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Masculinities in Crisis? Gendered Roles of Ukrainian Men during the War on Ukraine

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Master's Thesis

**Masculinities in Crisis? Gendered Roles of Ukrainian Men during the
War on Ukraine**

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since Russia started its full-scale invasion on Ukraine in February 2022, millions were displaced and left Ukraine for neighboring European countries. Of those, around 80 percent were women and children (Eurostat, 2024). But what about the men? While many women and children move to safer parts of the country or flee abroad, men are often expected to become the protectors of the nation. With the declaration of martial law on the day of the invasion, their responsibility to remain in the country and stand ready to be drafted into the military is also enshrined legally. “They are cowards without balls” (Dymtro, p.14)¹: This statement by Dymtro², a 37-year old man from Lviv who volunteered for the Ukrainian Armed Forces on February 24th 2022³, describes men who leave Ukraine or otherwise evade the draft amidst the Russian full-scale invasion. It epitomizes a prevailing sentiment that in the current situation, men’s primary role is that of defending the nation, and not fulfilling this role is perceived as a failure of their masculinity. The war has thereby not only brought immense suffering to Ukrainian society but has also reinforced traditional gender roles. From a feminist standpoint, this seems to contradict the movement towards a more gender-equal society that Ukraine has experienced in the last decade. Instead, we are seeing an apparent return to norms which oblige women to take care of the wellbeing of their families, while men stand ready to sacrifice their lives to defend not only them, but also the nation as a whole (O’Sullivan, 2019).

These gendered aspects of the war in Ukraine have been subject to extensive research. However, most feminist literature focuses on the gendered roles and vulnerabilities of women (Barth, 2021; Khromeychuk, 2018; Philipps & Martsenyuk, 2023; Strelnyk, 2024 among others), while the discussion of the role of men in this conflict in most cases is not the main focus of the research. The research on men that does exist predominantly approaches the topic from other academic disciplines such as psychology or law. Scholars have addressed the physical and psychological effects of war on men (Chaban et al., 2018; Mykhalchuk et al., 2023; Stebliuk et al., 2024; among others), alongside discussions of patriotism (Cancio et al., 2018) and the impacts of conscription under martial law on men’s legal rights, including conscientious objection (Roskoshnyi, 2023) and freedom of movement (Marushak, 2023). Only

¹ Refer to appendix for full interview transcripts.

² All names were changed to guarantee the anonymity.

³ Refer to Appendix for more information on interlocutors.

few scholars have explicitly researched how men's actions in this war are connected to and influenced by hegemonic constructions of masculinity (see Blomqvist Mickelsson, 2023 on Ukrainian male refugees' identities; Martsenyuk & Shevtsova, 2024 on masculinities during the Euromaidan; Shand, 2022 on militarized nationalist masculinities; Wojnicka, 2023 on protective masculinity).

Consequently, there remains a notable gap in understanding how Ukrainian men perceive and negotiate their roles in a context increasingly defined by militarized forms of masculinity, which this thesis seeks to address. This is important because understanding how the collective experience of gendered violence impacts men also sheds light on the broader implications on society as a whole. The lack of sufficient psychological care combined with the gendered nature of these experiences in Ukraine is already leading to increased cases of domestic violence (Ukrainian National Police, 2023; cited from Foroudi, 2023). Trying to understand the pressures Ukrainian men are under to conform to hegemonic notions of masculinity and how they try to conform to them is therefore not just an interest in itself, but a crucial piece of the puzzle in trying to understand the wider impact on society.

This research is situated within an interpretative feminist framework and draws on Critical Masculinity Studies (CMS) which challenge essentialist notions of gender and emphasize the socially constructed nature of masculinity. Although the theoretical framework of CMS does encompass a range of gender fluid perspectives, the legal and societal situation in Ukraine is largely rooted in a binary perspective, and gender fluidity did not emerge as a significant theme in the interviews. Therefore, this research does not explicitly address issues regarding gender fluidity. The research questions guiding this research therefore are as follows: **"How do Ukrainian men perceive their roles amidst the ongoing Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine? How do Ukrainian men grapple with the shift to a more militarized form of hegemonic masculinity during war?"**. To answer these, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 Ukrainian civilian and military men. The analysis showed that the interlocutors perceive their roles primarily through a lens of militarized masculinity, driven by a sense of duty to protect nation or alternatively support the defense of the nation. This prompts internal conflicts as men have to decide between their and their families' personal wellbeing and adhering to the societal and legal expectations put upon them. The societal expectation for men to be stoic and resilient leads to further issues as they become resistant to seek help for traumatic experiences. However, most men emphasized the importance of

contributing to the defense as effectively as possible, be it through military roles or not. This might indicate an alternative way for men to adhere to gendered expectations.

The thesis is structured as follows: First, the theoretical framework is introduced, providing a basis to understand how masculinities are constructed, negotiated and contested in times of crisis. This is followed by an overview of traditional and changing gender roles in Ukrainian society in order to embed the results of the analysis appropriately in the Ukrainian context. Subsequently, literature exploring the intersections of masculinities and conflict is reviewed. Due to the aforementioned scarcity of feminist research on masculinities in Ukraine amidst the conflict, this part of the literature review draws on general literature on masculinities in conflict and supplements it with existing research on Ukrainian men from other fields of research. The following chapter presents the methodology, detailing the research process and the challenges encountered. Finally, in the analysis chapter, results are presented and interpreted on the basis of relevant literature. The thesis concludes with a final discussion chapter that summarizes the results.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CRITICAL MASCULINITY STUDIES

Over the past 25 years, the study of masculinities has gained prominence and has slowly been integrated into feminist research. Scholars have produced a wealth of theoretical and empirical research and findings on male identities, roles and experiences, as well as theoretical constructs of masculinities. In general, this research is based on the core insight of feminist theory that every society is characterized by a gender order, in other words by certain gendered power relations and dominant notions of masculinity and femininity (Eichler, 2006). Scholars thereby moved away from focusing on 'men' and 'women', instead analyzing masculinities and femininities. This helps to avoid gender essentialism, stereotyping women with peaceful traits and men with aggressive qualities. Rather, it is acknowledged that, for instance, the link between aggression or bravery and masculinity is socially constructed rather than natural (Enloe, 2000; Kwon, 2000). This perspective also highlights the existence of different expressions of masculinity and femininity, and illustrates how these identities interact, shape, and are shaped by societal norms. Scholars therefore often prefer to speak of masculinities and femininities to emphasize the plurality of such constructions (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). In order to grasp the social hierarchies between different masculinities, CMS employ a variety of terms, such as 'military masculinity', 'militarized masculinity' or 'hypermasculinity'. These are often used interchangeably and with little analytical precision (Quest & Messerschmidt, 2017). For analytical clarity, a conceptualization and classification of the terms used in this thesis is necessary.

One of the most influential concepts in the study of masculinities is the concept of 'hegemonic masculinity', coined by Australian scholar Raewyn Connell (Connell, 1995). It aims to encapsulate a dominant form of masculinity that prevails in a particular society at a particular time, defined as a "culturally privileged or exalted way of both thinking about and conducting oneself as a man" (Edley, 2017:44). Hegemonic masculinity can only be embodied by a minority of men, but puts pressure on all men to orient themselves towards it (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This is where the term 'hegemonic', building on Gramsci, is of importance, emphasizing complex social processes of cultural approval combined with institutional coercion (ibid.).

Hegemonic masculinity is always constructed in relation to various subordinate masculinities, but also in relation to femininities. In patriarchal societies, it involves the marginalization of traits associated with femininity, portraying them as less desirable, and the

subsequent feminization of men who do not conform to hegemonic notions of masculinities. However, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) also emphasize “the complexity among different constructions of masculinity” (p.847), pointing to the fact that masculinities are not necessarily in a linear hierarchical relationship, but that they have a reciprocal influence on each other. Hegemonic masculinity thereby is a constantly changing concept, permeated by internal contradictions and emotional conflicts (ibid.).

Particularly during conflicts and in nationalist settings, hegemonic ideals of masculinity are often occupied by so-called ‘militarized masculinities’ (Ashe, 2012), where masculinity becomes associated with aggression and “equating ‘being a man’ with conquest, defense and the willingness to kill” (Heilman & Barker, 2018:69). It is important to acknowledge that militarized masculinities differ considerably with regard to context and time, and even within a certain society at a given time (Balbon, 2024; Eichler, 2014; Sasson-Levy, 2003). Scholars caution that assuming a singular form of militarized masculinity “does not account for the co-existence and entanglement of masculinities and femininities across military and civilian spheres” (Bulmer & Eichler, 2017:175). Nevertheless, it can be stated that militarized masculinities generally revolve around the ideal of the soldier as the epitome of masculinity. They thereby represent a specific form of hegemonic masculinity, characterized by traits such as aggression, toughness and dominance. In this construction, stereotypical masculine characteristics can be acquired and confirmed through military service and combat (Eichler, 2014; Enloe, 2000).

Militarized masculinities become hegemonic when social discourse makes military action the center of masculinity and in this way narrows accepted notions of masculinity (Quest & Messerschmidt 2017). They are often reproduced by the state by appealing to masculine identity during military recruitment processes (Eichler, 2014). States use militarized masculinities to legitimize conscription, portraying military service as a duty essential to protecting the nation and its citizens (Ahlbäck, 2014; Kronsell & Svedberg, 2011; Kwon, 2000 among others). Thereby, militarized masculinities are deeply embedded into legal and societal norms and shape perceptions of what it means to be a patriotic and responsible male citizen.

Furthermore, women and the femininities associated with them are also crucial for the construction of militarized masculinities for another reason. To borrow from Elshtain (1995), they represent the „beautiful souls“ that “just warriors” (p.4) can and must rescue. Any

analysis of masculinities must also consider constructions of femininity, as these concepts are closely interrelated and reinforce each other.

Militarized masculinities are therefore not limited to the military, but permeate broader social structures, legitimize the use of military force and influence behavior on the individual level (Enloe, 2000). Quest and Messerschmidt (2017) assume that individual actions and social structures are mutually dependent and have a co-constitutive relationship, and that accordingly, gender constructions and identities at the individual and collective level change interdependently in the course of armed conflicts. In a context of militarized masculinities, military actions are particularly attractive as they express and consolidate identity that is compatible with social constructions. The construction of militarized masculinities on a macro-societal level thereby causes individuals to act a certain way on the micro-level (Eriksson Baaz & Stern 2009; Quest & Messerschmidt 2017). This entrenchment of militarized masculinities at the institutional, societal and individual level lead to them having lasting effects on societies far beyond the end of conflicts (Bulmer & Eichler, 2017).

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to correctly embed the analysis into the context of Ukrainian society, an overview of the evolving gender norms and hegemonic forms of masculinity is necessary. This literature review therefore describes the developments in Ukraine since the fall of the Soviet Union and introduces the feminist literature on how masculinities develop during conflicts.

1. Gender Dynamics in Ukraine

The concept of masculinity in Ukraine has been subject to many social changes in recent decades, influenced by historical ideals and strongly shaped by political events. Although the Soviet era was by no means one of complete gender equality, women were encouraged to participate in the workforce and granted legal equality (Darbaidze & Niparishvili, 2023). The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 was followed by an estrangement from the Soviet past and a resurrection of pre-Soviet national ideals (Bureychak, 2011). This brought with it a return to traditional gender roles, modeled on pre-Soviet norms (ibid.). In post-Soviet Ukraine, the pinnacle of masculinity therefore has been closely interrelated with the Cossacks, a militaristic society that existed in Ukraine from the 15th to the 17th century, emphasizing militarism, courage, masculine solidarity and independence (Bureychak & Petrenko, 2015; Wojnicka et al., 2022). While men take up the role of the protector, women are mostly been socialized to take on their traditional role as mother and housewife (Barth, 2021).

Following the immediate post-Soviet period, scholars point out that in the last decade, Ukraine's orientation towards the West led to the increasing presence of emancipatory gender norms, which are particularly relevant when seen in contrast to the illiberal and traditionalist norms represented by Russia (Kratochvil & O'Sullivan, 2023; Martsenyuk, 2015). Nonetheless, seeing this „fundamental re-definition of masculinities and femininities” (Kratochvil & O'Sullivan, 2023:356) in the last decade as directly dismantling traditional gender norms would be simplistic. Instead, we observe a dual development, particularly since the annexation of Crimea and more prominently since the full-scale invasion. While collective resistance has opened new avenues of emancipation and challenged traditional gender roles, the process of militarization has also cemented them.

Emphasizing the emancipatory trend, Martsenyuk (2015) posits that the Euromaidan enabled women to challenge traditional roles and that their agency is also becoming more widely recognized. This is not least expressed by the fact that President Zelensky always

explicitly speaks of male *and* female Ukrainians, who are defending the nation (ibid.). This was accompanied by a legislative step that allows women to obtain combat positions in the Ukrainian army, taking up new roles previously reserved for men (Martsenyuk et al., 2016). A similar trend can be observed in the media, where the portrayal of women has been slowly changing from traditionalist to “more agentic and emancipatory” (Strelnyk, 2024:34). Some scholars also emphasize a transformation of masculinities. Again, President Zelensky is often taken as example as scholars argue that he presents a “new kind of masculinity” (Martsenyuk & Shevtsova, 2024:55), revolving around empathy and the open display of feelings such as a joy and sadness (see ibid.; Kratochvil & O’Sullivan, 2023).

However, many scholars also emphasize that the war has had a detrimental effect in cementing traditional ideas of femininity and masculinity. While commending women’s inclusion in the Ukrainian army, Martsenyuk et al. (2016) lament that women’s right “to hold combat and officer positions” (p.184) is still suppressed in practice. Also regarding the Euromaidan, many scholars conclude that women were very restricted in their agency, expected to take on supportive roles and excluded from militarized activities (ibid.; Khromeychuk, 2018; Strelnyk, 2024). For men, it was an arena to demonstrate normative notions of masculinity such as heroism and patriotism. While women were *restricted* in their participation, men were actually *expected* to participate and men who failed to do so became the object of societal condemnation (Martsenyuk & Shevtsova, 2024).

Similar critiques are expressed when assessing Zelensky’s masculinity. Many scholars argue that despite his masculinity not being as obviously militaristic and traditionalist as Putin’s, he does embody significant characteristics of militarized masculinity (Wojnicka et al., 2022). A particular prominent example of this is his response to the American offer to evacuate him “I need ammunition, not a ride” (Braithwaite, 2022). It has become associated with the courage and fortitude of Ukrainians, in particular men fighting on the warfront, and is symbolic of a trend that seems to cement traditional understandings of masculinity.

Generally, the majority of scholars contend that the Russian annexation and following war led to a “nationalist and militaristic discourse” (O’Sullivan, 2019:754) that generally exacerbates gender inequalities. The conflict has resulted in women participating less in local decision-making (Kratochvil & O’Sullivan, 2023) and has exacerbated women’s gendered vulnerabilities such as sexual and gender-based violence (Capasso et al. 2022) or a higher risk of trafficking (Enloe, 2024).

Men, on the other hand, are subject to compulsory military service and are not allowed to leave the country if they are conscripted. Khromeychuck (2018) illustrates how militarization in Ukraine established a specific value system where military men are positioned at the apex of the patriarchal hierarchy. Since the subject of this thesis is to analyze the development of masculinities and how men try to adhere to certain hegemonic forms of masculinity, the next chapter will review the existing literature on the nexus between conflict and masculinities in more detail.

2. (Ukrainian) Masculinities in the Midst of Conflict

The academic literature examining the role of gender in the conflict in Ukraine has mostly focused on women, while the gendered roles of men are often just mentioned peripherally. Only a few papers explicitly examine masculinities amidst the ongoing war from a feminist perspective (Blomqvist Mickelsson, 2023; Martsenyuk & Shevtsova, 2024 among others). This chapter therefore builds on feminist scholarship that explores how conflict and masculinities are connected more generally and complements this with insights from other academic disciplines, such as law or psychology, on how the war in Ukraine impacts men specifically.

As mentioned previously, men are often seen as the primary combatants expected to take up arms and defend their homeland. This expectation is deeply rooted in militarized versions of hegemonic masculinity that equate masculinity with strength, bravery and sacrifice. Here, a gendered „duty to protect“ (Kronsell & Svedberg, 2001) is introduced, in which the defense of the nation is socially institutionalized as the personal responsibility of every male citizen. Many scholars point to the fact that the gendered responsibility to protect is institutionalized in the practice of conscription, which, in most cases, obliges only men's bodies to the front lines. States thereby reinforce militarized masculinities during recruitment processes by appealing to the essentialist notion that men are more naturally aggressive, more rational and more willing to use violence than women (Bulmer & Eichler, 2017; Christensen & Kyed, 2022; Eichler, 2014; Khalid, 2015). In Ukraine, the imposition of martial law on February 24, 2022 effectively prohibited Ukrainian men aged 18 to 60 from leaving the country in order to guarantee rapid mobilization if needed (Marushak, 2023; Darden 2023; Wojnicka, 2023). Many feminist scholars have criticized such conscription policies as gender-based violence (Carpenter, 2006; Shand, 2022; Wojnicka et al., 2022). They describe that in Ukraine, “men of fighting age have had to transform into protectors of the nation” (Wojnicka et al., 2022:85),

and are legally obligated to put their own life at risk in order to protect women, children and sometimes other men from threats. The institutionalized gendering of men as warriors leads to a situation, where, in practice, the distinction between civilians and combatants is made on the basis of gender and age characteristics, rather than individuals' actions in a wartime context (Darden, 2023). In Ukraine, this dynamic is clearly exemplified by the Bucha massacre where the assumption that all Ukrainian men are potential combatants led to a highly disproportionate number of male victims (Al-Hlou et al., 2022).

This image is also reinforced by media images of the Ukrainian man as a “wartime hero”, illustrating the perfect image of masculinity built on courage and protection (Włodkowska, 2023:104). In a study of the identities of Ukrainian soldiers, Mul and Hromovenko (2023) find that Ukrainian soldiers see their identity as “an inner feeling of attachment to their people and a sense of duty to defend their country” (p.72). Even though not all men, and not even the majority, is currently on the frontline, these gendered expectations are very strong in Ukraine (Strelnyk, 2024).

3. The Impacts of Gendered Expectations on Ukrainian Men

While gender is crucial in shaping and creating conflicts, it also plays a pivotal role in forming the realities and experiences of individuals in wartime contexts. The pressure to conform to hegemonic forms of militarized masculinity can have significant psychological impacts on men. In Ukraine, corruption scandals, tightened conscription measures, and the fear that the age of active conscription, which is currently at 25, will be further lowered, is tempting more and more Ukrainian men to leave the country illegally or to take other measures to evade the draft (Dettmer, 2024; Sauer, 2024; Palikot, 2023). These often called “draft evaders”, face potential consequences under criminal law, as well as social stigma for not protecting their country from the enemy. Those who are unable or unwilling to fight may be viewed with suspicion or contempt, accused of lacking patriotism or bravery. This social pressure can lead to feelings of shame and inadequacy, further straining their mental health. As Cynthia Enloe (2024) aptly posits, “militaries count on [men and boys] to internalize a need to prove their own manliness – both to themselves and everyone else” (p.38). Men are thereby not only persuaded to join the military by conscription law, but above all by the desire to uphold masculine ideals.

This social pressure to adhere to conscription is particularly high in situations where the war effort enjoys high legitimacy. Wars of self-defense, such as in Ukraine, typically command strong legitimacy, which in turn bolsters the legitimacy of conscription policies (Linn, 1996). In these scenarios, the expectation for men to embody the warrior ideal intensifies, and draft evasion of conscientious objection is more likely to be socially condemned (Ethymiou, 2023). Blomqvist Mickelsson (2023) shows that Ukrainian men who flee the country experience ambiguous feelings incorporating shame for not living up to the expectation to defend the country. He also points to the fact that men have to reconcile the dilemma between whether they should be the protector of the nation or the protector of the family since staying behind in Ukraine while wife and kids leave abroad also means giving up the responsibility of becoming the family's protector. However, this might also present a chance for men to "mitigate any potential stigma and reinforce one's masculinity" (ibid.; p.6) because leaving with them allows them to "take on the role of the family's protector, ensuring safe surroundings for their family" (ibid.).

However, active service in the military does not guarantee achieving hegemonic militarized masculinity or exemption from social stigma. Men in military service encounter traumatizing experiences, including the deaths of fellow soldiers or physical injuries (Cancio et al. 2018; Colborne 2015; Stebliuk et al. 2016), which are closely linked to psychological issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or other mental health problems (Sharp & Harvey 2001; Roth et al. 2008). In Ukraine, the suicide rate is almost twice as high as the world average, with at least half of the suicides in Ukraine committed by soldiers (ibid.; Deahl & Andreassen, 2023). Mykhalchuk et al. (2023) conclude that the pervasive impact of the war has resulted in moral, physical and psychological overload.

Despite these challenges, the stigma surrounding mental health, particularly for men, often prevents them from seeking the help they need as any deficiency in effectively executing military tasks is associated with femininity. As Green et al. (2010) point out, depression, for instance, is seen as an essentially female illness, showing a lack of emotional control that does not conform to the idealized notion of masculinity. The link between masculinity and military service therefore often results in men being rhetorically stripped of their masculinity if they do not meet the expectations of militarized masculinity. Whitworth (2004) writes that this incongruence between the image of a warrior and the actual experiences of soldiers in the military reveals the contradictions and fragility of militarized masculinity and also contributes

to PTSD. While joining the military is associated with the acquisition of traits such as toughness and perseverance, it is exactly this notion which then presents a barrier to the expression of emotional distress because this is perceived as threats to one's masculinity. Scholars show that this in turn leads to the expression of grief through other outlets which are less threatening to a masculine identity, such as heavy drinking or violence, which in turn has a detrimental effect on society as a whole (Green et al. 2010).

4. Research Gap

As evident from the above literature review, understandings and perceptions of gender norms are currently subject to contention and are evolving amidst of the Russian full-scale aggression against Ukraine. Even though existing scholarship has focused on the gendered impacts of the conflict in Ukraine, limited attention was given to specifically analyze the gendered experiences and perceptions of men. This underscores the need to explore how Ukrainian men navigate their roles in a situation where they are socially and legally expected to embody traits like strength, bravery, and sacrifice to protect the nation. This is relevant for two reasons: First, focusing only on women perpetuates gender essentialism, whereby women are presented as the only subjects of gendered realities, while men's realities are continuously presented as objective and neutral, and not in need of feminist scrutiny. It fails to recognize masculinities as socially constructed, thereby not only neglecting gendered vulnerabilities of men but also reinforcing patriarchal norms. As Reeser (2015) notes, the "precondition for change is to understand masculinity and to make it visible" (p.16).

Connected to this, the second major issue with this research gap is the profound impact the war and the gendered roles attributed to individuals of different genders will have on Ukrainian society post-conflict. As mentioned above, conflict experiences and the connected militarization of a society lead to increased suicide, domestic violence and mental health issues and generally undermine efforts toward a gender-just society. Understanding how the war shapes individuals' perceptions of their roles and how they try to adhere to them is therefore essential in anticipating how the conflict might influence and shape Ukrainian society as a whole.

4. METHODOLOGY

The aim of this thesis is to contribute to the existing literature on the gendered effects of the war in Ukraine by examining how Ukrainian men perceive their roles amidst the Russian aggression. By examining these unexplored dimensions, it seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the gender dynamics at play, ultimately informing efforts to address and mitigate the mid- and long-term effects on Ukrainian society.

For this research, I conducted 17 semi-structured interviews involving 15 Ukrainian men. The interviews explored their decision-making process regarding joining or not joining the military, their perspectives regarding conscription and perceived responsibilities during the conflict. The interviewees ranged from the ages of 21 to 48. Given the conscription policies at the time of interviewing, all interviewed men were generally eligible for military service and are prohibited to leave the country. However, two were under the age of active mobilization, which is 25 as of April 2024 (Sauer 2024). Eight participants are actively engaged in the Ukrainian military, of which six volunteered and two were conscripted. While all of the military respondents had gained combat experience on the front line, some of them had been reassigned to logistical or bureaucratic positions at the time of the interview. One interviewee was undergoing conscription procedures at the time of the interview, one was exempted and one declared unfit. Two expressed that they are explicitly taking measures to evade the draft, by, for instance, not leaving the house as much and avoiding areas around recruitment offices. Another two reside abroad and can therefore effectively not be drafted. The men interviewed hail from diverse regions across Ukraine, including, but not limited to, Kyiv, Odesa, Kharkiv, Mykolaiv, Zaporizhia, and Lviv. Their perspectives are therefore shaped by different daily realities, with Kharkiv and Mykolaiv being active combat zones, while Lviv and Kyiv at the time of writing remain relatively stable and are not acutely attacked by Russian forces (ACLED, 2024). Importantly, none of the participants are from the separatist regions of Donetsk and Luhansk and all interviewees identify as Ukrainian, with no affiliations to separatist movements. While this was partly due to limited access to individuals from these regions, it was also methodologically deliberate. Notions of patriotism and citizenship are inextricably linked to how the interlocutors understand their roles and identities in the ongoing war effort. Including participants with fundamentally different perspectives on these themes would have made the research not feasible within the scope of this thesis.

Snowball sampling was used to align with the exploratory nature of this research. This involved leveraging existing connections with Ukrainian men, who either participated directly or facilitated connections. However, I initially encountered challenges in the recruitment process as many men who had some sort of personal connection with me seemed uneasy discussing their experiences and perspectives. Blomqvist Mickelsson (2023) suggests that “questions or justifications for leaving might be traumatic to answer” (p.7). This could explain why men accessible through personal contacts, most of which resided abroad, might have been less inclined to participate in the research. Consequently, majority of the interlocutors were ultimately approached via online platforms such as LinkedIn and Reddit. While I generally experienced a positive reception online, some initially displayed skepticism regarding the authenticity of my research, and two openly expressed concerns that I was a Russian operative. To facilitate unbiased discussions, I undertook deliberate efforts to address these concerns and provide extensive identification and academic accreditation.

The interviews were conducted in person or via online platforms from February to May 2023. Most lasted between 45 minutes and an hour and a half. Additionally, I had follow-up conversations with two men who agreed to continue the conversation. The interviews were recorded which minimized distractions such as note-taking (Fuji, 2017). Subsequently, these recordings were transcribed using an online transcription tool and manual transcription. This method facilitated a thorough analysis of the spoken content, ensuring that the research reflected the interviewees’ statements in their entirety and that pertinent quotes were not taken out of context, but could be accurately analyzed and interpreted. One interlocutor was not comfortable with a verbal interview and chose to answer the questions in a written form.

The interviews usually began with an introductory conversation to establish the background of the interlocutor and to ease into the conversation. Later, the questions became more specific to the war, including questions like “What was your initial reaction when Russia invaded in February 2022?”, “How do you perceive your role in Ukraine today?” or “How do you feel about men who evade the draft?”⁴. Throughout the interview process, the questions prepared for each interview were continuously adapted and refined based on insights gained from previous interviews. This was accompanied by an iterative approach to data analysis, where specific patterns and trends were identified inductively, but also deductively based on existing research. These themes identified in the interviews include inter alia ‘patriotism’,

⁴ See appendix for full questionnaire.

‘duty’, ‘camaraderie’, ‘stoicism’, ‘stigmatization of mental health’, ‘militarized masculinity’ or ‘shame’.

1. The Interviewee as an Active Participant

The aim of the interviews was to explore the experiences and perspectives of the participating men, their attitudes towards their perceived role within the conflict and the underlying perceptions of masculinity. The selection of semi-structured interviews was deliberate, as they allow for a specific catalog of prepared questions, tailored to answer the research question. Due to the emotional and sensitive nature of the topic, consent was not only sought at the beginning of the interview but was repeatedly underscored throughout, particularly when broaching sensitive topics. Further, I only asked particularly sensitive questions where it seemed the interlocutors were emotionally prepared to answer them. When interviewing, I followed the “feminist ethic of commitment and egalitarianism” (Tickner, 2006:28), trying to counter the shortcomings of traditional academic research, which often employs a hierarchical differentiation of roles between researcher and researched. Cynthia Enloe describes this feminist approach as follows:

We can forget that individuals are diverse, complex, hard-to-fathom creatures. It takes feminist listening, therefore, to take on board interviewee’s contradictions, confusions and anxieties... Feminist listening is not arrogant, however. That is it doesn’t set the listener up as knowing more about what the speaker means than the speaker her/himself (Enloe, 2011:142).

Thereby, the interlocutor is not merely regarded as a passive source of information but rather as an active participant with agency (Fujii, 2017). This approach fosters “reciprocity on the part of the interviewer” (Bryman 2012:492), where the interviewee also benefits from the interaction, rather than feeling exploited for information. It is for this reason, that I refer to ‘interlocutors’ instead of ‘interviewees’. In this regard, feedback from participants who stated that they enjoyed the conversation and found it meaningful was particularly reaffirming. Many interlocutors emphasized that they wanted their voices heard, with one even remarking „this felt like a therapy session“ (Anton, p.13). The open interview process allowed the interlocutors to expand on the topics they deem relevant which led to the conversations occasionally digressing in seemingly unrelated directions. Surprisingly, these apparent diversions often revealed pertinent issues that might have been overlooked in a more structured approach.

2. Methodological Limitations and Considerations

The methodology employed for this research is subject to several limitations.

As previously mentioned, most participants were recruited via the online platforms LinkedIn and Reddit. For interviewees recruited through LinkedIn, most of which were active soldiers, their disclosure of involvement in the Ukrainian military likely reflects a sense of pride in their service. This impression was confirmed in the interviews, where only one of the interviewed soldiers expressed a predominantly negative opinion of and experience in the Ukrainian military. It can be assumed that men whose feelings about their service in the military are more negative are less likely to share this activity online. On Reddit, men were recruited via the subreddit r/Ukraine, which has been previously described as “construct[ing] meaning through a distinctly Western and masculine lens” (Borg & Käis, 2022; cited from Phillips & Martsenyuk, 2023:6). This might result in a potential overrepresentation of these viewpoints.

Further, all interviews were conducted in English or German and most interviewees possessed a very advanced knowledge of the spoken language, indicating a higher level of education. This is confirmed when looking at the educational background of the interviewees, most of whom have completed or are completing a university degree. Many participants emphasized their professional successes prior to the war, suggesting a higher socio-economic class. In addition, it is important to consider that conducting interviews in a non-native language can pose challenges. Even if participants were proficient in English or German, nuances in language use and cultural expressions might be lost or misinterpreted. This can lead to subtle meanings or emotions not being fully captured as they would be in the interviewee’s native language.

As previously mentioned, the interviews were conducted between March and May of 2024. The results of the research therefore focus on a specific time during the conflict, namely the first two-and-a-half years since the start of the full-scale invasion. While the insights shed light on certain trends in how masculinities in Ukraine are perceived and performed in the context of the Russian full-scale aggression – ergo how the participants “understand their world” (Broache 2022:549) – they are based on the accounts of 15 individuals and are not generalizable to the entire Ukrainian society. Further research is needed to refine these

findings and give a more accurate account of the impact of the current war on masculinities in Ukraine.

3. Reflections on Positionality and Challenges

Employing a critical lens informed by Critical Masculinity Studies, the empirical insights are contextualized to elucidate the intricate interplay between masculinity, militarism, and societal transformation in the context of contemporary Ukraine. In an attempt to respond to valid criticisms of Ukrainian scholars that Western feminist academia writes primarily *about* Ukraine (Hendl et al. 2024), I actively attempt to reflect on my own positionality as a white Central European woman who is not part of Ukrainian society. Ukrainian scholars argue that Feminist International Relations scholarship marginalizes the post-socialist region, caught between the Global North and the Global South. (ibid.) This results in Western feminist epistemologies being imposed without recognizing regional and cultural contexts. As a result, Ukrainian feminist voices advocating for arming Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression find their voices suppressed by the Western feminist emphasis on pacifism (Graff 2022; Hendl 2022; Hendl et. al 2024; Kratochvil & O’Sullivan 2023). To avoid such “Westsplaining” (Hendl et al. 2024:176), my considerations are consciously informed by the insights of Ukrainian and other Central and Eastern European feminist scholars (Johnson 2023).

Furthermore, the process of reflecting on my positionality brought me to a dilemma articulate by Ghani and Khan (2024). They argue that reflexivity in positionality *statements* without reflexivity in relation to practice can just lead to improving my position as a researcher by having admitted to my positionality and thereby giving my words more legitimacy. Therefore, I aimed to ensure that my reflexivity was not just performative but genuinely informed my research practice, by seeking to mitigate potential biases inherent in my position. I did this by actively consulting Ukrainian feminist literature, and engaging in conversations with Ukrainian friends and acquaintances, whose perspectives showed me my own biases. They pointed me to certain sensitivities that I should keep in mind during the interviews, but also encouraged me to continue my research despite the complexities involved. Engaging with these challenges has improved my ability to conduct research that is ethically sound and ensures that the voices and experiences of those studied are authentically represented.

Actively reflecting on my positionality and engaging with Ukrainian voices presented me with numerous challenges and moments of doubt. From the beginning of the research

process, I faced a moral dilemma about its appropriateness, given the crucial need for self-defense of Ukrainians. While it is important to consider the long-term societal effects, I questioned whether my research goals were benign in the face of Russian aggression. Often, I doubted my feminist perspectives when the need for traditional masculinity seemed so obvious. At many points, I found myself thinking “Of course men have to go to the front and defend the country; how can it be any other way?”. In these moments of doubt, I again turned to feminist literature. Western feminist scholars point to the fact that questioning ones research goals as benign is a sign that you are overcoming patriarchal norms (Enloe, 2016). Ukrainian feminist voices, who have been grappling with the dilemma of how to balance the need for self-defense with feminist ideals, offer a different perspective. They recognize that achieving this balance is currently unsolvable; a deeply unsatisfying conclusion. Celebrating militarized masculinity might be necessary to some extent, despite cementing traditional understandings of masculinity and femininity and harming gender equality in the long term (Chumalo, 2022; cited from Kratochvil & O’Sullivan, 2023). With this in mind, I began conducting interviews.

5. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the results of how the interviewed Ukrainian men perceive their roles amidst the ongoing war and how they navigate the shift towards a more militarized form of hegemonic masculinity during this period of conflict. The analysis is situated within the broader context of existing feminist literature on masculinities and war.

5.1. The Militarized Duty to Protect

A crucial theme in understanding how Ukrainian men perceive and perform their masculine roles amidst Russian aggression that emerged clearly is their profound sense of duty to protect during the ongoing conflict. This sense of duty was closely tied to their own sense of honor and identity as men, serving as a guiding principle that influences their actions and shapes their self-perception in relation to the ongoing war.

An essential aspect of this sense of responsibility is the identification of many men as protectors of their families. Several interlocutors emphasized their immediate responsibility to ensure the safety of their loved ones before becoming involved in the war effort. Mykhailo (41, Mykolaiv, military) described his actions at the onset of the full-scale invasion as follows: “Immediately woke up and started to prepare my family, my kids and wife for kind of immediate evacuation.” (p.7). He went on to explain that the conscription to the military happened later because he “had the task to first move [his] family to a safe place.” (ibid.). Andriy (45, Zaporizhia, military) similarly described this dual responsibility: “[I] organize[d] my family safety location, more than 150 kilometers in a village near Kyiv. The next day, I moved to the military point.” (Interview 1, p.4). These responses illustrate that familial protection is seen as a precursor to participating in the national defense effort.

For most interlocutors, the perceived responsibility to protect extended beyond the family and was also perceived on the community and national level. After ensuring that his family was safe abroad, Mykhailo stayed in Ukraine and was drafted shortly thereafter. His reaction to being drafted is telling to the deep-seated sense of responsibility toward the broader Ukrainian society despite potential risks and danger involved in military service: “My emotion was that my family is in the same safe place and we have to go and fight for other families” (p.8). This sense of societal duty is fundamentally connected with prevalent notions of masculinity, as aptly expressed by Dymtro (37, Lviv, military). He described masculinity as

„[t]aking responsibility. The responsibility for others I think. Because taking responsibility for yourself is not enough.“ (p.13). Many respondents – military men as well as civilians – similarly emphasized that they believe that joining the army “is my duty as a man” (Andrij, Interview 1, p.4) and that “you have the obligation to defend your country” (Boryslav, p.11).

Men who were willing to take on such self-sacrifice were seen by many respondents as the pinnacle of masculinity: “The person who can sacrifice themselves for others, they are just the best people.” (ibid., p.11). This is consistent with the findings of Ukrainian feminist scholars who illustrate how the normalization of militarization in Ukraine established a specific value system where military men are positioned at the apex of the patriarchal hierarchy (Khromeychuk, 2018). Thereby, the “duty to protect the territory, to kill and risk being killed” is intricately connected to “masculinity and the initiation into manhood” (Kronsell & Svedberg, 2001:158). The link between masculinity and military service also results in men being rhetorically stripped of their masculinity if they do not meet the expectations of militarized masculinity (Darden, 2023). During the interviews, many interlocutors expressed that men evading the draft were not really men. A particular illustrative example is Dymtro’s statement that men who leave the country and evade the draft are “cowards without balls” (p.14). It exemplifies how the perceived lack of bravery of draft dodgers is directly linked with masculinity and those, who are unwilling to fulfill their duty as ‘protectors’ and ‘defenders’ are emasculated and feminized. This suggests a social framework where masculinity is contingent upon fulfilling roles involving protection and combat. By failing to meet these expectations, draft evaders are seen as deficient in essential masculine qualities, leading to their rhetorical emasculation.

However, also fulfilling the duty to protect often comes at a significant personal cost. One interlocutor reflected on the strain between his patriotic duty and familial responsibilities: “My wife blamed me all the time [...] that I chose patriotism instead of family.” (Mykhailo, p.8). Andrij describes a similar reaction from his wife: “My wife, she was crying. So she also tried to convince me not to go” (Interview 2, p.1), signaling the personal stakes and emotional burden that comes with the decision to join the military. However, he also stated that if he had not joined the military, his family “would think, or even tell me directly that I’m a coward and escaped the war” (p.4). This statement highlights the significant internal conflict between not only personal safety and societal obligations, but also between ensuring the well-being of the family versus the well-being of the nation as a whole. Georgij (40, Drohobych, civilian), whose

wife and children fled to Vienna in the first months after the invasion, decided to leave his position as a logistical volunteer for the military and join his family a few weeks before our interview. He explained his decision as follows: “I want to be with my family. Because two years without family. And I am scared to lose my family.” (p.14). Blomqvist Mickelsson (2023) suggests the possibility that this dual protector responsibility also presents an opportunity to diminish social stigma. Even if men do not conform to the role of the protector of the nation, assuming the role of the protector of the family could soften the impact on their masculinity.

However, this perceived duty to contribute to the war effort is dependent on geographical location and the threat that comes with that. Andriy, for instance, who has lived in Kyiv for years, said that he only thought about joining the military after the full-scale invasion. He attributed this to a “distance feeling”, explaining that “in 2014 [...], it was like 700, 800 kilometers from Kyiv” (Interview 1, p.4f). Now actively serving, he criticizes that large parts of the Ukrainian population who are not part of the military or live directly in the combat zone fail to take the war seriously: „People continue to live just a regular live without, even, you know, the bad mood that [...] children are dying.” (ibid.). According to him, the masculine sense of being a protector is thereby directly correlated with the perceived proximity of the threat: „the closer enemy, then I would say more duty you feel inside yourself to go and stand up with other males” (ibid.; sic!). This could indicate that militarized masculinities have a more hegemonic position in places where the existential threat is higher.

5.2. Civilian Contributions as Masculine Duty

Among the civilian men, all expressed responsibility to support the war effort. Anton (37, Zaporizhia, civilian), who is evading conscription, chose to remain in the country because he “feel[s] some responsibility to stay, well, if not [to] fight directly, then to help” (p.9). Many civilian men set aside their previous professions for volunteer efforts that support the army or otherwise contribute to the country’s defense. Denis (29, Odesa, civilian) has been actively engaged in the volunteer movement since 2014. He started collecting money and buying ammunition for the army, emphasizing the importance of personal responsibility in ensuring the country’s survival amidst the conflict. He stated, “it’s your responsibility. [...] You need to do something more than just sit on your back like, okay, I’m paying my taxes” (p.8). Despite not being active military personnel, all men expressed that they felt a duty to engage in activities vital to national defense. This underscores the societal pressure for men to contribute

actively to the war efforts, if not through military service, then through substantial civilian support roles.

In some conversations, interlocutors expressed that it not all men should to join the military but that also economic roles need to be filled. Artem (44, Drohobych, military) illustrated this by saying, “The role of men is to fight. But we should understand that if all men go to war, the economy will stop. And the economy is the blood of the war” (p.9). Similarly, Boryslav (39, Kyiv, in process of being conscripted) expressed that men who were reluctant to fight should contribute to the economy instead: “I think there are plenty of non-combat roles they can fill. I think the economy also has to go on something.” (p.10). Nevertheless, these economic roles for men always had to be connected to the war effort. The individual display of wealth, prior a marker of masculinity in Ukrainian society and associated with the attractiveness as a potential partner (Janey et al., 2009), now had a negative connotation. Boryslav captured a striking example of this shift:

“Right now, if you are running a bubbling V8 [SUV] across the street, no one thinks that you are an alpha male. Everyone thinks that you are a conscript dodger. [...] Nobody thinks that you are the perfect male, really. Not anymore.”
(p.18)

Men who displayed wealth and luxury are now viewed negatively compared to those who serve in the army, reflecting a profound transformation in societal values where military service and sacrifice are seen as the primary markers of true masculinity. This signals a development, where the hegemonic image of masculinity emphasizes the role of ‘protector’ over the ‘provider’ amid war, and militarized masculinity is seen as the pinnacle of masculinity. Even if the importance of economic factors was often acknowledged, these need to be to the benefit of national defense instead of personal enrichment. Finally, men occupying economic roles beneficial to national defense were still depicted as subordinate to those in explicitly militarized protector roles in most interviews.

5.3. Emotional Resilience and Feelings of Guilt

The foregoing chapters pointed to the internal conflict that many men experience when trying to adhere to hegemonic notions of militarized masculinity. Nevertheless, most men exhibited a collected demeanor when discussing highly stressful and frightening situations. It became apparent that this experience is strongly intertwined with hegemonic understandings of

masculinity, which expect a man to be emotionally resilient and not show weakness. The pressure to conform to these ideals often shapes how men process and express their emotions.

All the interviewees implicitly or explicitly described being torn between the societal and legal duty of defending their country and the desire to ensure their own survival and well-being, as well as the well-being of their families. Even though many acknowledged the fear of war and the desire for self-preservation as natural instincts, they felt societal pressure to suppress these instincts in favor of defending the country. One interlocutor admits, “most of the people, of men, are afraid of war. It’s normal because no one wants to die. But we have no choice. If we don’t stop Russians, they will destroy us.” (Artem, p.10; sic!). In light of this reality, men are expected to fulfill their collective duty to protect their nation. Boryslav, currently in the process of being conscripted, responded to the question of how he feels about being sent to the front soon: “It’s a very anxiety-inducing time to be conscripted because everybody is saying ‘Ukraine is losing. There is not ammo, no nothing. But you know, somebody has to hold the line. What can you do.’” (p.9) Anatolij (48, Kyiv, soldier) described his decision to join as follows: “It will be toughest experience in my life, it’s likely that I shall die, but we shall do our best to kick those Russian asses” (p.1). While acknowledging hardship, they ultimately reflect the cultural expectation for men to confront their fears with stoicism. Mykhailo, who was conscripted at the beginning of the full-scale invasion, explicitly stated that showing emotions does not go hand in hand with prevalent norms of masculinity in Ukraine: “Yes, I am scared [...] but you know, in our culture, men shouldn’t kind of show it, because it’s a man’s role in Ukraine to be a defender.” (p.9). He reflects a societal expectation that men must conceal their fears and vulnerabilities to fulfill their roles as protectors.

This was accompanied by a stigmatization of mental health, both among many respondents and in the environments they described. Serhij (21, Kyiv, military), who volunteered for the defense of Kyiv on the first day of the invasion and was then sent to active combat duty in the east of the country, describes being denied promotion to rank as an officer because “some major [...] thought I was like defective because I had a depressive disorder.” (Interview 1, p.14). Other research shows how this is a highly gendered sentiment. As Green et al. (2010) point out, depression is seen as an essentially female illness, showing a lack of emotional control that does not conform to the idealized notion of masculinity. Further

describing his experience in the combat unit, Serhij recounted that even highly traumatized soldiers who had just returned from the front line were kept busy with work:

„There were a lot of times, for example, when people who have returned from the combat lines, who were shell-shocked, you know, they couldn't really speak properly because they stuttered and they were just assigned some guard duty or something like that.” (Interview 1, p.9)

This underlines a cultural stigma towards mental health problems that encourages men to persevere without seeking psychological help, remaining functional and productive at all costs. Particularly Serhij's accounts reflected the lack of support and recognition for soldiers struggling with combat-related trauma, as well as an institutional reluctance to address mental health issues. As Blanchard (2014) explains, there is a logic behind militaries not recognizing the emotional toll of military service as it would undermine the very myth of masculinity based on physical and psychological strength that they instrumentalize in recruitment processes. He shows how emotional and mental health issues are often dismissed in militarized environments, where any display of vulnerability is seen as a violation of masculine norms. Colborne hypothesizes that the psychological effects of the war experience are exacerbated because soldiers do not know how to cope with what they have experienced and are unwilling to ask for help. (Colborne, 2015). Scholars have shown that this leads to the expression of grief through other outlets which are less threatening to a masculine identity, such as heavy drinking or violence (Green et al., 2010). These experiences of violence by men in conflicts also make them more likely to use violence against others, including their intimate partners (Shand, 2022). The severe mental health crisis and psychological climate in the Ukrainian armed forces are also reflected in the high suicide rate. The suicide rate in Ukraine is almost twice as high as the world average, with at least half of the suicides in Ukraine committed by soldiers (Mykhalchuk, 2023; Deahl & Andreassen, 2023).

While none of the interlocutors pointed to such explicitly destructive behaviors, many did reflect reluctance to seek psychological help and instead deal differently with the psychological consequences of war. Artem had the following to say about this:

„The best drugs against [PTSD] is work. When my two grandpas returned from army to their families, the country was in ruins. If they wanted their family to live, if they wanted their people have bread to eat, they should work and

should do a lot of work. If the person is working, they have no time to think
 ,Oh, it's very bad, oh, I have stress'". (Artem, p.11; sic!)

His statement reflects not only the expectation that men should remain functional and productive despite severe emotional trauma but also privileges a stoic form of masculinity where personal suffering is managed privately rather than seeking psychological help.

Despite the stigmatization of mental health, many respondents serving on the front line in the military did show resignation and described the hardships they experience. Artem described how intense and unpredictable this experience is: "Everyone is tired, very tired. And morally tired, physically tired. [...] We talk that we are not immortal and we are not terminators. But the situation is war" (p.8). Another described the immense emotional toll of uncertainty on the front line: "Five minutes you're happy, five minutes you're destroyed. [...] And the swings are present all the time." (Dymtro, p.8). They thereby illustrated the profound emotional toll of combat.

Civilian men faced different challenges in reconciling their personal experiences with hegemonic notions of what is expected of them as men. Opting for personal safety brought its own set of challenges. Maksim (31, Odesa, civilian), a young architect from Odessa who emigrated to Vienna seven years prior to the full-scale invasion expressed feelings of guilt. He explained he was not returning to Ukraine because "if I were to go home now, there is a huge risk that I will not be able to return to Austria. And that would mean that I would lose my job and my apartment." (p.2). His choice of prioritizing his personal wellbeing over the nation led to feelings of guilt, particularly when he juxtaposed his life in Vienna with "beautiful apartments" and "a great job" (p.6) to the daily reality of his friends and relatives in Ukraine.

Anton, a reservist for the army evading conscription in Ukraine, shared similar feelings. He shared that he did not "go to the recruitment center because [he] was afraid." (p.2) and explained how this decision led him to feel "a little bit ashamed" (p.6). He juxtaposed his fear with the emotional strength of men who do join the military: "The men with willpower, they're already volunteering. They're doing all they can. The men without are just hiding." (p.11). He thereby inadvertently positioned himself as lacking resilience, suggesting a sense of inadequacy regarding his own masculinity. Even though Anton expressed that he was categorically against conscription, he said that he would feel some sort of relief if he were conscripted because "at least I will not have shame for skipping this altogether" (p.8). These

statements resonate with Blomqvist Mickelsson's findings (2023) that men evading conscription feel shame for leaving fellow Ukrainian men to defend the country.

5.4. Defending Ukraine as a Rite of Passage to Citizenship

What was clear from the interviews is that the motivation to defend the country from Russia was deeply rooted in the defense of Ukraine, highlighting the link between masculinity, patriotism and citizenship. Kiril (32, Chernihiv, military) described the willingness to defend Ukraine as a core value: "This is my value, to defend my country, my relatives, my citizens, and [...] I have a patriotic value." (p.13). Similarly, Andrij, explicitly linked his motivation to join the army with his national identity: "I'm Ukrainian and that's why I actually joined the Ukrainian army as a volunteer." (Interview 2, p.4). Civilian men expressed related views, explaining their personal sacrifices with the necessary priority of national necessity over individual needs. These accounts illustrate a collective sentiment that defending Ukraine, be it through active military service or other personal sacrifices, is not a choice but a fundamental aspect of their identity as Ukrainian citizens.

This narrative was often intertwined with historical references, as many interviewees drew on Ukraine's past to contextualize their current involvement in the conflict. Personal motivations were thereby inseparable from the collective struggle for Ukrainian sovereignty and identity. Boryslav reflected on the continued spirit of Ukrainian resilience despite historical hardships "For me, when I'm getting paranoid, I think that regardless of all this crap, our ancestors had it much worse, have been in much worse situations. And, you know, still, the idea of Ukraine remained." (p.13). These statements clearly expressed the belief that individual sacrifices must be made in service of the nation's historical struggle for independence. Personal needs therefore must be subordinated to the collective goal of safeguarding Ukraine's sovereignty. Denis described Ukraine as a "cursed land" (p.8) due to its historical struggle for freedom and independence, marked by conflicts and oppression. At the same time, he also characterized it as a "blessed land" (ibid.), as this ingrained a fighting spirit and determination in the Ukrainian people, prompting them to "take their life in their own hands" (ibid.). He recounted, "I also have this question to like, guys, my friends, why are we doing this? You know, we don't know another way." (ibid.). He suggests that this masculinized commitment to the struggle for independence is not merely a choice but an inherent aspect

of Ukrainian identity. This is consistent with the findings of Cancio et al. (2018), who examined the identities of Ukrainian soldiers in relation to historical trauma prior to the full-scale invasion. Their interviewees perceived a shared understanding of pain, which was inextricably linked to masculinity and Ukrainian identity. Ukrainian cultural identity was thereby embedded in conflict and shaped by the understanding that pain and militarized struggle are part of being Ukrainian.

An especially interesting observation was that even Serhij, who was the only one to exhibit an explicitly negative and unpatriotic attitude towards Ukraine felt he had a responsibility to join the war effort before leaving to the United States. Despite describing that he “didn’t really feel like [he] belonged to Ukraine”, he said that he “was raised in this country, and [is] kind of in debt for this country before [he] can leave.” (Interview 1, p.12). His account reflects a complex relationship with national identity, where duty and obligation to the country persist despite personal grievances or disillusionment with the state. It illustrates how deeply ingrained the sense of duty and responsibility is within the masculine identity of Ukrainian men, where serving in the military is seen as fulfilling a fundamental obligation and a perceived debt to the nation.

Particularly among the interviewees who were active in the military, the act of fighting on the front line was often perceived as a critical passage to genuine citizenship. Several respondents expressed these thoughts clearly. Andrij found it difficult to reconcile the sight of men in traditional vyshyvanka dress on the streets of Kyiv with the lack of soldiers at the front: “Would I call them Ukrainians? No.” (Interview 1, p.17). Dymtro also clearly expressed the connection between military service and citizenship when asked about draft dodgers: “I feel ashamed for them to be a citizen to the same country with these guys and I’m not quite sure I want to be in the same country with these people. [...]” (p.14). Describing how he felt after joining the army, he said, “I finally felt myself as a man, as a kind of citizen of Ukraine who deserves to call himself as a citizen.” (p.13). Statements like this encapsulate the belief that true citizenship is intrinsically tied to the act of defending the nation.

This raises the issue of potential future discrimination against non-combatants and draft dodgers. Several interlocutors called for a ‘qualified citizenship to be introduced after the end of the war. Thereby, not all citizens should be treated equally; but those who have fought for the country should receive material benefits such as “additional rights, wages, bonuses” (Mykhailo, p.13), whereas men who evade the draft should be punished:

„Maybe they should be refused with the rights to vote, for example, because it's fair when you fight for this country with the risk to die, to be killed, you should have some primary rights to decide what will be with this country.“

(ibid.)

While this position was “only” explicitly expressed by five men (Aleksandr, p.13; Anatolij, p.1; Artem, p.11; Mykhailo, p.13), it is merely the culmination of the generally expressed belief that those who risk their lives for the country should have a special status in society. As feminist scholars have analyzed thoroughly, the strong relationship between military service and nationalism creates a distinct and hierarchical gendered citizenship (Sasson-Levy, 2003). Janowitz even goes as far as to argue that “participation in armed conflicts has been an integral aspect of the normative definition of citizenship” (Janowitz, 1994:357). To this end, men who have not conducted military service are not considered to be full citizens in the same way as men who have (Kronsell & Svedberg, 2001). Furthermore, in the context of male-only conscription, this not only affects men who are not in the military but also generally perpetuates gendered roles which promote women as ‘the protected’ and men as ‘the protectors’. Thereby, men are positioned as active agents qualified for the public, while women are presented as passive and confined to the domestic sphere (Kwon, 2000; Caltekin, 2020).

5.5. Constructing Masculinities against Femininities

As mentioned previously, feminist scholars perceive masculinity and femininity as inextricably linked concepts. Therefore, a full account of masculinities is not complete without also examining how they are constructed in contrast to femininities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

A recurrent theme in the interviews was the portrayal of women as essential supporters of men, both emotionally and practically. This support was considered vital to the war efforts, yet for the most part remained confined to specific gendered roles. This becomes evident for instance in Georgij's account who noted “Many men come to the war because they have support of their women. [...] Women stay with little children.” (p.12f). He thereby reflects the traditional view that while men fight, women maintain the home front and provide the necessary support to enable men to fulfill their duties as protectors of family and country.

Many interviewees perceived this dichotomy of gender roles as natural, stating that they believe biological differences make women's bodies less suited for combat. While many

acknowledged women's participation in combat, this was mostly seen as unnatural. Artem for example, stated "War is not a place for women" (p.8) and cited as reasons for this assessment "stress [...], absence of the possibility to have a shower, physiological things." (p.9). Mykhailo said that being a soldier is a "natural role for men because of hormones" (p.9) and regarding women expressed that "the role of women in Ukraine is very high but it doesn't mean that your natural role to be a defender, fighter, so play a man role." (ibid.; sic!). Anatolij shared a similar opinion: "Women have a responsibility to pass on genes and Ukrainian cultural code to the future generations. Men have a responsibility to protect the medium (Ukrainian state) in which those generations could operate and thrive". Militarism was therefore explicitly connected to masculinity, reinforcing the notion that men are the natural protectors and warriors, while women are more appropriately positioned in supportive, non-combat roles. Declaring war as unsuitable for women indirectly emphasizes the expectation that men should bear the burden of combat and valorizes a traditional masculine identity of protectors and warriors. Most men believed that female soldiers are and should be assigned gendered tasks such as "medical service [because] they have this empathy to know where it hurts" (Aleksandr, p.16f) or "clerk jobs" (Georgij, p.9).

This perceived gendered dichotomy further establishes a clear distinction of men as 'protectors' and women as 'protected', as particularly evident in Mykhailo's account, who said:

"We are actually a women-driven country. We are fighting for women mostly, in a wide sense, I mean, mothers, sisters, wives, I don't know, lovers or whatever, daughters, because for men in Ukraine, it's part of, I would say, our aesthetics." (p.8)

He highlights once more the interconnectedness of femininities and masculinities, whereby masculine strength is not only constructed in contrast to feminine softness, but where feminized bodies are depicted as "beautiful souls" that have to be protected by "just warriors" (Elshtain, 1995:4).

Another aspect, where feminized women help to sustain militarized masculinities of men is through sacrificing their male loved ones. Aleksandr said: „Women in Ukraine right now are contributing bloody everything they have to our war. And it starts with theirs sons and husbands" (Aleksandr, p.17). Women's self-sacrifice for the nation state is thereby constructed and valued through their roles as mothers, giving birth, and nurturing masculinized warriors. (Kwoon, 2000).

This brings us to another specifically gendered task that was explicitly mentioned in several interviews, namely ensuring the nation's demographic future. Many men emphasized women's role in childbearing and ensuring the continuation of the Ukrainian people. This view suggests that women's primary contribution should be through reproduction and highlights a biological determinism that assigns women the primary role of ensuring population stability amidst the uncertainties of war. Moreover, it is a call for women to embrace traditional family roles more earnestly as part of their national duty. Kiril remarked: "We will have a huge demographical gap. And [...] if [women] are not willing to give birth to children with her husband, it will not lead to the prosperity of the country." (Kiril, p.19)

Emphasizing the potential demographic gap suggests that the continuation and prosperity of the country are directly tied to women's willingness to have children. It further reinforces the impression that several of the interlocutors support a traditional division of labor where men are seen as protectors and women as nurturers. Feminist researchers highlight how such a perspective underscores the need for militarism to rely on women's cooperation as mothers and wives, who are expected to raise patriotic children (Caltekin, 2020). Women's self-sacrifice for the nation state is constructed and valued through their roles as mothers, giving birth, and nurturing masculinized warriors. (Kwoon, 2000).

While gender essentialism was quite dominant in the interviews, it is crucial to note that the above-described trends were not universally expressed. Some men advocated for gender equality, emphasizing that serving in the military should not be subject to gender. While agreeing with the assessment that women faced significant challenges in the military, they did not contribute these challenges to biological differences, but to the gendered hierarchy in the military. Serhij remarked:

"Commanders don't really think it's useful to use women [in the territorial defense] because they're weaker according to their war or other shit. And they're just being put to some positions like being in the kitchen, which is super fucking ironic." (Interview 1, p.17)

Others also said that the 'strongest' women should join the military. Dymtro, for instance, said that "the most courageous women should go to the army. A bit less courage should go to the army but work like in the service in some office part. If they don't want, again, they need to grow kids and help." (p.14; sic!).

5.6. Reforming Hegemonic Masculinities through “Effectiveness”?

As outlined in the above chapters, a notable trend towards militarized forms of hegemonic masculinity is evident in Ukraine and men experience various struggles as they try to conform to these ideals. However, the interviews also revealed another trend, namely the determination to maximize one's potential and effectiveness. Many men expressed a strong desire to apply their unique skills and experiences in ways that would be most beneficial to the war effort, and not necessarily get directly involved in combat. It highlights the value placed on not just physical strength, but also intellectual and practical capabilities, possibly hinting toward a broader understanding of masculinity.

Among men in the military, a desire to utilize their skills effectively emerged. Here, a distinction between interlocutors of varying military ranks became clear as men with higher military ranks had the possibility to move to positions that allowed them to apply their individual expertise. Andriy, a sergeant, moved to an IT unit in Kyiv after having been part of the territorial defense in order to ideally use his skills:

“I have a deep business experience. And using such kind of experience and skills being as a regular soldier is not effective. That is why [...] I was starting to search some position in Ukrainian army where my [...] skills would be much more on demand than being just a regular soldier in a battalion of the territorial defense.” (Interview 1, p.6; sic!)

This is juxtaposed to Serhij, a ground soldier of low rank. After pausing his studies to volunteer for the defense of Kyiv, he later involuntarily got transferred as a ground soldier to the East of the country. Serhij expressed frustration about not being able to utilize his capacities: “I’m not really a super strong guy who can fight off everybody. I’m more of a brain guy. So I think I’ll bring more impact by doing electronic engineering, instead of just running around with an AK in some fields.” (Interview 1, p.5). He thereby points to the harmful effects of adhering to militarized masculinities not only on the individual level, but also on the effectiveness of the army as a whole.

Generally, there was a strong sentiment among both civilian and military men that their most effective contributions could be made outside traditional combat roles. Boryslav has been active on Reddit since the start of the invasion, regularly conducting live streams to raise awareness about the realities in Ukraine and to raise funds for military equipment. Currently in the process of conscription, he questioned if this would allow him to use his skills effectively,

stating “I don’t consider myself particularly effective in combat role. And the things that I do on Reddit [...], I’m not sure the army will give me the freedom to talk openly” (p.5). Generally in favor of conscription, he explained that he saw his role as an awareness-raiser and stated that “every person for themselves decides this level of effectiveness.” (p.11). He thereby reflected an understanding that the war effort requires diverse skills and that joining the military was not the only valuable way to contribute.

A similar sentiment was brought up by Georgij, who had been actively involved in transporting supplies and ammunition from the Western border to the frontline as a volunteer for over two years. He explained “I can do for my country more in this position. Somebody should make this work and government makes this job too slowly” (p.10; sic!). This reflects the broader understanding that being a man and a patriot does not necessarily mean taking up arms but rather contributing in the most impactful way possible.

Aleksandr and Anton, who are evading the draft, cited the uncertainty of whether or not they will be able to use their skills when drafted as one reason for avoid mobilization. Aleksandr (37, Dnipro, civilian) expressed “I have some capabilities. And if I’m already in the army, I want to show these capabilities. And I want to be useful with my capabilities”. (p.11).

Denis, who is involved in organizing military equipment as a volunteer, suggested that not serving in the military can be justified by significant contributions through volunteer and fundraising activities:

“There is a ton of Ukrainians who, physically, they’re absolutely okay to join the army. [...] But they don’t. Because they’re part of a huge volunteer movement and they can collect, like, half a billion hryvnia a month. We don’t have questions for guys like this, like, why you are not in the army.” (p.20)

Despite stating that an overwhelming majority of men mentioned that everyone should play to their strengths, only a few interlocutors explicitly stated that they believe military and civilian activities to be equally valuable. While most men emphasized the importance of both, many indicated that there is a certain hierarchy in the value between the two. Fehir (21, Kharkiv, civilian) illustrated this sentiment:

“Of course [people in the military] are cooler than me because they done what I cannot do, so I respect that. But I think that our country needs to work like a soccer team. There are goalkeepers and field players and we need to cooperate.” (p.7; sic!).

He thereby subtly implies a hierarchical view between men in the military and those who are not by suggesting that military service inherently confers a certain level of “coolness”. Despite the notable emphasis on resourcefulness, effectiveness, and diverse contributions to Ukraine’s defense it therefore seems questionable to see this as a sign of a development away from militarized masculinities as hegemonic. Nonetheless, it may provide an alternative path for men to demonstrate masculinity in other meaningful ways.

6. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This thesis aimed to explore how Ukrainian men perceive their roles amidst the ongoing full-scale invasion. My interviews of 15 Ukrainian men showed that the way they see their roles and responsibilities is strongly defined through a militarized form of hegemonic masculinity. The sense of duty to protect extended beyond family to community and nation, underscoring a societal expectation that men need to actively contribute to national defense. In other words, it was strongly connected with their identity as citizens, which in turn was framed within the historical struggle for independence. Even the one respondent who felt unpatriotic towards Ukraine expressed a sense of debt to the country. This might reflect how deeply ingrained the duty to protect is within Ukrainian masculinity. The masculine man as protector was often mirrored by the feminine woman whose primary responsibility it is to ensure the nation's demographic future through childbearing and providing emotional support. Although this view was not supported by all interlocutors, it showed how traditional gender roles are reinforced and valorized during the war.

This shift to a militarized form of masculinity had various effects on the men and led to many internal conflicts. While many men in the military described traumatic experiences, some civilian men expressed guilt for not risking their lives for the cause. The emotional distress often appeared to be suppressed, which can partly be attributed to the fact that men are expected to display emotional resilience and stoicism. Another part of the internal struggle was having to choose between being present for their families and fulfilling their roles as the protector of the nation. One way men grapple with the shift to militarized masculinity as the hegemonic form is through an emphasis on effectiveness. Most men reflected the view that the ideal man is willing to sacrifice his life as a soldier. However, almost all interlocutors simultaneously emphasized the need for everyone to play to their strengths, be it as a civilian or a soldier, in order to be as effective as possible for the defense of the nation.

Overall, the interviews point to a reinforcement of militarized masculinities as hegemonic during war, which is in line with the majority of existing literature. Given the existential threat to Ukraine through Russia's active aggression, it is understandable that such a militarization is deemed necessary in the short term. Nevertheless, it remains critical to acknowledge and mitigate its detrimental consequences on both men and women stemming from entrenched understandings of masculinity and femininity. Proactive measures should be taken to understand and counteract these effects and promote positive gender relations.

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