

Co-editor's Introduction to the *Folklorica* Special Issue “Folklore and Protest I”

While challenge is often an expected part of an academic publication process, it has presented itself in unforeseeable—and traumatic—ways during the production of this special issue. This project, announced in the spring of 2021, is coming to fruition months later than planned. It was the suddenly shifted reality in the region of *Folklorica*'s purview that has caused the delay. On 24 February 2022, the Russian Federation began an unprovoked and ferocious invasion of the entire country of Ukraine. Those of us who have close personal and professional ties to the region found ourselves in a state of despair, unable to process our thoughts.

The theme of this special issue is Folklore and Protest. Defined as the “[e]xpression of objection or nonacceptance” [Ozzimo 2011: 1022], protests come in multiple shapes and forms. They occupy varying positions on political spectrums, and range from individual to collective, from quiet to loud, from subtle to blatant, and from peaceful to violent. Depending on the nature and intensity of objection and nonacceptance, as well as on the specific actions undertaken to express these reactions, such related terms like “resistance” and “activism” often circulate alongside “protest.”

Protest and Folklore Studies

Protest, resistance, and activism, including those in Eastern Europe and Eurasia, have historically drawn the attention of many scholars in a variety of disciplines [see *Slavic Review* 2021 and Khromeichuk 2016]. Folklorists share a particular interest with those who focus on the creative dimensions of objection and nonacceptance. Although the studies of this diverse group of scholars vary in scope, disciplinary approaches, theoretical frameworks, and thematic prisms, they all explore what sociologist Thomas Reed identifies as the dialogue between the political and the cultural [2005: 289]. Reed focuses on the roles of song, drama, poetry, murals, music, and graphic arts generated by several resistance movements in the United States. In a similar vein, the contributors to the recent multi-disciplinary volume *Cultural Forms of Protest in Russia* explore a variety of artistic media, including creative writing, film, and fashion in the Russian political protests of the 2011-2012 [Beumers, et al 2017]. Political scientist Lena Jonson studies the same wave of protests through the prism of visual art [2015]. Among the most recent anthropological contributions, Jeroen Stevens addresses architecture as a “site, subject, and agent” of protest connected to housing access and related inequalities in Brazil [Stevens 2020: 167]. Hafsa Kanjwal, Durdana Bhat, and Masrat Zahra focus on the photographs of two female photojournalists, treating those artifacts as forms of protest to the Indian occupation of Kashmir [2018]. Additionally, Mirco Göpfert discusses the broad political matrix of Iran through cartooning as a form of resistance [2020].

What distinguishes the folkloristic body of literature is its authors' focus on the role of informal and traditional cultural practices in protest, resistance, and activist initiatives. These include folk songs [e.g., Greenway 1953; MacKinnon 2008], carnival elements [Britsyna and Holovakha 2005] or the broader categories of "tradition" [Bronner 2005], "social protest folklore" [Brenner 2021] and "symbolic resistance" [Arkhipova, Radchenko, and Titkov 2016] in various contexts. In line with their long-standing interest in marginalized voices and nuances on the ground, folklorists are well positioned to recognize individual and community responses to social and political matters even in those settings where such responses are not communicated explicitly. Peter Narvaez's look at traditional wakes in Newfoundland as subtle critical reactions to hegemonic powers is a representative example [1994]. Several contributors to *Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death* [Santino 2006], while focusing on public sites of mourning, trace important social messages, including various forms of resistance [e.g., Tye and Goldstein 2006] and protest [e.g., Marchi 2006] at such sites. Eastern European examples include Jeanmarie Rouhier-Willoughby's study of urban Russian life-cycle rituals and Dorian Jurić's work on *guslars* [traditional singers] in the Balkans [Rouhier-Willoughby 2008; Jurić 2020]. Albeit in different ways, both scholars illustrate how creative resistance to power structures is often accompanied by complex negotiation with those very same structures.

While the authors cited above embrace the relatively neutral positions of observers and analysts, many folklorists directly engage in various forms of activism. The sub-field of public or applied folklore, especially in the United States, is one of the main platforms for such action. In line with folklorists' long-standing commitment to social justice, an attempt to bring about positive change and to place marginalized community voices in the forefront often informs public folklore projects. Debora Kodish refers to these initiatives as "activist ideals" within which folklorists should closely work with individuals and communities to "address inequalities, challenge injustice, and work for the common good" [2011: 31]. Similarly, Robert Baron, while emphasizing the importance of advocacy for the communities with whom public folklorists collaborate, describes a large body of public folklore work as "inherently counterhegemonic" [2019: 170].

The recent issue of *Journal of American Folklore* on African American Expressive Culture and Protest, produced in response to the concerns raised by the Black Lives Matter movement, is worthy of special mention. The contributors address not only broader societal structures shaped by systemic racism. They also trace similar problems within the discipline of folklore studies that, in Ebony Baily's terms, historically employed a "racialized regime of folk representation" [2021: 389]. Additionally, they challenge the "disciplinary structures rooted in colonialism and white supremacy" associated, in turn, with control over what finds its way into scholarship [Boucicaut 2021: 375] by introducing Black perspectives and expressivity through a variety of disciplines and expressive forms, including poetry, literary nonfiction, and quilting.

Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: Protest and Lack Thereof

The current issue was prepared and approved for publication prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Thus, all of the contributors included here focus on resistance and protest events, both historical and more contemporary, that predate the war. Writing about this war in the Introduction to an issue that is not directly related to it may seem out of place. However, considering the scale of the tragedy, and the new reasons for and forms of protest, resistance, and activism that the war has generated, I believe that some preliminary reflections are in order. Present-day communication technologies allow small-scale local acts of objection to and nonacceptance of Russia's aggression not only to be documented but also to be spread globally, to evolve into new forms, and to produce broader meanings. One example is a video of a Ukrainian farmer towing away a captured Russian tank with his tractor [Hindustan Times 2022]. While journalists the world over wondered whether the recording was actually authentic, it went viral and inspired a growing number of other actions and videos of a similar kind from war-torn Ukraine [see Holl-Allen 2022]. Numerous Internet memes and pieces of digital art soon followed.



Image 1. Special Operations Agricultural Division Patch [Saint Javelin. 2022b].

One example is a stylized image of a tractor accompanied by the inscription: “Special Operations of Ukraine: Agricultural Division” [Image 1]. While this phrase appears in English, the words John Deere (the name of a common brand of tractor) are translated into Ukrainian as Іван Олень to illicit a humorous effect. Below the stylized tractor, the motto “Go fuck yourself” (a well-documented phrase uttered by the soldiers defending Ukraine’s Snake Island in response to an attack by a Russian warship) and “Glory to Ukraine” appear in Ukrainian. While this image and other similar ones were informally shared on social media with no specific references, they are part of the commercial project “Saint Javelin” created by former journalist Christian Borys, a Canadian of Ukrainian-Polish descent. Reportedly, the sales of “Saint Javelin” merchandise in the form of stickers, pieces of clothing and patches informed by the war themes and imagery have surpassed one million dollars and have been used to support Ukrainians affected by the war [Saint Javelin 2022a].

Another example is the story of an elderly woman in Kyiv who destroyed a Russian drone with a jar of her home-canned vegetables. The story was first tweeted by the Ukrainian media expert Liubov Tsybulska: “In Kyiv a woman knocked down a Russian drone from a balcony with a jar of cucumbers. How did they expect to occupy this country?” [Tsybulska 2022]. While English-language journalists raised questions about the accuracy of the story [see Scheerhout 2022], they simultaneously contributed to its wide dissemination. Like its tractor counterpart, this story found its way into popular Internet memes and pieces of digital art. One of them [Image 2] features a stylized image of an elderly woman holding a rifle armed with jars of pickles, while a drone plummets to the ground in the background. The inscription says: “Pickles of Kyiv.”

Reportedly, a Ukrainian journalist eventually uncovered the heroine of this story, a woman named Olena. According to Olena, she had never seen a drone before so she was not initially sure what the flying object was. As she watched it approaching, Olena grabbed a jar and threw it at the device with her full force: “Мабуть, від страху. Бо я злякалася. А що як звідти почнуть обстрілювати мене! Як же шкода тих помідорів [...] Не знаю, звідки взялися байки про огірки” [I did it likely out of fear because I was scared. What if they begin to shoot at me from there! What a pity that I lost a jar of tomatoes [...] I don’t know where the fable about cucumbers came from” [Līga. Life 2022]. This discovery resulted in new memes. One of them uses the stylized image described above but it is now accompanied with the inscription in red: “STOP FAKE! It was a jar of canned tomatoes, not cucumbers.” (1)

The transformation of these reported daily acts of objection and nonacceptance into electronic imagery and commentary and their subsequent dissemination speak to their broad appeal. Ordinary people with traditionally prescribed gender roles—male farmers driving tractors and women associated with domestic food production—perform extraordinary heroic acts. For Ukrainians, they provide a necessary moral uplift at a time of devastation. To the international community, they serve as broader symbols of courage, resistance, and defiance.



Image 2. Digital image “Pickles of Kyiv.” Author unknown [Tsybulska 2022b].

Such images and stories enjoy a wide appeal largely because, despite the context of their origin, they convey the aura of positivity via humor. However, in reality, war is an immense tragedy, both collective and personal. Thus, unavoidably, it also generates emotions and creative responses that are diametrically opposite to those of a positive nature. Anger, hostility, and hatred that come from Ukrainians and their close allies toward Russians are recurrent themes on social media platforms and in personal communication venues. “Росіяни, будьте ви всі прокляті!” [Russians, may all of you be cursed!] was a phrase that filled my Facebook feed through individual posts, “likes,” and “shares,” immediately following the initial bombings on February 24.

The notions of good and evil, enemy and ally appear in both stark contrast and broad generalizations in many comments communicating Ukrainian resistance to the Russian invasion. For example, the term “orcs,” referring to the aggressive and malevolent monsters in J.R.R. Tolkien’s popular trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, has found its way into vernacular Ukrainian and Russian as a pseudonym for the Russian invaders in Ukraine. As some outside analysts have observed, much like Tolkien’s savage and merciless army of orcs, “[t]oday’s

‘orcs’ wreaking havoc in the towns and villages of Ukraine appear to have this in common with their fictional predecessors” [MacLachlan 2022].

Many Ukrainian citizens use the term to denote not only the ruling Kremlin elite and the Russian Armed Forces but the majority of, if not all, Russians, finding them responsible for the war. Unlike the inspirational “Special Operations of Ukraine: Agricultural Division” and “Pickles of Kyiv” memes, angry creative references such as “orcs” used in regard to all Russian citizens may make outsiders, including folklorists, feel uncomfortable. The discomfort may be reinforced by our discipline’s longstanding commitment to daily complexities, nuances, and the overall grey areas of ethnographic realities, often directly related to the discipline’s problematic relationship with “grand theories” [Noyes 2016]. However, as the Ukrainian anthropologist Tina Polek aptly observes, “war is black and white” and leaves no room for grey areas for those who experience it directly [Buyskykh and Polek 2022]. Theoretical frameworks developed to understand daily realities in times of peace, no matter how socially and culturally problematic, may not always be sufficient to explain the situations of war, when people’s lives are at stake.

David Hufford’s influential research on the role of experiences in the formation of certain clusters of spiritual beliefs can shed light on the Ukrainian situation [1989; 1995]. Even though Hufford focuses exclusively on the spiritual, his findings have broader implications. As I have shown elsewhere, both physical and social experiences, tend to play a significant role not only in the shaping of spiritual beliefs but also in the formation trajectories of political convictions [Lesiv 2018; 2019]. Folklorists who consider insider voices seriously are equipped to understand why Ukrainian objection or nonacceptance is expressed in antagonistic and broadly stereotypical terms.

The atrocities of the Russian Armed Forces—including the rape and torture of young children—such as those committed in the town of Bucha have been widely reported [see Weber 2022 for a discussion]. In addition to such horrifically traumatic and often deadly encounters, there are also numerous personal experience and survivor stories that either remain unheard or circulate within much smaller circles. For example, anthropologist Julia Buyskykh spent the first several days of the war with her mother and their cat in their Kyiv apartment under the sound of seemingly endless air raids and bombing. What were once memories recounted in her grandmother’s and great-grandmother’s bedtime stories about their survival during the Nazi occupation of Kyiv—candles as the only source of light, tightly closed and insulated widows, and a minimal amount of food—became real-life survival strategies for Julia and her mother [Buyskykh and Polek 2022].

A Ukrainian academic and acquaintance whose husband joined the Ukrainian Armed Forces at the beginning of the war, had to leave her native city of Kyiv in an effort to protect her two young daughters. Their first shelter was a relative’s household in a small village in the Kyiv region. The place appeared to be suitable for their needs because there was a well and a wood-burning stove that could allow them to survive without modern amenities such as running water,

electricity, or gas. However, a fierce battle soon broke out in a neighboring village, and they had to flee once again. My acquaintance kindly shared a brief self-reflection on her experiences when they reached safety. The piece includes the following:

Ми постійно чули вибухи, бачили дим від пожеж у [сусідньому] Макаріві. [...] Вибухи були настільки сильні, що ми думали, що хтось стукає у двері. Над нами досить низько літали літаки й гвинтокрили. 5-6 березня були розбомблені хати в сусідніх селах Королівка й Кодра. Із цих та інших навколишніх сіл почали тікати люди. Нам запропонували допомогу в евакуації.

We constantly heard explosions, saw smoke from fires in [the neighboring village of] Makariv. [...] The explosions were so loud that we thought someone was knocking on the door. Planes and helicopters flew quite low above us. On March 5 and 6, houses in the neighboring villages of Korolivka and Kodra were bombed. People began to flee from these and other surrounding villages. We were offered help to evacuate. [Anonymous, n.d.]

In order to reach transportation services, my acquaintance and her two daughters had to endure a five kilometer walk under recurrent air raids and shelling. When I reached out to her to ask permission to use her story in this Introduction, she added the following remarks: “Ще я не описала, як ми сокири і серпи під поріг клали – мали з окупантами боротися. Оці серпи і сокири – наш протест, готовність до захисту.” [I forgot to describe how we put axes and sickles by the threshold [while staying in the village house] to potentially fight the invaders. These sickles and axes symbolized our protest and our readiness to defend ourselves” [Personal correspondence, 21 May 2022].

Julia’s and my acquaintance’s experiences of survival are but just two examples showing that Russia’s invasion has stripped a very large number of Ukrainians of their daily normalcy and has forced them to employ the radical agency of survival. To expand on Hufford’s theory, it is intense inhumane experiences that may lead, at least partly, to the formation of hostile political views.

Another contributing factor is the political silence in Russia, as viewed by many Ukrainian (as well as some Western) intellectuals and activists. Remarks about the collective Russian responsibility for the war recurrently appear in social media discussions and in formal published opinion pieces. The authors argue that war does not appear in a vacuum but rather requires numerous human resources. They often provide references to statistical data showing that, in Russia, support for Russia’s war on Ukraine ranges from 70% to 83%. Furthermore, the authors frequently note the paucity of large-scale anti-war protests in Russia. The following example comes from the online newspaper *Ukrainianer* that, in turn, refers to all Russians as the “passive creators of an authoritarian regime:”

Росіян часто жаліють через те, що вони живуть в авторитарному режимі, де з правами людей не рахуються, а всі медіа — підконтрольні владі. Однак росіяни 22 роки спостерігали за тим, як цей режим будували на крові їхніх співвітчизників, і не змогли або не захотіли протистояти терору.

Others often take pity on Russians because they live in an authoritarian regime, where human rights are ignored, and all media are under the control of the government. However, for the last 22 years, Russians have watched this regime being built on the blood of their compatriots and have been unable or unwilling to resist the terror [Ukrainer 2022].

Overall, while pointing out that statistics in a dictatorial state cannot be fully trusted, even outside observers admit that, as Patrick Luciani writes, “support for the war seems intuitively true” in Russia [Luciani 2022]. There is no doubt that the themes of complicity, protest and the lack thereof in relation to Russia’s war on Ukraine will constitute the focus of numerous studies, including folkloristic, in the future.

Folklorica and Protest

Folklorica has historically created dialogues among folklorists and scholars of related disciplines trained in a variety of regional academic traditions. The dialogue has also been enriched by those contributors who study creative expressive culture through the lenses of other disciplines and theoretical frameworks. The journal now offers two concurrent special issues on the theme of folklore and protest that continue this tradition. The volumes add a regional perspective to an understanding of resistance through the prism of creative expressive culture, informed by contextually unique pre-war socio-political complexities. The present Special Issue I, co-edited by Jeanmarie Rouhier-Willoughby and me, focuses on protest, resistance, and activism in three regions in Eastern and Central Europe. Special Issue II, edited by Jeanmarie Rouhier-Willoughby, explores the same themes in the historical and present-day contexts of Russia and Belarus, currently united by the criminalization of protest by their governments.

In the present volume, readers are invited on a two-fold—historical and geographical—journey. Our first stop is the Czech lands at the time immediately preceding the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In her article “Revolutionary Kašpárek: The Life Cycle of the Radical Puppet,” Cheryl Stephenson focuses on the 1918 performance of *How Kašpárek Laid Austria to Rest*. Through the prism of social history and semiotics, she explores the play’s character, the jester Kašpárek, and his significant symbolic role in the defeat of the oppressive regime of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Implicitly, Stephenson illustrates that folklore can inform dissent indirectly. Kašpárek is not only a

theatrical character but also a widely recognized symbol of resistance that embodies the folk imaginaries of Czech national identity and freedom.

The next destination point is Soviet Ukraine, albeit as viewed through the prism of recent reflections. In her piece “Protesting Retrospectively: Oral Memories and Social Practices of Migrants from the Areas of Artificial Water Reservoirs in Soviet Ukraine,” Ukrainian folklorist Iryna Koval-Fuchylo focuses on narratives about the construction of Soviet hydroelectric power plants that resulted in the forced resettlement and flooding of numerous villages. The author demonstrates that protests can sometimes form retrospectively and become shaped by changing socio-political realities and complex memory formation paths. The author’s examples include recent social events that retroactively condemn Soviet infrastructure projects and personal narratives containing the generalized legend motif of an old couple refusing to leave their house.

Anthropologist Nikolina Zenović relocates us to Montenegro. In her contribution “*Sviće* “Smurf”: Intertextual Linkages in Protests Against Montenegro’s 2019 *Freedom of Religion* Law,” Zenović focuses on the protests of Serbs, both in Montenegro and among the American diaspora, against the 2019 Montenegrin Law on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Legal Status of Religious Communities. The new law required documented proof of ownership for church property. The absence of such documentation allowed for the confiscation of the property by the government. Zenović explores the role of traditional folklore (embedded in the song “*Sviće zora*” [Dawn Breaks] by Beogradski Sindikat) and popular culture (the cartoon character Papa Smurf) in the protests through the theoretical framework of intertextuality. The author shows that it is precisely intertextual links, which are dynamic and contextually-specific, that create platforms for meaning-making processes during protests and have broader implications for an understanding of protest and expressive creative culture.

The next contribution takes readers back to contemporary Ukraine. My article “Not All Quiet on the Culinary Front: The Battle Over *Borshch* in Ukraine” is devoted to a pre-war dispute between Ukraine and Russia over the origins of the traditional beet-based soup *borshch*. This research reveals close connections between traditional family tables, resistance and activism, and international politics, supporting the necessity to treat folklore wholistically. Ukrainian cultural activists turned beets into a cultural weapon in the face of the external threat from Russia at the time, clearly distinguishing between the enemy and allies. While the article captures a historical situation shortly before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, it also includes a preface outlining my understanding of the implication of this research in the context of the present-day war.

I am indebted to many individuals whose help, often behind the scenes, has enabled this publication’s appearance in print. Jeanmarie Rouhier-Willoughby has been a source of support and wisdom and a pleasure to work with. I thank all our contributors for their stimulating research and patience throughout the review and publication process. The role of the anonymous reviewers cannot be overestimated. Thank you for your time, expertise, and service to the profession.

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Mariya Lesiv, Guest Co-Editor

NOTES

- 1 This meme can no longer be located on the Internet as of publication.

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