Fairytales in the Time of War: Analyzing the Russian War in Ukraine through the Lenses of Cultural Narratives

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Abstract

This article investigates the influence of childhood fairytales on the cultural narratives, attitudes, and behaviors of Ukrainians and Russians during the aftermath of the 2022 large-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Drawing on psychological theories such as theory of mind, social learning theory, operant conditioning, and significance quest theory, the study explores how early exposure to fairytales shapes adult moral values and influences mass public responses, particularly in times of crisis. By comparing traditional Ukrainian and Russian fairytales in published collections, this article identifies distinct narrative motifs in each culture, shedding light on the unexpected military performances of the Ukrainian and Russian armies during the conflict. The findings reveal that fairytales published in Ukrainian collections more often emphasize resilience, wit, and hard work, aligning with the strategic prowess exhibited by the Ukrainian military. In contrast, tales published in Russian collections more often portray protagonists relying on magical coincidences, echoing the lackluster performance of the Russian army. Recognizing the influence of these cultural narratives provides valuable insights for understanding and addressing complex geopolitical events.

Fairytales in the Time of War

Folklore is important for understanding cultural narratives—story lines that describe something unique to a culture and its people. They help to define a cultural identity, frame its history, and shape choices about the future [Lamont 2019]. Here, I propose a psychological theory that connects culturally prevalent narratives from Ukrainian and Russian folklore—fairytales—with differences in attitudes and behaviors of Ukrainians and Russians in the immediate aftermath of the Russian large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February of 2022.

Building on the theoretical and empirical work related to developmental psychology's theory of mind, behavioral psychology's social learning theory [Bandura 1969] and operant conditioning [Skinner 1971], and social psychology's significance quest theory [Kruglanski et al. 2022], I will demonstrate how fairytales encountered in early childhood can shape adult moral values, and how, especially in times of great upheavals such as during wars or political conflict, they can be crucial in shaping mass public responses. In what follows, I will first lay out the psychology research relevant to the appreciation of fairytales

encountered in early childhood. Then I will compare fairytales typical of Ukrainian and Russian folklore collections, highlighting psychological schemas underlying each. Finally, I will suggest how the differences in these cultural narratives can be related to differences in each culture's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Fairytales represent a diverse genre, varying in length, content, complexity, and the age of the intended audience. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on a particular type of fairytales, specifically, those in published collections and aimed at children aged at least four or five. These tend be short stories that include a human or human-like protagonist, clearly defined good versus evil, an element of magic, and a happy ending and/or a moral [Applebee 1978].

Theory of Mind: Childhood Paradise Lost

The psychological concept of theory of mind involves the capacity to comprehend and envisage the thoughts, needs, and expectations of others as separate from one's own [Wellman 2011]. This cognitive ability typically emerges in children as a developmental milestone around the age of four or five. Prior to reaching this stage, children usually lack the ability to consider the world from someone else's point of view [Wimmer and Perner 1983]. As theory of mind develops, children undergo a transition from the egocentrism prevalent in infancy and toddlerhood, when they perceive the world as centered around themselves, to recognizing that others may possess distinct feelings, thoughts, and perspectives.

Being able to grasp the idea that others may see them differently, children also realize that the way others perceive them doesn't always match their own self-image. This recognition of a disparity between an "ideal" self and a "real" self, which may fall short of expectations, marks the development of self-awareness [Rochat 2003]. In social psychology, the acknowledgment of this difference between the "real" and "ideal" selves is termed "objective self-awareness," and it can be an uncomfortable and anxiety-inducing experience even for adults [Duval and Wicklund 1972].

Studies on objective self-awareness reveal that when confronted with the mismatch between their real and ideal selves, people employ various strategies to divert attention away from themselves to reduce the discomfort that the realization of one's shortcomings inevitably brings. These strategies include activities like watching television, listening to the radio, or reading [Moskalenko and Heine 2003]. For children, fairytales offer a particularly attractive means of escaping the discomfort of realizing their own shortcomings. Beyond providing a break from the uneasiness of objective self-awareness, fairytales also supply guidelines on how to meet cultural moral standards [Moskalenko and McCauley 2018], helping to align real selves with an ideal.

Theory of mind and objective self-awareness introduce children to the notion that others might perceive them as less than perfectly lovable, important, or deserving. This realization, termed "significance loss" [Kruglanski et al. 2022], creates an uncomfortable state that motivates children to embark on a

"significance quest": actions aimed at regaining recognition, a sense of importance, and worth.

Down the Yellow Brick Road: Fairytales as a Quest for Significance

Fairytales serve as the original significance quest during the age when children first recognize the gap between their self-perception and others' judgment [Moskalenko 2024]. This moment marks the first-ever loss of significance, a mental departure from the Garden of Eden of early childhood innocence. Knowledge bestowed by theory of mind propels children into the realm of objective self-awareness, where they strive for lost perfection through significance quests. This initial loss of significance triggers early attempts at significance quests, which, if successful, can become a blueprint for later life choices and actions.

In these early significance quests, children must learn societal expectations and practice striving for these standards. Fairytales have likely culturally evolved to address such motivational needs, providing the content of cultural norms and moral values, as well as a means for children to practice striving for these values through identifying with fairytale characters [Moskalenko 2023; Moskalenko and McCauley 2018]. Moral lessons prevalent in fairytales often portray "good" characters as conscientious, hard-working, kind, generous, selfless, courageous and loyal. By contrast, "bad" characters are often lazy, mean, violent, selfish, unreliable, and cold. Through fairytales, children are given a clear blueprint for who is considered "good" and "bad" within their cultures. Fairytales hold a unique influence over children, fostering identification with main characters and motivating them to emulate desirable traits [Wong 2008]. They inspire character development through empathy and imagination, rather than through adult commands or instructions [Moskalenko and McCauley 2018].

Achievements Unlocked: Learning through Fairytales

Learning through fairytales involves two psychological forces: learning by modeling [Bandura 1969] and learning by operant conditioning [Skinner 1971]. Social learning theory suggests that children can acquire complex behaviors by learning about fictional characters who exhibit these behaviors, which then serve as models for achieving cultural ideals and attaining significance [Bandura and Walters 1977]. Operant conditioning, on the other hand, emphasizes the role of rewards and punishments in shaping behavior. By engaging with fairytales, children identify with characters, and the intrinsic rewards of these characters become virtual rewards for the child, reinforcing behaviors associated with a positive outcome. This two-step learning process—learning about a character trait or behavior that can be emulated and then the vicarious experience of joy at the character attaining significance that reinforces the learning—is a powerful virtual medium for children's socialization.

Fairytales also play a crucial role in cultural contexts. They form a foundation for communication through common phrases and expressions, shaping a "naïve" personality psychology that influences how individuals form impressions and predict actions. For example, even if one does not know what Internet trolls do, the use of the fairytale term, troll, immediately conveys negative connotations. "If I could wave a magic wand," "we'll all live happily ever after," "lost boys," "snow queen"—these and other fairytale motifs often feature in adult discourse because they offer colorful and emotionally evocative descriptions rooted in shared cultural foundations.

Fairytales socialize children into cultural norms, eliciting positive reactions to characters who follow these norms and negative reactions to those who deviate. In finding their place in the cultural landscape, fairytales undergo a form of natural selection: stories that resonate with both children and caretakers become favorites that persist through generations, whereas those that seem too boring, too cruel, or too sad fade into obscurity. This cultural selection of fairytales reflects and influences social norms, values, and preferences.

For example, tales published in Chinese collections tend to depict the loss of wealth as a form of punishment, the acquisition of wealth as a reward, and the possession of wealth as an indicator of a character's goodness, reflecting distinct cultural perspectives on prosperity [Doyle and Doyle 2001]. Consistent with this, research suggests that the prevalence of achievement themes in fairytales across cultures correlates with the cultures' economic growth [McClelland and Clelland 1961].

Similarly, tales published in French collections often celebrate acts of rebellion against authority [Obergfell 1983; Reddan 2021]. Examples include Bluebeard's wife defying her husband's instructions not to unlock a secret room, Cinderella rejecting her stepmother's command to stay home instead of attending the ball, and Thumbelina resisting multiple attempts to arrange her marriage, choosing her partner herself instead (though of course versions of these stories also exist outside of French collections). This recurrent theme in French collections may be intertwined with the long-standing and characteristically French tradition of protesting [Carpenter 2019].

Another prevalent motif in French collections centers on the role of fashion and style in achieving personal significance. Characters like Puss in Boots transform from mere animals to distinguished individuals through the acquisition of special attire. Puss in Boots not only gains boots for himself, but also secures elegant clothing for his master, enabling the master (a poor miller's son) to pose as Marquis de Carabas and vie for a princess's hand in marriage. Similarly, Cinderella's transformative journey from rags to riches, in most French versions of the tale, relies on her dress and crystal slippers, elevating her from scrubbing pots and pans to a "happily ever after." The tale of Donkeyskin [Perrault, translated by Johnson 1921] narrates how a princess, facing an unacceptable marriage proposal from her father, requests as a condition of marriage extraordinary gowns and her father's donkey hide. Wearing the hide as a disguise,

she escapes her incestuous father and later uses the glamorous gowns to win the heart of a prince.

These tales in French collections consistently portray main characters progressing to their happy endings via fashion in their quests for significance. The emphasis on fashion as a quest for significance in such tales aligns with the contemporary reality: France, the birthplace of fashion, is to this day considered the "fashion capital of the world" [Fashion Industry Worldwide 2022, n.d.]. Over 600,000 French individuals chose to seek personal significance through careers in the fashion industry [Travagli 2023]. This connection potentially underscores the enduring influence of French fairytales on cultural perceptions and aspirations surrounding fashion and success.

Cultural Adaptations of Fairytales

Of course, fairytales often undergo cultural adaptations as they move through different speech communities [George 2007]. For instance, the tale of Little Red Riding Hood predominantly exists in German and French collections. In many German renditions, the tale concludes with a hunter saving the girl and her grandmother by killing the wolf—the bad are punished, and the good saved by a mighty hero. In contrast, most French versions lack a heroic figure, and instead of a happy ending concludes with a cautionary moral: young girls should be cautious of wolves, particularly those who appear harmless [Thomas 1988]. Although based on the same core narrative, the different endings would likely inspire children to learn different lessons and pursue different paths to significance.

The selection of which fairytales endure and are transmitted through time involves a dual process: children's preferences and adults' values both play a role. Fairytales that resonate deeply with both children's imaginations and adults' sensibilities become enduring favorites that reflect societal norms and values. The American "sanitization" of dark themes in fairytales, for example as in later Disney adaptations, is consistent with American parents' increasing anxiety and over-protection of their children since roughly the 1980s until today [Lukianoff and Haidt 2019].

Not only do fairytales adapt to different cultural environments while spreading geographically, but they also change as the culture changes over time. For example, the tales collected by the Brothers Grimm originally included some antisemitic narratives such as "A Jew in the Bumbles" that told of a thieving and cheating Jew, whose appearance was changed by the Grimm brothers from "an old man" to "a man with a goat beard" to make the character more devil-like [George 2007]. "A Good Bargain" was another antisemitic story in the Grimms' collection, read widely in pre-Nazi Germany, which likely reflected the popular sentiment of German adults and also instilled antisemitic views in many German children at the time [Thomas 1988].

Grimms' fairytales, especially those that emphasized patriarchal orders like "might makes right" and heroic ideals were heavily promoted in children's

magazines during the pre-Nazi Weimar period [Zipes 2019]. After Nazis rose to power, the Third Reich education minister presided over efforts to use fairytale collections to glorify Nazism and Hitler [Thomas 1988]. The narratives were altered to make "happy ending" contingent upon following Hitler and his ideals of Aryan German superiority [George 2007]. Because of their strong associations with the Third Reich, Grimms' fairytales were briefly banned by the American Allies occupying Germany in 1945 [Zipes 2019]. In this case, the power of fairytales to guide significance quests had been used for evil.

The cases above suggest that fairytales offer a window into the collective psyche of a society, not only entertaining but also shaping cultural beliefs and aspirations. In summary, fairytales provide unique insights into the foundation of mass psychology, influencing children's significance quests through modeling, operant conditioning, and cultural context [Moskalenko 2024]. Fairytales offer a rich cultural landscape that shapes personality, values, and behavior, making them a powerful force in childhood development and an important influence on cultural values, social norms, and political trends.

Dire Straits to Fairytales

Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman [1974] famously demonstrated that decision-making is often biased, relying on heuristics that offer decision shortcuts that feel like intuitive judgments rather than careful consideration [Kahneman 2003]. When cognitive and emotional resources are strained, deliberate reasoning gives way to intuitive reasoning, drawing on scripts, schemas, stereotypes, and authority [Cacioppo and Petty 1984]. This makes early models of significance quests particularly likely to impact people's choices and actions in times of crisis. Therefore, for adults, fairytales may hold a unique appeal in situations of high stress, high stakes, and low control that challenge cognitive and emotional capacities. Under such challenging conditions, people may be especially susceptible to the influence of early models of behavior that are found in fairytales.

War and violent conflict represent ultimate high-stress situations where life or death decisions hang on minute choices. In this context, simplified models of good versus evil derived from childhood collections of fairytales may become especially salient [Moskalenko 2008]. In this sense, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine presented a unique opportunity to observe reactions to this crisis through the lens of the above theory. Consistent with it, the reactions often fell into fairytale categories.

The war brought about broad international support for Ukraine and condemnation of Russia [Boyon 2022]. Interestingly, this support has often been expressed in terms reminiscent of fairytales, such as the use of "orc" to describe Russian invaders [Kryvushenko 2022]. In other words, many in the broader international public observing the Russian invasion of Ukraine seem to have resorted to the early moral models from fairytales when issuing social judgments about these political events. These judgments led them to support one side and

condemn the other, contributing to their personal sense of significance by aligning with what they perceive as "the right side of history."

Another interesting connection with fairytales and the war in Ukraine has to do with the surprises of Ukrainian resistance on one side and the Russian army's early incompetence on the other side. When Russia attacked in February 2022, very few individuals in the Western world anticipated that Ukraine could mount any significant resistance against the unprovoked aggression. Even trained political analysts in Europe and the United States made substantial misjudgments in their assessments of the Ukrainian civilians' determination to resist the Russian army [Merchant 2022]. Several weeks into the conflict, it had also become evident that many had overestimated the Russian army's determination and capacity to fight [Jones et al. 2021]. At the same time, the Ukrainian army's resolve to resist a numerically, technologically, and strategically superior opponent was also underestimated [Jonas 2022]. In short, Western experts have vastly underestimated the Ukrainian will to resist and vastly overestimated the Russian army's will to fight.

I propose that the surprising turn of events in the Ukraine war, contrary to expert predictions, can in part be attributed to cultural differences between Russians and Ukrainians, and that these differences, reflected in the fairytales of their childhoods, potentially contributed to the unexpected performance of each country's military forces.

Fairytales in Ukrainian Collections

In collections of Ukrainian classic fairytales, unassuming protagonists navigate formidable challenges, demonstrating resilience and transforming from vulnerable underdogs to triumphant heroes. These fairytales adhere to a familiar narrative pattern. In these collections, the protagonists are unlikely heroes, but their bravery, resourcefulness, and determination propel them to success, after which they return to their normal life and duties.

Thus, a typical tale published in Ukraine includes the following narrative motifs: 1) an unlikely hero, 2) a reluctance of the protagonist to engage in conflict, 3) the use of wit and skill to defeat a foe, and 4) a return to normal as a happy ending.

The following typical examples of Ukrainian fairytales fit the above model. They are often featured in collections of folktales, making them widely familiar.

Ivasyk-Telesyk

An elderly childless couple carves a log into a son named Ivasyk-Telesyk, who, through the mother's love, comes alive into a little boy. As he grows, he fishes to provide sustenance for his parents, guided by his mother's voice to return safely to shore. A deceitful snake tricks Ivasyk-Telesyk by mimicking his mother's voice and captures him. The snake plans to cook the boy and serve him as a dish to her dinner guests. But in a clever twist, Ivasyk Telesyk outsmarts the

snake's daughter who stands guard over him, and the snake daughter is the one who ends up baked and eaten by the snake's unsuspecting guests instead of the clever boy. To escape the pursuing snake, Ivasyk-Telesyk seeks help from passing geese, who agree to carry the boy on his back. After a challenging fight with the powerful snake, he returns home safely, revealing himself to his parents and thanking the heroic goose.

Kyrylo Kozhum'aka

A dragon, Zmey Gorynych, attacks the Kievan-Rus and captures beautiful girls. The daughter of the Kievan prince becomes a victim, prompting her to feign affection for the dragon to discover its weakness. The dragon confides to the princess that only Kyrylo, a *kozhum'aka* [hide tanner] from Kiev, can defeat him. The princess shares this secret with her pigeon, who informs her father. The prince seeks Kyrylo's help, but the tanner declines the offer of wealth and power. The prince then assembles hundreds of children to plea with Kyrylo, and the tanner relents, agreeing to fight the dragon. In the ensuing battle at Gorynych's lair, Kyrylo triumphs, heavily beating the dragon with his wooden club. Fearing defeat, Gorynych proposes an alliance, but Kyrylo cunningly demands they rule separate halves of the world. Exploiting the dragon's foolishness, Kyrylo coerces it to plow a border and even divide the sea. In the end, Gorynych obeys and meets its demise by drowning. Kyrylo returns the princess to her father and returns to his tanning duties.

Fairytales in Russian Collections

In contrast to tales published in Ukrainian collections, tales published in Russian collections often portray a character as unintelligent and indolent, spending their days lounging in bed while their diligent older brothers toil. The challenges the main character faces are not a hostile monster but rather the duties the protagonist is unwilling or unable to perform. Another typical element of these stories is the protagonist coming across a magic animal (e.g., a frog, a horse, a wolf, a bird, a fish, or a cow), who uses its magic to complete the protagonist's duties and fulfill his wishes. The protagonist then gains riches, status, and sometimes a beautiful woman, thus achieving a happy ending. In short, tales published in Russian collections typically contain the following elements: 1) an unmotivated hero, 2) a reluctance to engage in effort, 3) the use of a magical animal to achieve glory, and 4) riches or a beautiful woman as a happy ending.

The following are examples of Russian fairytales are often featured in collections of folk tales, making them widely familiar. They fit the above model.

By Pike's Wish

In a village, lived three brothers. The older two were prosperous merchants, while the youngest, a fool by the name of Emelya, spent his days sleeping on the

stove. One day while fetching water from the ice-hole, Emelya caught a magical pike. The pike promised to grant any wish if he released it, providing him with the magic phrase to command the pike to do his bidding, "By the pike's wish, at my command." Emelya first commanded his water pails to return home on their own, and then he directed his ax to chop wood for the fire. The news of this wonder reached the tsar, who summoned Emelya to the palace. Upon arriving, Emelya used the pike's magic to make the tsar's daughter fall in love with him. In response, the tsar ordered the pair to be placed in a barrel and thrown into the sea. However, Emelya invoked the magic words once again, and the waves carried the barrel to the shore of a beautiful island. With the pike's magic, Emelya constructed a magnificent marble palace. At the princess's request, he transformed himself into a handsome and intelligent prince. One day, the tsar visited the island and recognized his daughter and Emelya. The tsar sought forgiveness, and they lived happily ever after.

Sivka-Burka

Long ago, there was an old man with three sons. The two elder sons managed the farm and enjoyed fine clothes, while the youngest, Ivan the Fool, preferred venturing into the forest for mushrooms and lounging on the kitchen stove at home. When the father fell ill, he instructed his sons to bring bread to his grave for three consecutive nights upon his death. The eldest son persuaded Ivan to take his place the first night. Ivan, agreeable, brought bread to his father's grave, and at midnight the father rose and inquired about the world. Pleased with Ivan's visit, the father ate the bread and returned to the grave. This pattern repeated the second night with the second brother. On the third night, Ivan's turn came. After complying with his father's request, the father praised Ivan for being the only son to fulfill the task and instructed him to call the magical horse, Sivka-Burka. The horse transformed Ivan into a handsome young man, and the horse's magic allowed Ivan to win the hand of the tsar's daughter in a remarkable contest. Despite his brothers' skepticism, Ivan succeeded, and with the help of the magical horse he married the princess and lived happily ever after.

Relative Prevalence of Different Motifs in Ukrainian and Russian Fairytales Collections

Because Russia and Ukraine are adjacent countries with shared histories, it is reasonable to suppose there would be overlap between the tales published in Russian and Ukrainian collections, and that the above motifs and tales exemplifying them would be represented to a comparable degree in each country's tale collections. To empirically investigate this possibility, a comparative study was carried out across collections of Russian and Ukrainian fairytales.

To collect source data for the study, a research assistant unfamiliar with the proposed theoretical differences was engaged and tasked with finding fifteen books representing collections of Russian fairytales and fifteen books

representing collections of Ukrainian fairytales. Using search terms in both Russian and Ukrainian, correspondingly, for "Russian fairytales" or "Ukrainian fairytales" in Google, the criteria for retaining a collection was that it was in the corresponding language (i.e., Russian collections in Russian, and Ukrainian collections in Ukrainian), that it was published in the corresponding country (i.e., no Russian tale collections published in Ukraine and vice versa), and that the book included a table of contents. The resulting cases included one Russian collection and two Ukrainian collections that contained non-native fairytales, such as Arabic, German, or French fairytales; these collections were dropped from analyses. An additional search was carried out to replace the dropped collection, achieving a total sample of fifteen Russian and fifteen Ukrainian collections, resulting in a total of thirty collections.

The collections varied greatly in the number of tales they contained, ranging from six to fifty tales for the Russian collections (the average number of tales per collection was twenty-one), and from eight to 135 (the average number of tales per collection was forty-one) for the Ukrainian collections. Tales representing the motif of "magical animal brings the protagonist glory" as well as the motif of "underdog hero prevails through wit/hard work" were each identified in both Ukrainian and Russian collections.

The differences in frequency of appearances of each motif were apparent in the number of collections containing no instances of a motif. Thus, the number of collections published in Ukraine that contained no instances of "magical animal brings glory" motif was ten out of fifteen. By contrast, all the Russian collections included instances of this motif. In other words, sixty six percent of Ukrainian collections did not mention the "magical animal brings glory" motif, as compared with zero percent of Russian collection that did not feature it. Similarly, when it came to the "underdog hero prevails by wit/hard work" motif, nine out of fifteen Russian collections did not contain a single instance of a tale representing it. By contrast, only one collection of Ukrainian tales did not include a representation of such a motif (Russian collections omitting motif: sixty percent; Ukrainian collections omitting the motif: seven percent).

Additional comparisons considered not only the fact of a motif's appearance in a collection, but also the number of tales in the collection exemplifying it. Thus, if a collection only has one instance of a "magical animal brings glory," it can be claimed that this motif is less frequently represented than if a collection contains two, three, or more tales representing the same motif. Because the number of tales per collection varied so widely, the findings for this comparison are reported as average percentages of tales per collection reflecting a particular motif. Figure 1 depicts the comparison between fifteen collections of tales published in Russia and fifteen collections tales published in Ukraine with respect to the relative frequency of them featuring tales that each of the two motifs: "magical animal brings the protagonist glory" and "underdog hero prevails through wit/hard work." A list containing the sources for the analyses is in the appendix.
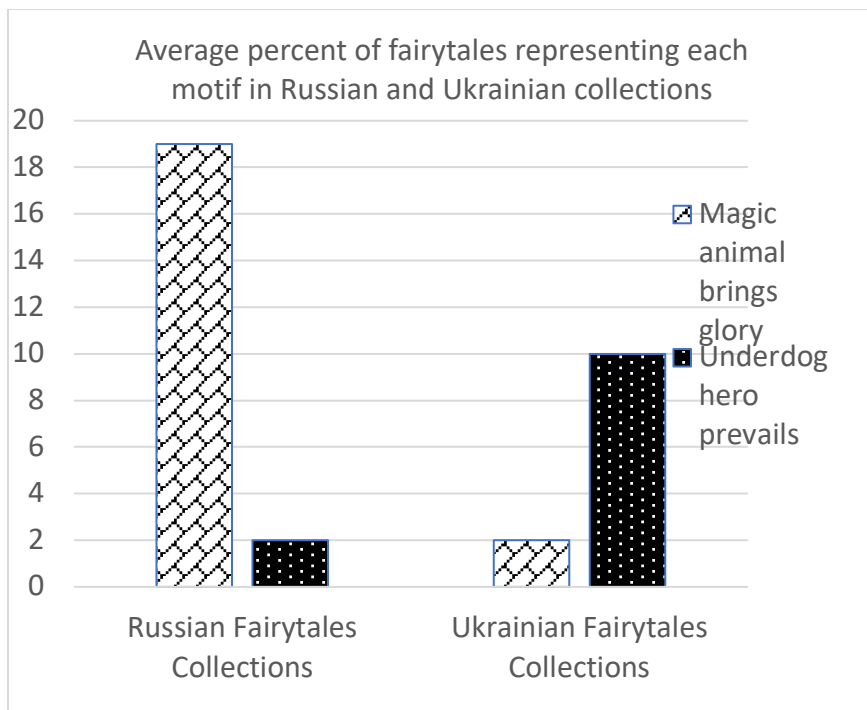
Figure 1: Average percent of fairytales that each motif (Magical animal brings glory; Underdog hero prevails through wit/hard work) in Russian and Ukrainian collections of fairytales.

As the quantitative results above demonstrate, there is a consistent difference between Russian and Ukrainian representations of the two motifs, with tales in Russian collections more often than tales in Ukrainian collections featuring magic animals that bring protagonists glory, whereas Ukrainian tales more often feature an unlikely hero prevailing through wit/hard work. It seems reasonable to conclude that an average Russian would be more familiar with the former motif and see it as more culturally-consistent than the latter motif—and vice versa for an average Ukrainian. Future studies might examine this hypothesis empirically, by surveying Russians and Ukrainians about their familiarity with the motifs and their notions about the cultural consistency of these two fairytale motifs, to compare survey responses with the above findings from printed fairytale collections.

The theoretical considerations above, supported to some degree by the analyses of fairytale collections, suggest that the cultural scripts for achieving significance are quite different for Ukrainians and Russians. While Ukrainians are inspired to rely on wit and resilience in opposing a formidable foe, Russians might

be inspired by tale characters to "sit tight" and hope that a magic coincidence will propel them to glory. Whereas Ukrainian fairytales suggest hard work as normative, Russian fairytales suggest a laissez-faire attitude. Finally, while Ukrainian fairytale collections see a happy ending as going back to one's home, family, and returning to one's work, "business as usual," Russian tale collections see a happy ending as a gain in riches, status, and women. These narrative motifs, legitimized as culturally valued social norms, can perhaps help explain the disparity in the behavior of Ukrainian and Russian troops and civilians in their responses to the Russian invasion of 2022.

Even though the Ukrainian military was numerically and technically far inferior to the Russian army, it managed to hold off the invading force through clever maneuvers, such as flooding Ukrainian flatlands by releasing water from a dam in the vicinity of the capitol, Kyiv, thus preventing the Russian forces from advancing on the city [Kramer 2022] or allowing Russians advances inland only to then cut off their supply lines, starving them of ammunition and fuel before encircling and successfully attacking them [Barnes 2022]. By observers' judgment, the Ukrainian strategy has been to "outsmart and wear out" the Russians, surprising them: with underwater drone attacks on their military ships, deep-behind-the-front-lines attacks on their ammunition depos, and other unexpected tactics [Kullab 2023]. After almost two years of war, prominent Western generals lauded the Ukrainian military for its successes, highlighting especially the decentralized nature of military initiatives, which allowed quick and adoptable maneuvering by small mobile units [Sonko 2023]. Thus, starting at a great disadvantage, the Ukrainian army was able to successfully oppose a much stronger opponent by clever maneuvers and perseverance, just like Ukrainian folk heroes in the published tales found in children's fairytale collections.

By contrast, the Russian Army, which was seen as the world's second strongest before the invasion, has performed remarkably poorly in Ukraine since 2022 [Kofman and Lee 2022], demonstrating incompetence and a lack of morale and fighting spirit [Sirgany et al. 2023]. Desertion and voluntary surrender rates were so high that the Russian government implemented a tougher penalty for deserting or surrendering, making it punishable by a prison term of up to ten years [Kyiv Post 2023]. The Russian government, facing opposition to conscription from potential recruits, incentivized them with sizable monetary compensation [Atlamazoglou 2023]. Russian soldiers have overwhelmingly engaged in looting, stealing, and transporting to Russia everything from the jewelry of people they killed, to washing machines from the apartments they invaded, to artwork from the museums and cultural centers they took over ["Looting by Russian Forces during the Russian Invasion of Ukraine" 2023]. Additionally, Russian soldiers have perpetrated rape against Ukrainian women and girls on a systemic and massive scale [UN News 2023]. Russian soldiers exhibited little will to fight, although they often volunteered for the war because of financial incentives and engaged in theft of property and the raping of women once in Ukraine. In a way, they acted similarly to the main characters of tales in published Russian

collections, who at first show no initiative, but, once in possession of power, use it to obtain riches and women.

Faced with unprecedented challenges, the Russian army has displayed subpar morale and performance [Smolkin 2022]. In stark contrast, Ukrainian forces have showcased a remarkably adaptive response, evolving from underdogs to heroes through sheer determination and resilience, defying the odds with spectacular resolve [Sovsun 2022]. The differences between fairytale collections published in Ukraine and Russia may offer insight into the disparate performances of their respective armies, which are, after all, comprised of individuals, each with their own ideas of cultural norms and values, that, when facing mortal danger, are likely to simplify down to basic motifs.

The Russian war against Ukraine, however, must be viewed in a context that is not always favorable to Ukraine. Before the invasion, for example, the Russian army was strategically positioning around Ukraine's borders in a manner that made major analysts and news outlets around the world warn about an imminent invasion. Yet, Ukrainian authorities rejected these worries, and instead of preparing for the invasion advised Ukrainians to avoid panic [Basu 2022]. Important opportunities were thus needlessly squandered, which contributed to Ukraine's extreme disadvantage in the early days and months of the war, including the loss of Ukraine's south, left largely unguarded [Lvova 2024]. Likewise, after the northern Ukrainian city of Kharkiv was liberated in 2023, Ukraine had time to build fortifications to guard against future attempts by Russia to attack the major city. However, that opportunity was likewise neglected, and in 2024 Russian troops again crossed the poorly guarded border on foot, requiring enormous sacrifices from the Ukrainian troops to beat back the attack [Beale 2024]. Russia has fully capitalized on these kinds of lapses by Ukraine, jumping on opportunities to advance its positions. In this sense, not only is Ukrainians' resistance against the odds (made more unfavorable by Ukraine's lack of vigilance) but also Ukrainians' eagerness to return to "business as usual" that has cost them dearly is consistent with Ukrainian folktale motifs. Similarly, not only is Russia's initial poor showing in combat but also its ability to later seek out and capitalize on opportunities to advance its position are consistent with Russian fairytale motifs.

Conclusion

It is true that most adults often don't actively ponder the folk and fairytales of their childhoods. And yet, these early narratives, filtered through the intense lenses of childhood emotions, can play a pivotal role in shaping our worldview. They serve as a deep-rooted foundation for our responses, particularly during challenging times. Fairytales equip us to identify archetypal characters, discern between good and evil, and grapple with themes of love, death, victory, and betrayal, influencing our decisions amid life's dichotomies and especially in times of crisis.

Comparing Ukrainian and Russian tale collections within the psychological framework of significance quest helps to explain cultural difference and distinctions in behavioral choices that seem inexplicable to Western analysts who rely only on economic and political data while ignoring the subtle influences of cultural narratives. As the world becomes smaller and more closely interconnected and the potential of conflicts to reverberate far and wide grows, fairytales hold a unique potential to illuminate deeply held beliefs and wishes that guide people through difficult times.

According to Steve Jobs, the visionary founder of Apple, "The most powerful person in the world is the storyteller" [Farmer 2021: para. 2]. This article delves into the psychological mechanisms echoing Jobs' assertion. Fairytales, serving as both an escape from the challenges of lost significance and a guide to moral values, immerse children in virtual quests for significance. Through modeling and operant conditioning, early significance quests become ingrained, influencing adult decision-making.

Regardless of age, individuals want to be the hero of their stories, to confront evil, and to reach a happy ending. Fairytales' power lies in their ability to simplify life's complexities to fundamental dichotomies (good vs. bad) and to offer actionable intelligence for attaining a happy ending, whatever that might be. A skillful leader can wield fairytale themes to mobilize their followers for war or peace, violent riots or peacebuilding [Moskalenko 2024].

Like nuclear power, the elemental force of fairytales can illuminate and warm—but also harm and annihilate. Individuals can be cast as either beasts to kill or heroes to emulate, women as fairy godmothers or witches. Recognizing the influential role of fairytales opens avenues for crafting policies and governance that mobilize collective action in addressing shared challenges like climate change, mass migration, and political polarization, leading us all toward a "happily ever after."

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE

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APPENDIX

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