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Murals of War in Kharkiv: Visual Narratives of Memory, Resistance, and Decolonisation

Summary: This article explores the phenomenon of wartime murals in Kharkiv as a form of public visual expression amid the full-scale war. The murals are analysed not only as artistic objects, but also as political, memorial and symbolic gestures that represent experiences of loss, resistance, collective memory and national self-awareness. The focus is on how murals transform urban space, alter its symbolic geography and contribute to the displacement of colonial and Soviet meanings. The author identifies three main types of murals: memorial murals (dedicated to fallen defenders, volunteers and victims of the war), resistance murals (which affirm heroism, national unity and visual protest) and decolonial murals (which reframe urban space through figures of Ukrainian culture, particularly Hryhorii Skovoroda). The study combines methods of visual analysis, theories of cultural memory (Pierre Nora, Aleida Assmann, James Young), urban studies (Andreas Huyssen, Jill Bennett), postcolonial critique (Edward Said, Achille Mbembe), and the Ukrainian experience of decommunisation. Special attention is given to specific examples of murals, their location, visual language, artistic teams and the layers of meaning formed in Kharkiv's public space. Murals are examined as a form of counternarrative, as acts of visual resistance that mobilise the community while functioning as a living archive of the war. In conclusion, it is argued that Kharkiv's wartime murals are not only a response to trauma, but also a mechanism for reinterpreting space, shaping a new civic identity and affirming Ukraine as a subject of history resisting both physical and symbolic aggression.

Keywords: visual culture, decolonisation, murals, national identity, memory, public space, resistance

The full-scale war launched by Russia against Ukraine in 2022 has become not only an unprecedented challenge to national security but also a catalyst for profound transformations in Ukrainian society, particularly in the realms of collective memory, visual culture and the decolonisation of public space. In this context, the significance of non-institutionalised, often spontaneous or grassroots forms of interpreting wartime experience grows, among which street murals, appearing in frontline cities such as Kharkiv, play a special role. In wartime, the visual language of art becomes a means of immediate reflection, public commentary and the construction of memory narratives that bypass the filters of official historiography or state memory policies. The mural, as a form of street art, combines artistic expression with spatial presence in the daily life of the city. Unlike traditional memorial objects, murals often emerge rapidly, at the site of trauma or victory, responding to specific events or figures. They capture living, unprocessed memory in the process of its formation. In the case of Kharkiv, a city targeted by intense shelling from the very first days of the full-scale war, murals play a dual role: on one hand, they serve as a means to honour loss and trauma; on the other, as an act of cultural resistance and a marker that the city is alive, fighting and remembering. Furthermore, murals in Kharkiv function as a tool of decolonisation by displacing the visual codes of the Soviet and imperial past, filling the urban space with the Ukrainian language, symbolism, images of contemporary heroes and heroines and cultural identifiers.

The study aims to analyse the role of wartime murals in Kharkiv as visual tools that shape memory, strengthen civic resistance and support decolonial reorientation in the urban space. The murals discussed in this article were selected according to three criteria. First, they were created in Kharkiv after the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, and therefore directly reflect wartime experiences. Second, the selected murals exhibit explicit or implicit references to themes of resistance, collective memory, or decolonisation, making them representative of the broader cultural and political dynamics emerging in the city. Third, the study focuses on murals that gained public visibility through their location in central or symbolically significant districts, circulation in media, or active engagement by local communities. The analysis employs a qualitative, visual-interpretative approach that combines elements of semiotic and narrative analysis. The murals are examined through the lens of their symbolic structures, visual metaphors and iconographic references. The visual readings are contextualised with ethnographic observations, photographic documentation and public reactions collected from local media and social networks, allowing for an understanding of how these artworks operate within the city's sociopolitical and cultural landscape. Thus, the analysis of war murals in Kharkiv enables the exploration of how new memory narratives are formed in the contemporary urban environment, what aesthetic and political functions public art fulfills during times of crisis, and how visual culture becomes a powerful means of understanding and

transforming collective experiences. This topic is critical in the broader debates on the de-imperialisation of public space, community participation in memory-making, and the role of art in documenting history ‘from below’.

Public urban space is not only the material environment of everyday life but also a carrier of collective memory, a field of symbolic struggle for identity, interpretation of the past and the formation of shared narratives. In studies of the city’s role in memory production, approaches based on the idea of the spatial localisation of memory — its rooting in the physical environment — are particularly important. The French historian Pierre Nora formulated the concept of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) as material, symbolic, or functional objects where ‘memory crystallises and is fixed’. In the context of visual art in the urban environment, murals can be understood as such ‘sites of memory’, especially when they appear at locations of traumatic events, commemorate the fallen, or symbolise resistance. Nora identifies that these sites emerge when memory is no longer a ‘living experience’ but becomes ‘consciously constructed’ through objects, rituals, or images.¹ Australian scholar Jill Bennett, develops the idea of affective memory, which is conveyed not only through narrative but also through sensory experience. Bennett emphasises that art can serve as a mediator of traumatic experience, allowing the viewer to engage with memory not as an abstract story but as an emotionally involved experience.² In this context, war murals function as affective ‘zones of memory’ that do not merely inform but evoke emotional responses such as empathy, anger, solidarity, or resistance. The German cultural theorist Andreas Huyssen, considers cities as palimpsests of memory, where various historical layers, cultural codes and political contexts overlap. He emphasises that in contemporary conditions, visual culture in public space — memorials, graffiti, murals — becomes a key means of affirming or reinterpreting memory.³ According to Huyssen, street art in the city can serve as a form of ‘counter-memory’, opposing official, dominant narratives. These approaches allow for a complex understanding of the city as a performative space of memory, where murals simultaneously become documents of traumatic experience, gestures of resistance and spatial acts of decolonisation.

A mural in the context of war is not only an artistic gesture but also a complex memorial and political form. Its analysis requires the engagement of interdisciplinary theories — from visual studies and urbanism to trauma theory and the decolonial turn. The visual image as a memorial agent is presented in the work of W.J.T. Mitchell, where the author argues that images possess their own ‘agency’ in public space — they seem to ‘want’ to say something, evoke a reaction, and exert influence.⁴ Thus, the mural acts

1 Nora P. 1989, 7–8.

2 Bennett J. 2005, 36.

3 Huyssen A. 2003, 7–9.

4 Mitchell W.J.T. 2005, 30.

not as a passive representation but as an active agent in the memory process. Viewing the mural as a visual text, it can be seen that it functions in an urban space similarly to a literary or documentary narrative. It unfolds stories of heroism, pain and resistance, addressing the viewer through metaphors, symbols, colour and sometimes literal quotes. James Young notes that unstable memory, in the form of visual representations, is capable of capturing not only facts but also the emotional colouring of events, often contesting official history.⁵ Aleida Assmann also speaks about the mediation of memory — its ‘carriers’ can be not only archives and documents but also images, spatial interventions and cultural gestures.⁶ Murals precisely function as such a ‘medium’, capable of being simultaneously aesthetic, political and documentary. The study of visual art as a form of trauma representation is especially relevant for analysing war murals. Dominic LaCapra⁷ and Cathy Caruth⁸ view art as a space for working through collective pain that is not always easily verbalised. In this context, murals function as visual acts of emotional witnessing, sometimes replacing traditional monuments.

As a spatial intervention, a mural changes the city’s semantics — it intrudes into a landscape that may still carry Soviet or imperial traces, effectively a rewrite. Miwon Kwon emphasises that site-specific art transforms not only space but also the identity of a place.⁹ Kharkiv’s murals, often created on sites of war destruction, shape a new topography of memory where space speaks of contemporary history and trauma. This gesture also holds political power, which Boris Groys describing art as a form of soft political intervention, especially in conditions of crisis or authoritarian control.¹⁰ In the case of Kharkiv, this is also a decolonial gesture that, according to Edward Said, undermines the representational hegemony of imperial discourse.¹¹ Achille Mbembe¹² and Madina Tlostanova¹³ also emphasise the need to decentralise knowledge and restore local voices in public art, which is especially important for post-Soviet, trauma-affected spaces. Ukrainian scholar Heorhii Kasyanov, in numerous works, emphasises that post-Soviet societies, particularly Ukraine, are characterised by a multiplicity and competition of memory narratives, which take on a distinct spatial form in streets, memorials and visual objects. According to Kasyanov, memory in the 21st century is a ‘battleground’, not merely a background narrative of history.¹⁴

5 Young J.E. 1993, 15.

6 Assmann A. 2011, 107.

7 LaCapra D. 2001.

8 Caruth C. 1996.

9 Kwon M. 2002, 3.

10 Groys B. 2008, 24.

11 Said E. 1994.

12 Mbembe A. 2015.

13 Tlostanova M. 2017.

14 Kasyanov H. 2018, 17–18.

As a tool of soft decolonisation, especially in eastern Ukrainian cities where the Soviet legacy remained visually dominant for a long time, street art is interpreted in the research of Kharkiv scholar Roman Liubavskiy. He views the mural as an act of transforming the urban environment that ‘blurs the boundary between official and unofficial art, between monument and protest.’

Thus, murals in Kharkiv emerge as multifunctional entities: markers that anchor memory in space; texts that tell stories in visual form; and interventions that transform the visual and political semantics of the environment. Applying the approaches of Mitchell, Kwon, Young, Groys, Assmann, Said and others allows not only for a deeper interpretation of the functioning of murals in public spaces but also for situating the Ukrainian experience within the global context of post-traumatic art, decolonial action and cultural resistance.

The total destruction of architecture and urban spaces caused by the war creates new contexts for artistic practices that generate visual responses to the devastated urban environment.¹⁵ In this situation, murals themselves become vulnerable objects: exposed to continuous shelling and urban degradation, they risk being damaged or erased, turning the question of their preservation into an urgent cultural and ethical challenge.¹⁶ The murals that appeared in Kharkiv after the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine are not only visual manifestations of wartime but also markers of the transformation of urban space and collective consciousness. They capture reactions to trauma, mobilise resistance, redefine identity and create new, hybrid forms of public expression. To understand this phenomenon, it is useful to distinguish several functional types of Kharkiv murals, which can simultaneously overlap or interact within a single image.

In the context of war, Kharkiv’s murals can be seen as a form of ‘traumatic art’ that captures shock, loss and grief, while simultaneously transforming these states into visual resistance. Memory in the murals is not only a fixation on the past but also an invitation to act — remembrance becomes a form of mobilisation. The murals in Kharkiv have become public monuments to contemporary heroes. They emerge not by top-down decisions but from the initiatives of communities, comrades-in-arms, families and artists. Among the examples of memory and heroisation murals, one mural is highly prominent which is dedicated to two fallen fighters of the ‘Kraken’ unit — Andriy Khrypunov (call sign ‘Psykh’) and a fighter with the call sign ‘Vzhyk’ (Fig. 1). Andriy participated in the Kharkiv counteroffensive, which led to the liberation of his native village, Kivsharivka. ‘Psykh’ died at the age of 21 on the Donetsk front while on a combat mission. Information about ‘Vzhyk’ is still limited due to certain

¹⁵ Belinskyi S. et al. 2023, 16–34.

¹⁶ Molodid O. et al. 2023, 1381–1390.

circumstances. During the battles for Soledar, thanks to his knowledge of topography, a successful evacuation under enemy fire was conducted. He died a Hero while performing a combat mission on the Kupiansk front. At the centre of the mural is a shield featuring the Kraken unit's logo and an inscription that, translated from Latin, means 'God and Fatherland'. This phrase was chosen deliberately, as both young men were Orthodox Christians and gave their lives for their country. The mural was created by members of the creative group 'Kailas-V' — Yana Vovk, Roman Partala and Serhii Yakimenko.¹⁷ During the full-scale war, murals have also appeared in Kharkiv dedicated to Chief Sergeant of the engineering and sapper reconnaissance of the 95th Separate Air Assault Brigade Oleksii Ostapenko; fighters of the 'Kraken' unit, Oleh Sapalenko ('Yuvelir') and Oleh Fadeyenko ('Malysh'); as well as the commander of the volunteer formation 'Freikor' Heorhii Tarasenko ('Zhora'). The iconography of these murals forms a heroic pantheon of the contemporary war, combining individual stories, religious symbols and signs of belonging to the military community. They not only commemorate memory but also integrate it into the visual narrative of a city caught in armed conflict and ongoing self-identification.



Fig. 1. The mural honouring two fallen fighters of the 'Kraken' unit — Andriy Khrypunov (call sign 'Psykh') and a fighter with the call sign 'Vzhyk'

¹⁷ Tsomyk H. 2024.



Fig. 2. The mural in honour of volunteer Anton Khrustaliyov



Fig. 3. The mural 'Kharkiv — Hero City'



Fig. 4. One of the three murals on the façade of the Kharkiv Theatre of Musical Comedy

In this typology, a particularly striking example is the mural dedicated to volunteer Anton Khrustaliiov, created by artist Andriy Palval in Pivnichna Saltivka — a district of Kharkiv that suffered extensive destruction from shelling (Fig. 2). On 16 March 2022, Anton, along with his comrades, was delivering humanitarian aid — food and medicine — to the civilian population. Their vehicle was struck by Russian rocket artillery fire.¹⁸ This act became a symbol of civic sacrifice: not only soldiers but also volunteers have become heroes of Kharkiv's new history. The mural bearing his portrait is not merely a tribute — it is a visual localisation of pain and resilience. Its placement amid the ruins of Pivnichna Saltivka adds both physical and emotional depth to the work, as it becomes part of the landscape of trauma. As Aleida Assmann notes, memory in public space functions most effectively when it is tied to a specific place and a personal story.¹⁹ In this case, the personal becomes collective: Khrustaliiov represents not only himself but also embodies the image of thousands of volunteers who risked — and continue to risk — their lives for the sake of others.

The war has radically transformed Kharkiv's public space. The urban landscape, destroyed by Russian strikes, has become both a site of destruction and a stage for resistance. In this context, murals have acquired a particularly significant function — they

¹⁸ *U Kharkovi...*

¹⁹ Assmann A. 2011, 243.

are no longer merely aesthetic or memorial. They have become visual declarations symbolising the city's resilience, gestures of solidarity with Kharkiv and its residents, acts of cultural restoration and expressions of political protest. A powerful example is the mural 'Kharkiv — Hero City' by artist Anastasiia Khudiakova, created in October 2022 at 95 Novobavarskyi Avenue (Fig. 3). This building — one of the first to be destroyed by enemy shelling on 1 March 2022 — was restored, and its facade now features a large-scale mural. The artwork depicts construction workers rebuilding Kharkiv, as well as iconic architectural landmarks: the Assumption Cathedral, the Ferris Wheel, the Mirror Stream fountain, the Annunciation Cathedral, the Derzhprom building and the Central Railway Station.²⁰ Thus, this mural serves as a redefinition of a space of trauma: a site of destruction becomes a site of visual renewal — a space that declares Kharkiv lives, resists and rebuilds. In this artistic gesture lies a form of visual solidarity with the city as a living organism, one that resists not only physical devastation but also symbolic erosion.

Murals created not only in memory or honour, but directly at sites of traumatic events — literally on the wounds of the city — play a special role in the visual resistance. In this context, the murals on the façade of the Kharkiv Theatre of Musical Comedy serve as a multilayered visual testimony to resilience, an aesthetic response to violence and a symbolic act of resistance through art. On 23 August 2022, Kharkiv City Day, a Russian missile struck the theatre, damaging the façade and shattering all the windows. Instead of simply applying a covering of plywood, the theatre's administration transformed these scars into a space for artistic intervention by engaging the theatre's artist, Mariya Storozhuk. The first mural — portraits of the theatre's actresses dressed in blue and yellow, gazing hopefully into the sky — is a deeply metaphorical image. It combines beauty, vulnerability and resilience, with the female figures simultaneously embodying the Muse and the Mother-Protectress, symbolising the role of culture as a source of spiritual resistance. The second mural is a vivid theatrical metaphor for freedom and defiance (Fig. 4). It depicts a ballerina in mid-leap, wrapped in the Ukrainian flag. Her movement is a gesture of life, a dance as an act of resistance, and the blue-and-yellow banner becomes an almost winged form. The inscription on the façade — a graphic play on the Ukrainian words for 'free' (*vilna*) and 'war' (*viina*) — underscores the fragile yet unyielding nature of Ukrainian freedom, which grows in spite of destruction. This is an example of the visual deconstruction of language through art, opening new horizons for semiotic resistance. The third mural continues this logic, combining military themes, patriotic symbolism and a hope for victory. It functions as a public message to the community, conveying not only the fact of struggle but also its meaning — the transition from darkness to light, from pain

²⁰ *Mural Kharkiv – Misto Heroi*. 2025.

to rebuilding.²¹ This triptych on the theatre's façade exemplifies what W.J.T. Mitchell, calls an image that possesses its own 'will'²² — in the context of war, the image ceases to be a passive representation and becomes an active participant in dialogue, a subject of remembrance, resistance and renewal. The theatre, as an institution, acquires new meaning here — the cultural space becomes a bunker of freedom, where every artistic gesture is a response to violence, a visual manifestation of the city's resilience. Art placed directly at the site of impact becomes a form of counter-narrative, one that publicly rejects the occupier's discourse and offers an alternative perspective: resistance through beauty, survival through creativity.

Among all forms of artistic resistance, a distinct aesthetic and ethical position is occupied by the street art of Hamlet Zinkivskiy — one of Kharkiv's most renowned artists. His work does not follow the typical pattern of 'military murals' — there are almost no depictions of weapons or heroism in the conventional sense. Yet his pieces serve as invisible pillars of inner resistance, philosophical defiance and hope. Hamlet's first graffiti appeared back in 2000, and since then, he has created over 150 works, more than 100 of which have survived even after the massive shelling of the city. This testifies not only to the material durability but also to the symbolic resilience of his art. His approach stands in stark contrast to loud propaganda: concise black-and-white figures and handwritten texts, often placed directly on entrance walls, fences, or utility buildings. Phrases like 'Everything will be okay', 'Light will prevail', 'You are alright', and later during the war: 'The city that stands', 'People matter more than buildings', 'It's hard to strangle bastards with your hands down' (Fig. 5) — become forms of care and solidarity, gentle yet unwavering gestures of support.²³ These are words that do not shout but whisper — and yet they resonate at the very heart of social pain. In this sense, Zinkivskiy plays the role of a city chronicler and visual philosopher. His art is a diary of inner resilience, something akin to a quiet but persistent 'internal front'. These images do not carry canonical memorial weight, but that is precisely where their power lies: they are woven into the fabric of everyday life, as if piercing it with new meanings. As Miwon Kwon notes in *One Place After Another*, site-specific art derives its strength precisely from being rooted in the place and context in which it exists.²⁴ Hamlet's graffiti are exactly that — not 'exported' symbols, but organic parts of the urban organism that convey its pain, hope and self-irony. These works are not just art on a wall. They are the 'voices of the city', an inner monologue that has become collective, creating a narrative of shared resistance, dignity and resilience.

21 Tsvietkova S., Hnatiuk I. 2022.

22 Mitchell W.J.T. 2005, 30–35.

23 Ponomarenko I. 2025.

24 Kwon M. 2002, 3.



Fig. 5. The mural by Hamlet Zinkivskyi is titled: 'It's inconvenient to strangle scum with lowered hands'



Fig. 6. The mural dedicated to Hryhorii S. Skovoroda was created by Anastasiia Khudiakova and Mykhailo Novikov

The third dimension of Kharkiv's murals is visual decolonisation. This involves not merely creating new images but re-signifying the urban space—replacing traces of the Soviet or Russian imperial past with new narratives rooted in Ukrainian identity. Such murals do more than decorate facades — they intervene in the fabric of the city, rewriting the identity of streets, squares and buildings, restoring historical agency. As Edward Said wrote, colonial power creates a 'geography of domination', subjugating space not only physically but also imaginatively.²⁵ A mural as counter-geography is a way to deconstruct a foreign narrative, overlay it with one's own Ukrainian meaning, and create an emancipated topography where not the Kremlin or Lenin dominate, but Skovoroda, Shevchenko and Marko Vovchok. One of the most powerful gestures of visual decolonisation in Kharkiv is the monumental mural dedicated to Skovoroda, unveiled for his 300th anniversary on 3 December 2022 (Fig. 6). This mural not only honours the figure of the Ukrainian philosopher but also directly displaces imperial images from the old centre of Kharkiv — right next to buildings where architectural remnants of the Soviet era once prevailed. Skovoroda is depicted in a blue zhupan, holding a book and a staff, as a wandering thinker and symbol of Ukrainian spiritual self-sufficiency. The format itself — 18 by 13 metres, composed of 70 separate fragments — represents an architectural manifestation of an idea, not a random drawing but a declaration of presence. The materials allow the mural to be dismantled and relocated — symbolically becoming a mobile, living memory, much like Skovoroda's own thought. The authors are Anastasiia Khudiakova and Mykhailo Novikov, well-known artists in Kharkiv.²⁶ It is important that the mural did not appear on a 'blank slate', but in a place where visual dominance had long belonged to other — imperial — symbols. Its emergence is an act of visual displacement, negation and at the same time, cultural emergence.

Another initiative is a mural created by the community of Kharkiv National Pedagogical University named after Skovoroda (Fig. 7). Here, the philosophical legacy is presented through a combination of a portrait of the thinker and the visualisation of his aphorisms, inscribed on the walls: 'Love arises from love: when I want to be loved — I am the first to love', 'As a nut is nothing without its kernel, so is a person without a heart'. The authors are faculty members and students — Dmytro Chaus, Yehor Lobodynskyi, Mykhailo Lytvyn, Denys Khomyakov and Nadiya Sydorova.²⁷ Thus, the educational institution acts not only as a learning establishment but also as an active participant in the cultural decolonisation of the city. This mural carries not only an educational but also a spatial-political message: it demonstrates that Skovoroda does not belong to the empire, as he was often represented in the Soviet cultural canon — he is a Ukrainian thinker, and his philosophy is part of our national emancipation.

25 Said E. 1994, 225.

26 *Mural Hryhoriu Skovorodi*. 2025.

27 Todorova O. 2022.



Fig. 7. The mural dedicated to Hryhorii Skovoroda was created by faculty and students at Kharkiv National Pedagogical University

Thus, in Kharkiv, the mural becomes a tool for rewriting the city's symbolic map. This is especially significant in a place that, for decades, was saturated with imperial visual markers — from Lenin monuments to street names, architectural landmarks and memorial bas-reliefs. Now, each new mural is not merely a 'decoration' on a wall. It is a local point of resistance, a living form of collective memory, where we ourselves determine who has the right to belong in the space, whom we choose to remember, and whom we choose to displace.

In conclusion, it can be argued that the war murals in Kharkiv are not merely aesthetic expressions of art but, above all, visual documents of the present that record experiences of loss, resistance, trauma and national affirmation. They shape a new public topography of memory, where every façade becomes a potential bearer of meaning — a marker of dignity or pain. In wartime, art steps beyond the confines of galleries, becoming a weapon, an act of solidarity, a form of intervention in a space under constant threat. The analysed examples reveal three key functions of these murals: memorial (honouring the fallen, articulating collective grief), resistance (heroisation, protest, solidarity) and decolonial (displacing imperial meanings, affirming Ukrainian identity). These functions intertwine, and each mural is not merely an image but a text that enters into dialogue with the city and the viewer, assigning new meanings to space and time. Through its murals, Kharkiv transforms into a living archive of war, where every building façade bears witness to the emotional and historical experience of the community. Their appearance is not accidental but reflects a societal need to speak, remember, resist and reclaim identity. Thus, the visual narratives formed in the urban space are not only a response to wartime reality but also a powerful means of transforming collective memory, cultural self-identification and asserting Ukraine as a subject of history.

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