia*. 3(5), 5–9. [in Ukrainian]. http://dspace.opu.ua/jspui/bitstream/123456789/8461/1/Зінов%27єва%20Три%20жіночі%20архетипи.pdf.

[4] Fabric chevron sewn for members of the Defense Forces of Ukraine. “UKROP” is a neologism, an Internet meme that has become a sarcastic symbol, one of the nicknames of Ukrainian security forces. A play on words based upon the similarity of the words “українець” (Ukrainian) and “укроп,” the edible herb, dill.