

Decolonised Gendered Subjects at War for Freedom and Self-Determination: Women in Combat in Real-Time and in Digitalised Memory

Mariya Shcherbyna,^{ID a,b} Tetiana Havlin^{ID a}

a) Brandenburg University of Technology Cottbus-Senftenberg

b) Politecnico di Torino

Abstract: Women's history has long been marginalised in dominant narratives, with archives and institutional memory omitting or minimising women's contributions. Recognising and documenting women's roles across warfare, social movements, science, and culture is essential to shaping collective memory and challenging persistent gender bias. The digitalisation of archives and memory practices has democratising potential, expanding accessibility, diversity, and global engagement with women's histories. Online platforms transcend geographical and institutional barriers, integrating testimonies and artefacts in multimedia formats that foster inclusive, participatory representations of women's experiences. In post- and decolonial, postsocialist contexts, these tools create alternative spaces to contest state-controlled historical discourses. In Ukraine, digital public history initiatives such as *Incredible Women* (Gender Museum 2024) and *Beading the Womantory* (Gender Culture Centre 2025) recover the contributions of marginalised women, while *Invisible Battalion* (2025) and *Her War Story* (Gender Museum 2025b) document women's wartime experiences. Drawing on 25 testimonies of women in or formerly involved in combat, we examine self-representation, identity, and agency to explore how digitalised memory practices transform collective remembrance and commemoration in the context of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war. We argue that these digital narratives function as epistemic repair, reclaiming women's subjectivity within androcentric and imperial memory regimes, and propose the figure of the 'woman at war' as a discursive and decolonial subject of commemoration.

Keywords: digitalised memory, women in combat, Russo-Ukrainian war

Shcherbyna, Mariya, Havlin, Tetiana. 2026. Decolonized Gendered Subjects at War for Freedom and Self-Determination: Women in Combat in Real-Time and in Digitalized Memory. *Gender a výzkum / Gender and Research* 27 (1): 25–50, <https://doi.org/10.13060/gav.2026.008>.

'We are writing the history of our country now. I want to leave a worthy trace. Someday I will tell my grandchildren: your grandmother, Valkyriia, helped to fight the enemy.' Valentyna Zhelezko (52, 'Valkyriia') (Zhukovska 2025)

Women's history has long been marginalised in the dominant historiography, where institutional archives and memory practices have systematically excluded or underrepresented women's contributions to warfare, science, art, and culture (Bohachevsky-Chomiak 1995; Hagengruber 2020; Melman 1993; Sánchez Hernández, Martos García, López Navajas 2017; Shcherbina 2020). Ukrainian historian Martha Bogachevskaya-Khomyak (1995) compared the history of women with traditional embroidery in white on white: the metaphor is sad but accurate. Viewing human history through the lens of a supposedly universal male experience produces a profound epistemic distortion: it erases women's contributions from collective memory. Recognising and documenting women's roles – whether in warfare, social movements, science, or culture – is crucial for shaping a collective memory that is not just based on 'Great Men' history (Billson, Fluehr-Lobban 2005: 46), and for countering the gender biases that continue to influence contemporary societies.

These omissions have produced what Miranda Fricker (2007) conceptualises as epistemic injustice, a structural denial of women's status as knowers and historical agents. Feminist historiography has consistently demonstrated that such absence is not a mere oversight but the outcome of androcentric epistemologies that regulate what counts as knowledge, whose voices are recorded, and which memories are institutionalised (Hagengruber 2020). Within this framework, women become absent epistemic subjects, marginalised both symbolically and materially in processes of knowledge production and collective remembrance.

The digitalisation of historical records and memory practices has introduced what Gerben Zaagsma (2023: 844) defines as 'the democratizing potential of digitization', a transformative force that reshapes the politics of historical visibility and opens new epistemic and methodological perspectives for recovering marginalised voices. From a feminist perspective, digitisation redefines authority over historical knowledge and challenges institutional monopolies of remembrance. Digital initiatives have begun to reconfigure not only how women's experiences are documented and are remembered but also the conditions under which marginalised voices gain epistemic visibility.

The digital turn in memory practices offers an opportunity to contest traditional archival hierarchies by enabling participatory and decentralised modes of remembering. Digital archives, participatory databases, and crowdsourced storytelling platforms make it possible to address archival exclusions by making women's histories (through text, video, oral recordings, podcasts, interactive maps, etc.) more accessible, diverse, and publicly engaged across national borders (Noiret 2018; Robinson 2018). At the same

time, they contest the androcentric logic of traditional historiography by granting agency to rediscovered voices: narrators, witnesses, researchers, artists, and activists. This shift from institutionalised hierarchic commemoration to participatory digital memory practices has particular significance in post-colonial and post-socialist contexts, where state-controlled historical narratives have long subordinated or distorted women's roles (Bogachenko, Oleinikova 2023; Koobak, Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert 2021; Tlostanova, Mignolo 2012).

For feminist and postcolonial scholarship, the digital environments represent both an epistemic and political shift: they decentralise authority and integrate oral histories and affective testimonies, while foregrounding previously silenced experiences. Digital practices perform both an epistemic and social function: decentralise the production of knowledge and create transnational networks of memory beyond institutional boundaries. In the post- and decolonial contexts of Eastern Europe in particular, digital memory projects become counter-archives, spaces where silenced or suppressed experiences can challenge official versions of the past become visible (Koobak, Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert 2021). However, the democratising promise of digital memory and inclusion remains uneven, as the internet and digital realm are susceptible to manipulation and misrepresentation by both human actors and algorithms (Esposito 2017). Moreover, as scholars of post-colonial and post-socialist feminisms argue, digitisation does not automatically dismantle hierarchies; rather, it often reconfigures them within new sociotechnical forms (Adair, Nakamura 2017; Petkova 2025; Ponzanesi 2020).

Ukraine, long positioned within the 'internal colony' of the Russian and Soviet imperial knowledge systems (Bogachenko, Oleinikova 2023; Tlostanova 2024; Tlostanova, Mignolo 2012), provides a particularly illustrative case, where the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war has generated new forms of feminist public history and digital commemoration. The erasure of women from official historiography, especially from military and political narratives, has been both a colonial and patriarchal process. In response, digital initiatives have been developed that reconstruct women's historical presence through participatory, community-based storytelling. The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has further intensified the urgency of these digital practices. Women's participation in the war as soldiers, medics, and volunteers has challenged traditional gendered boundaries. Simultaneously, digital platforms have become central arenas for documenting, commemorating, and archiving their experiences in real time to confront male-dominated military memory in national mythmaking. Through digital platforms, these projects transform private narratives into public memory, making visible the multiplicity of women's roles in wartime Ukraine. Initiatives such as the *Invisible Battalion* (Invisible Battalion 2025), *Sestry* (2025), *Incredible* (Gender Museum 2024), *Beading the Womantory* (Shcherbina 2020), and *Herstory of the War* (Gender Museum 2025) exemplify the emergence of digital public history in Ukraine as a feminist epistemic

practice and demonstrate how digital practices reclaim women's visibility within collective memory.

In this contribution we address the problem of women's historical marginalisation and the persistent invisibility of female experiences within national and military narratives. We focus on the Ukrainian context amid the Russo-Ukrainian war while analysing women's digital war testimonies. Drawing on 25 publicly available testimonies of Ukrainian women involved in combat in the ongoing war, we explore how digital media and feminist memory initiatives contribute to the reconfiguration of collective memory and to the emergence of new subjects of commemoration. The analysis situates these narratives within broader discussions of collective memory, post-socialism and post-coloniality, digital memory, and feminist historiography to examine how the digital turn transforms both the forms and the agents of remembrance. Accordingly, we ask: How does the digitalisation of historical memory transform the forms and gendered subjects of commemoration, particularly in decolonial wartime Ukraine? By addressing this question, we aim to show how feminist digital memory practices challenge epistemic injustice and hierarchies, while producing new, participatory spaces of remembrance that redefine what and who is considered worthy of historical record.

We begin by outlining the theoretical and epistemological framework of our study, focusing on the mechanisms of collective memory and drawing on post-socialist and post-colonial perspectives and the concepts of epistemic injustice and epistemic reflexivity. In the second section, we situate the Ukrainian case within broader debates on the digital democratisation of historical knowledge production and feminist memory practices, identifying how digital platforms transform the politics of remembrance. Building on this, we examine key feminist public history initiatives and war-related projects, such as *Invisible Battalion*, *HerStory of the War*, and *Sestry*, as case studies, which exemplify the emergence of digital counter-archives in wartime Ukraine. The dedicate the third section to our empirical study titled *Women's Testimonies in Combat*, where we analyse self-representation, belonging, agency, and memory as dimensions of epistemic repair and women's visibility. Finally, we conceptualise the figure of a 'woman at war' as a discursive and epistemic subject that reconfigures the gendered politics of commemoration, highlighting implications for feminist and postcolonial historiography in digital contexts.

Collective memory: invisibility, epistemic injustice, and postcoloniality

Collective memory and history

Julia Kristeva (2002: 3) conceived of memory as *hyperbole* – an emotional, linguistic, and psychic intensification rather than a reproduction of events from the past. From this perspective, memory is never recollection; it is always mediated through present standpoints, technological settings, and collective framing. Elena Esposito (2002) similarly understood memory as a system of mediation grounded in the communicative technologies available to each society. She argued that collective memory and its preservation depend on the material infrastructures of communication – from non-phonetic writing and the alphabet to the press and digital media – each shaping memory's outreach, form, and interpretation. As she wrote: 'Memory is simultaneously past and present, subjective and objective, personal and uncontrollable, remembering and forgetting – and in any case, one side of the distinction constitutes the condition for the existence of the other' (Esposito 2002: 12). In other words, memory exists through temporal tension: It operates in the present while negotiating the meanings of the past. As Esposito emphasised, the revision of historical narratives can only be understood from the present: 'Memory inevitably always operates only in the present' (2002: 31).

Esposito's ideas resonate with Norbert Elias's (1988) reflections of social time: The past, present, and future are relational concepts rather than fixed entities. He described the simultaneous presence of all three temporal dimensions in human consciousness (Elias 1988: 99). Like Chinese boxes, these dimensions emerge from and fold back into one another, since '[the] future of today is the present of tomorrow, and the present of today is the past of tomorrow' (Elias 1988: 98). Grasping these shifting perspectives means acknowledging the fluidity of time, which shapes generational experiences and collective memories.

From the standpoint of the present – as the authors of this article positioned within the realities we analyse – our epistemic decisions and reflexivity in memory production, our choice of research themes, and the selection of case studies shape the past (the present of today and the past of tomorrow) through the voices we choose to preserve, remember, and commemorate, thereby projecting them into the future. In the context of Ukraine's defensive war against Russia's imperial aggression and necropolitics, this relationship between past and present is particularly visible. Memory practices here are not merely commemorative but actively reconstructive – they reclaim suppressed narratives and reinterpret history and past events through postcolonial and postsocialist lenses, which we discuss below. History, as institutionalised collective memory through scholarship and systematic preservation, is shaped

by epistemic asymmetries and is selective by nature. As Janer M. Fluehr-Lobban and Carolyn Mancini Billson (2005: 46) noted, '[t]he conceptualization of change and culture were constructed by early sociologists and anthropologists, most of whom were Western males. The same is true for historians and philosophers'. According to these authors, this androcentric bias manifests as the 'Great Men'¹ theory of history, in which progress and transformation are attributed to powerful male figures, while women's contributions have remained marginal or invisible. Our article seeks to make a modest contribution towards changing this.

Women as absent epistemic subjects

The systematic omission of women from archives and canonical historiography exemplifies *epistemic injustice*, a concept articulated by Miranda Fricker (2007). She described such injustice as harmful because it 'strikes at a person's standing as a subject of knowledge – a capacity essential to human value' (Fricker 2007: 5). Within historiography, this harm occurs when women's voices are excluded, discredited, or rendered unintelligible. Fricker distinguished two interrelated forms of epistemic injustice. Testimonial injustice occurs when prejudice undermines the credibility of a speaker, causing her testimony to be undervalued (Fricker 2007: 17). In historical terms, testimonial injustice is institutionalised through selection processes, canon formation, and the systematic privileging of male-authored accounts while marginalizing women's narratives. Women are thus constituted as *absent epistemic subjects*.

Hermeneutical injustice, on the other hand, denotes a deeper structural failure – the absence of interpretive frameworks to comprehend marginalised experiences. This form of injustice occurs when 'some significant area of one's social experience is obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource' (Fricker 2007: 155). Within historical discourse, this means that even when women speak, the conceptual and institutional means to interpret their experiences as historically meaningful are lacking. Together, testimonial and hermeneutical injustices generate a recursive cycle (Fricker 2007). Discredited testimony leads to absence from archives; absence from archives limits interpretive vocabularies; limited vocabularies, in turn, disqualify future testimony. This cycle results not only in women's historical invisibility but also in collective epistemic loss. What is excluded from the archive cannot circulate as knowledge, and the very

¹ A contemporary example of this narrative condensation can be seen in the wartime myth of the 'Ghost of Kyiv'. Although this figure circulated as a legendary male fighter pilot, the Air Force later clarified that it was a collective image of several Ukrainian pilots, including Kharkiv-born fighter pilot Andrii 'Juice' Pilshchikov, defending the capital. In this sense, the narrative transformed a plural military effort into a singular heroic male symbol of resistance (Kopytko 2024).

definition of ‘history’ becomes skewed towards the dominant perspectives (Billson, Fluehr-Lobban 2005: 46).

Fricker’s ethical response to such injustice, which we instrumentalise in our contribution, lies in cultivating *reflexive critical awareness* – a practice of examining and counteracting prejudice within our epistemic institutions and in knowledge production. Applied to historiography, this entails reconstructing the credibility economy of historical knowledge, making space for marginalised voices not as supplements but as constitutive epistemic agents. In this process, women’s history becomes an act of epistemic reclamation: it restores testimony as a legitimate source of historical authority and re-inscribes women’s experiences as integral to collective memory.

Our study, dedicated to Ukrainian women in active duty and combat, helps us to exercise Fricker’s reflexive critical awareness. Current Ukrainian narratives of war and resistance to Russia’s imperial aggression are often shaped (including in Western European scholarship) through the figures of Ukrainian refugees – predominantly women with dependent children – and men of the battlefield. Our work intervenes by studying and presenting the marginalised accounts of women engaged directly in combat and active service. This allows us to reach the critical point at which the ‘other’, the marginalised other, becomes a historical, political, and epistemic subject. Who defines what is worthy of preservation? Whose experiences, voices, and testimonies achieve the status of history? These questions help us to underscore the politics of remembrance. Women’s history thus emerges not merely as an archival endeavour but as an ethical and epistemological project in the making. By dedicating our study to the testimonies of women in combat and on the battlefield, we strive to transform absence into agency and marginality into subjectivity. In analysing women’s contributions to the defence of Ukraine, we affirm their right to be remembered and engage them as active participants in memory-making rather than as its silent objects.

Postcolonial and postsocialist knowledge and memory

To fully assess our case studies, we engage postcolonial and postsocialist perspectives. The colonisation and occupation of Ukraine, both in the past and present, have concerned not only control over territories but also control over systems of knowledge and memory (Hundorova 2024). As Tlostanova and Mignolo (2012: 26) have argued, the colonality of knowledge represents a persistent structure of domination that outlives formal colonialism. It shapes how knowledge is produced, in which language it circulates, and how it is validated and transmitted, privileging hegemonic epistemic norms as universal and neutral.

Homi K. Bhabha (2007 [1994]: 245) described postcolonial critique as a response to ‘the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the context for political and social authority within the modern world order’. Such perspectives emerge from the testimonies of colonised peoples and marginalised minorities – as in

the case of Ukrainian women in combat, whose voices are positioned at the intersections of resistance and domination. In Ukraine, an Eastern European and post-Soviet country, the postsocialist condition complicates this dynamic. The region has long existed between various (geo-)political impacts (Hrytsak 2004) and remains shaped by internalised hierarchies between Eurasian (Russian) and Western epistemic authorities. Thus, the colonality of knowledge operates not only as what Tlostanova calls a 'modern syndrome' referring to modernity as an epistemic regime (2015: 39), but also as a historical one – the struggle for the right to one's own history, continually denied by imperial narratives. These dynamics render alternative epistemologies marginal within dominant knowledge systems.²

This colonality persists in the post-Soviet world, where epistemic infrastructures remain shaped by imperial and socialist legacies. Epistemic modernity here developed alongside epistemic colonality – the colonisation of thought through the absorption or rejection of non-Western knowledge. Reclaiming epistemic agency and subjectivity requires, as Fricker (2007) suggested, *reflexive critical awareness*, and in Tlostanova's (2015: 40) terms, *epistemological self-reflexivity*: the ability to look at the world 'from the position of our own origins, lived experiences, and education', while treating Eurasian and Western knowledge production not as models to follow but as objects open to critique. In this context, it is worthwhile to reflect on our positionalities as an analytical outcome of epistemological self-reflexivity. We were both born during the late socialist period in Soviet Ukraine, and our schooling and higher education took place amid the turbulent transition period in the 1990s and 2000s. These years were marked not only by Ukraine's transition to independence but also by a broader shift from totalitarianism to democracy (with authoritarian tendencies at times), from a planned to a market economy, from internationalist rhetorics to nation-state logics, and from state-controlled and censored academia to the neoliberal logic of (surviving) universities. We were professionally socialised in Odesa (TH/Tetiana Havlin) and Kharkiv (Mariya Shcherbyna/MS and TH) – regions of Ukraine deeply shaped by Russian colonality. Russian functioned as a prestigious and dominant language in everyday communication, education, the arts, and popular culture. Although the Russian Empire and later the USSR had formally collapsed, we nonetheless internalised Russian colonial knowledge through these cultural and linguistic structures. Independently, we both entered the fields of gender and memory studies – a rapidly

² The current Russian official justification for its genocidal and ecocidal war against Ukraine relies on claims of so-called historical ties, rooted in the periods of the Russian imperial and later Soviet occupation of Ukraine. This colonial rhetoric and the instrumentalisation of historical narratives constitute a central element of contemporary Russian politics – or, more precisely, in Achille Mbembe's terms (2003), necropolitics.

developing area in Ukraine in the early 2000s – through academic work (our dissertations and publications) and activism (MS's involvement in the Gender Museum) (Havlin 2015, 2019, 2026; Shcherbina 2020; Shcherbyna 2025; Strelnyk, Shcherbyna 2023). Emerging from Western feminist epistemologies, this engagement became a path towards our feminist, postcolonial, and postsocialist reflexive awakening. Our institutional experiences within West European and American higher education (TH over a decade and MS in recent years) have compelled us to interrogate the roles of Western and Eurasian (particularly Russian) dominant epistemologies in our professional development and self-positioning (Shcherbyna, Havlin 2025). Within this framework, our present co-authored article, dedicated to the testimonies of female active-duty soldiers in Ukraine's defensive war, represents not only an effort to restore their epistemic subjectivity but also an attempt to reclaim our own.

In doing so, we aim not only to decolonise patriarchal and hegemonic knowledge but also to reimagine its purposes by transforming mechanisms of exclusion in the context of historical memory, remembrance, and commemoration. Ukraine's case exemplifies the emergence of post-Soviet and postsocialist subjectivities shaped by the long shadow of various empires – Russian, Soviet, Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, and Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. The departure from the youngest empire (the USSR) did not simply mark political independence; it initiated a complex process of *re-subjection* within structures still permeated by Russia's imperial syndrome (Pain 2016: 69). In this context, postcolonial practices – acts of remembering, resisting, fighting against, and reclaiming – function as strategies of resilience and survival from epistemic erasure and coercion. They are ways of asserting agency, where the choice to resist colonisation becomes an act of reclaiming subjectivity long denied. As Irina Zharebkina (2006: 200) observed, subjectivity is tied to the possibility of choice: 'the era of totalitarianism is based not on others choosing for us, but rather on the fact that we are compelled to subjectivize ourselves through the structure of a coercive choice, whether we want it or not. Its most extreme form is precisely the choice we do not wish to make'. Ukrainian subjectivities today emerge from precisely this terrain – resisting Russia's attempt to impose its coercive choice on Ukraine and its people. The choice of women in combat, the focus of our analysis, is to protest and fight – against renewed imperial violence, against epistemic asymmetries, and against invisibilities. Their acts constitute both a political and existential act of survival, resilience, and recovery. On the battlefield and beyond, they transform coercive conditions into acts of agency, turning choice itself into a postcolonial practice of self-assertion, survival, and the redefinition of freedom. In this way, they shape their present, claim the right to interpret their past, and envision their future. Women on the frontlines – as soldiers, as volunteers, and as mothers bringing their children to safety – assert their right to visibility and participation in defining the present, past, and future.

As Bignall (2010: 131) suggested, '[c]entral to the creation of a postcolonial concept of agency is the need to reconsider the nature of power and desire, which together constitute the conditions and the impetus for social action'. To move beyond coloniality requires introducing a *historical discontinuity* – a break with inherited logics of mastery and reconciliation. Postcolonial agency and subjectivities, then, are not defined by the desire to dominate or appropriate the Other but by the capacity to create new forms of sociability and ethical relations. In this light, the work at intersection of memory and postcoloniality becomes a site of epistemic struggle. The *inner colonisation of memory* (Bogachenko, Oleinikova 2023) – the internalisation of imperial narratives – can be undone only by recognising alternative digital archives, oral histories, real-time testimonies and embodied practices as legitimate knowledge sources. Such recognition transforms memory from an object of study into a political act: a practice of epistemic justice that restores silenced subjects to the narrative of action, humanity, and reflexive acknowledgment. In this context, the digital sphere emerges as a crucial site for reclaiming epistemic agency and countering imperial erasures. The following section explores how the digital turn intersects with feminist memory practices, focusing on Ukrainian initiatives that preserve testimonies of the past, shape the present, and envision the future.

Ukrainian digital feminist memory initiatives

The digital initiatives discussed below can be understood as forming an evolving ecosystem of feminist digital memory in Ukraine. Within this ecosystem, platforms, activist archives, and media outlets document and circulate women's wartime experiences. Some initiatives reconstruct women's historical visibility, while others collect testimonies of women affected by the war. Together, these platforms contribute to the formation of a distributed digital memory environment in which women's experiences of war, displacement, and civic participation are recorded, mediated, and made publicly accessible. Several Ukrainian initiatives have sought to address the historical invisibility of women through feminist public history projects. For example, the international artistic memory project *Beading the Womanstory* (Gender Culture Centre 2025; Shcherbyna 2020) reinterprets beadwork as a medium of feminist historical storytelling, bringing together 35 artists from 9 countries to visualise women's historical contributions, while the project *Incredible* presents a digital collection dedicated to influential Ukrainian women from science, culture, and public life. Both initiatives contribute to restoring women's presence in historical narratives. In the following examples, we approach the figure of a woman at war as an epistemic and discursive subject in digital counter-archives, a locus where gendered memory and militarised citizenship intersect.

Launched in 2015 during the Russo-Ukrainian war, *Invisible Battalion* emerged as a digital advocacy and research initiative aimed at restoring the visibility of women serving in the Ukrainian Armed Forces in a context of institutional erasure. Combining sociological research, documentary storytelling, and digital campaigning, the project documented the structural invisibility of women soldiers, who were frequently registered in non-combat positions despite serving on the frontline. The initiative played a significant role in public debates on gender equality in the military and contributed to the legislative reform of 2018 that granted equal rights to women and men in the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Over time, *Invisible Battalion* has evolved into a broader digital platform addressing issues such as veterans' reintegration, trauma, and sexual harassment in the military, while continuing to document women's wartime experiences. In this sense, the initiative functions as a living digital archive that connects feminist knowledge production with institutional change and public memory (*Invisible Battalion* 2025).

Another important initiative within Ukraine's feminist digital memory ecosystem is *HerStory of the War* (Gender Museum 2025), a digital storytelling and archival project developed by the Centre for Gender Culture in Kharkiv and hosted by the Museum of Women's and Gender History. Launched in 2023, the project collects and curates testimonies of Ukrainian women whose lives have been transformed by Russia's full-scale invasion, including soldiers, medics, volunteers, journalists, and displaced civilians. The online platform presents these accounts through a multimedia exhibition integrating texts, images, and audio materials, thereby creating an open digital archive of women's wartime experiences. By foregrounding women as witnesses and historical agents, *HerStory of the War* challenges the traditional gendered monopoly over war memory and contributes to the preservation and dissemination of women's voices in the public sphere.

The international online magazine *Sestry* ('Sisters' in Ukrainian) was launched in 2023 in response to the mass displacement caused by Russia's full-scale invasion (*Sestry* 2025). Based in Warsaw and produced by Ukrainian and Polish women journalists, the platform provides a transnational digital space for reporting, essays, and first-person testimonies documenting women's experiences of war and exile. The section 'Stories' features narratives of women soldiers, medics, journalists, and displaced civilians, combining journalistic documentation with digital storytelling. Although women's perspectives are central, the project also features materials about male protagonists and gender-mixed contexts. In this way, *Sestry* functions both as a media outlet and as a repository of testimonies that record women's wartime experiences for a transnational audience.

Alongside feminist digital initiatives, several Ukrainian media outlets have also developed series documenting women's participation in the war. *ELLE* Ukraine launched the rubric 'Women at the Front' in 2024, featuring interviews and photo-portraits

of women officers, medics, and volunteers. Similarly, the platform *Ukrainky.com.ua* publishes biographical narratives and analytical materials highlighting Ukrainian women's contributions in the military, civic, and humanitarian fields. Together, these initiatives form a broader ecosystem of digital feminist memory documenting women's experiences of the ongoing war.

The testimonies analysed in this study were drawn from *SESTRY*, *Ukrainky.com.ua*, and a range of Ukrainian media outlets including *Suspilne*, *BBC Ukraine*, *Elle Ukraine*, and others. A full list of sources is provided in Table 1 in the appendix.

Methodological considerations

Based on grounded theory methodology and its principles of flexible research design, our study examines how women serving as active duty soldiers participate in Ukraine's defence on the battlefield against the ongoing Russian imperialist war.³ We analyse how, in the context of active service, these women construct subjectivity, agency, and practices of remembering through publicly accessible digital narratives and emerging textual testimonies. Our aim is not only to identify recurring rhetorical structures but also to explore how narrators construct agency, belonging, and memory within the constraints of media formats and socio-political expectations of heroism. Since our sample consists of women in active duty, we explicitly approach 'women at war' as a discursive figure produced at the interconnection of heroism, care, and professional competence. Rather than reproducing traditional war mythologies, we trace how these narratives challenge masculinist heroic templates by normalising women's professional soldiering and life-saving practices, echoing earlier efforts (Alexievich [1984] 2018).

Methodologically, we treat these testimonies as elements of a feminist digital counter-archive, where epistemic injustice is actively negotiated through self-representation rather than passively recorded. Following Zaagsma's notion (2023) of 'the democratizing potential of digitization' and Robinson's (2018) concept of digital

³ In this article we describe the initial analytical stage of a broader research project that applies grounded theory methodology according to Juliet Corbin and Anselm L. Strauss (1990, 2015) as well as Kathy Charmaz (2014, 2017). The analysis we present here should therefore be understood as a pilot phase focusing on open coding and the identification of preliminary analytical categories derived from a corpus of testimonies. Within the logic of grounded theory, theory construction is expected to emerge through iterative processes of data collection, theoretical sampling, and constant comparison until theoretical saturation is reached (Glaser, Strauss 2006 [1967]: 61). As we are still expanding our empirical corpus and the theoretical sampling (ibid.: 45) has not yet been completed, with the present study we do not aim to formulate a fully developed grounded theory. Rather, we identify emerging analytical categories that will inform the subsequent stages of theory building in the larger project on gender roles in wartime Ukraine between everyday practices and digital performativity.

memory as a participatory practice, we approached these narratives as both epistemic and commemorative acts – instances where women claim the right to narrate the war from within.

Sampling and selection criteria

Our study relies on an empirical corpus comprising twenty-five publicly available digital testimonies documenting women's participation in the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war. These testimonies include interviews and biographical profiles published between 2022 and 2025 across feminist digital initiatives as well as in selected Ukrainian media. These narratives portray women serving as combat-adjacent personnel, frontline medics, and paramedics engaged in military actions since 2014.

The testimonies included in this corpus originate from different mediated contexts of digital publication, including journalistic interviews in Ukrainian media and narratives curated within feminist digital memory. As narratives produced by women directly involved in military service, they also constitute war testimonies, recounting the lived experiences of the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine. While these formats differ in their editorial and curatorial practices, in both cases the narratives appear as mediated forms of first-person testimony rather than independently authored accounts. From the perspective of epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007), such testimonies can be understood as instances in which historically marginalised epistemic subjects claim authority over narrating their own wartime experiences. Many of these narratives are collected within initiatives explicitly aimed at documenting women's participation in the war, and therefore function as elements of emerging feminist counter-archives that seek to restore women's visibility in historical memory. At the same time, once these narratives enter digital platforms, they become part of what Zaagsma (2023: 9) describes as the politics of digitisation, where the selection and circulation of digital materials shape which stories about the past become visible. In this sense, the analysed testimonies function simultaneously as personal accounts of the Russian war in Ukraine and as mediated contributions to the emerging digital memory of the war.

Although women's role in the Ukrainian Armed Forces has significantly expanded during the ongoing war (Radio Svoboda 2025), their public representation remains marginalised and gendered. Women in active duty must continually negotiate visibility and legitimacy while confronting persistent stereotypes that question their competence and authority (Khromeychuk 2018; Martsenyuk 2023). Research and field testimonies repeatedly note that women in military roles face a double burden: they must demonstrate professional excellence in a masculinised institution while navigating everyday microaggressions, scepticism, and at times open discrimination.

This structural ambivalence makes their self-narration both politically and epistemically significant. In this context, digital platforms provide a space where women artic-

ulate their experiences and negotiate belonging and agency within a militarised environment. In our sampling procedures we were guided by following selection criteria:

1. Explicit self-identification and self-representation as active duty in combat or medical capacity in the form of first-person voice through direct quotation, narrated monologue, or identifiable narrator.
2. Our access to the full content of the testimony in open-access digital archives (project websites or media portals) published in the period between 24.2.2022 and 30.9.2025 (i.e., from the beginning of the full-scale war)

A composed corpus thus represents a hybrid zone between self-representation, journalism, activism, and digital heritage; a zone where women's lived experiences intersect with practices of public memory production. The analysed materials were selected according to the principles of theoretical sampling (Birks, Hoare and Mills 2019: 4). Open coding yielded four analytical categories: self-representation, identities and belonging, agency and mission, and memory and continuity. These categories informed the subsequent stages of analysis and will be further developed as the empirical corpus expands. We exclude visual artefacts and private social media posts to ensure comparability. The mentioned above selected digital initiatives such as *Invisible Battalion*, *HerStory of the War*, and *Sestry*, we recognise as central nodes in Ukraine's evolving digital memory ecosystem and exemplify curated public feminist remembrance. They frame women not as objects of reportage but as authorised narrators of war.

Open coding procedures

Prior to the open coding procedures (Corbin, Strauss 1990: 423), we asked how women in active duty are positioned themselves within dominant war discourses in relation to combat, sacrifice, authority, and competence. We also explored how their speech acts recalibrate the gendered intelligibility of soldiering while situating testimonies in the institutional and historical context of wartime Ukraine and postcolonial memory regimes. Open coding enabled us to identify recurring categories:

1. *Self-representation* includes professional and ethical self-definition and how women articulate subject positions and professional integrity while challenging stereotypical femininity in the military.
2. *Identities and belonging* address how narrators negotiate military, civic, and collective identities and express embeddedness in units and networks.
3. *Agency and mission* analyse how women frame motivation, duty, and responsibility, and justify action under constraint.

4. Finally, *memory and its continuity* examine how narrators construct remembrance and situate their experiences within the ongoing history of war.

Through these analytical lenses, we trace how women position themselves as historical agents and custodians of memory, challenging the androcentric and colonial epistemologies that shaped traditional archives and historiography. We acknowledge the limitations of curated digital testimonies, including editorial framing and potential self-censorship under wartime conditions, and address them through cross-sourcing across activist archives and media.

Analysis and findings

Self-representation: speaking from the frontline

Women's self-representation in digital war narratives constitutes a discursive practice through which speakers construct professional military identity while negotiating the marginalised position of the woman soldier within masculinised institutional spaces. Narrators present army service as professional specialisation, emphasising technical knowledge, operational competence, and deliberate vocational choice. From the perspective of testimonial injustice (Fricker 2007), these narratives challenge stereotypes that historically undermine women's credibility as military professionals. Daria 'Anakonda', a drone operator, articulates this logic of parity explicitly: 'I must show people that I work on equal terms with men, that I am not a little girl who is simply in the army, I am a fighter.'⁴ The binary opposition between дівчинка ('little girl') and боець ('fighter') indexes an epistemic struggle against the stereotypical infantilisation of a woman, the transition from symbolic presence to professional subjecthood. Veronika 'Palianytsia', a combat medic, defines her practice through procedural precision: *'The main work of a combat medic is to take him [the injured person] from point A, transport him to point B, and hand him over to the doctors.'* Similarly, Oleksandra Chorna describes evacuation under fire in procedural detail, asserting medical expertise as skilled labour. A recurrent theme across the corpus is свідомий вибір ('conscious choice'). Women frame their participation as deliberate and prepared. Olena Ryzh explains: *'There is a short and a long answer. The short one is a call of the heart. The long one – many components influenced my decision [to join Ukrainian Military Forces].'* Viktoriia Kravchenko, with fourteen years of service, similarly insists: *'I made my conscious choice back then and understood what military activity entails.'* Such utterances reposition female participation within the epistemic field of reason. Preparation further reinforces this legitimacy. Olena Totel recounts: *'I signed up for*

⁴ The full list of testimonies analysed in the study is available in the appendix.

martial arts, the gym, and shooting, and also underwent a full medical examination. When asked about her goal, whether she was here to train her glutes, she responds: *'We're going to make me into a machine'*, redefining the body as an instrument of disciplined readiness for defence, replacing stereotypical beauty ideals.

Narrators also expose the stereotypes, double standards, and systemic barriers women face and sometimes internalised gender scripts. Externally, structural gate-keeping persists through paternalistic rationalisations. Olena Ryzh observes: *'For men everything is simple, you came, they processed you. For a woman it's mandatory; without a recommendation they don't even want to talk.'* Kateryna Halushka recalls one commander's remark: *'He said I would distract the fighters, because there are many young, single guys among them. Every second matters and can cost a life, and I had to run a mile through the trenches because I am a woman.'*

Uniform provision represents similar patterns of gendered stereotyping and epistemic invisibility. Until early 2024, women were issued only male-pattern uniforms. Another Kateryna, a servicemember in the Special Operations Forces, explains: *'Before that I wore the men's one. But the movement "Veteranka" (Female Veteran) made a women's uniform tailored to my measurements and gifted it to me.'* The inadequacy of women's uniforms and underwear was recognised in the army but not understood as an indicator of systemic exclusion. *'Imagine: a girl comes to serve, and they give her men's shorts instead of underwear. Sometimes it's uncomfortable, although they're warm and good, they cover half of you.'*

The (female) volunteers thus became both a producer of material solutions and an epistemic actor that translated women's embodied experience into institutional visibility. From the perspective of testimonial injustice (Fricker 2007), these accounts expose how gender stereotypes manifest not only in discourse but also in supplies and infrastructure. The military system implicitly assumed that the standard body was male, rendering women's bodies epistemically marginal. The lack of appropriate uniforms has become a metaphor of epistemic exclusion: women are literally not fitted into the institutional design. When women volunteer groups take the initiative to create tailored uniforms, they enact epistemic repair and transform structural neglect into collective recognition.

Moreover, the symbolic invisibility surrounding female heroism parallels this material absence. As Halushka remarks: *'When my comrade was killed, everyone wrote about him. About the female medic who evacuated the wounded under the same fire – they mentioned her in the last paragraph. Why? Because she's a woman? Because her work is "natural"?' This double standard reflects how gendered labour is normalised into invisibility: women's contributions are framed as extensions of care, not as professional sacrifice and heroism.*

Taken together, these testimonies show how self-representation functions as epistemic repair. Circulating through digital platforms, these narratives also function as elements of emerging digital war memory, where personal testimony becomes part of a distributed archive of the ongoing war. These narratives represent a postcolonial practice of claiming control over systems of knowledge and memory. By narrating competence, conscious choice, and embodied professionalism, women transform invisibility into recognition and stereotype into the structure of critique. Rather than producing a new 'Great Women' narrative, even though some of the narrators have become publicly visible figures, these accounts foreground the collective professional practices and everyday military work through which women challenge the gendered structures of military memory. In this sense, the narratives complicate personalised heroic models of war memory.

From here, the question shifts from representation to embeddedness: how do women who have gained visibility and legitimacy within masculinised structures negotiate belonging and collective identity?

Role and belonging: embeddedness and collective identity

Women's narratives of active service move beyond individualised professionalism to construct embeddedness and belonging as a constitutive dimension of military identity. In these accounts, belonging is an epistemic condition for action under constraint: competence is recognised, validated, and stabilised through relations of trust, mutual accountability, and shared memory. The first axis of embeddedness is intra-unit solidarity, which converts visibility into acceptance. Drone operator Daria 'Anakonda' foregrounds how peer recognition offsets isolation: 'I am the only female pilot in the battalion. My brothers-in-arms have supported me very much...' Here, legitimacy is conferred not by exceptionalism but by integration into a collaborative workflow, where competence is actionable and witnessed. The same logic underpins Valerii's 'Osa' formula, 'The army is like a family, only larger', which reframes the military as a warm community of practice whose cohesion is ethical (care) and operational (shared risk). Affective belonging here is articulated through kinship metaphors that transform military camaraderie into epistemic community. Kateryna Halushko conceptualises service as a shared ordeal rather than an institutional duty: 'The army is not only the frontline and combat tasks but also a community of people who go through extremely difficult trials together. It is in such conditions that a strong bond between people is formed.'

This recognition of collective endurance reframes belonging as ethical and affective infrastructure. Olena Ryzh develops this metaphor of kinship further, extending it beyond metaphorical solidarity to embodied social reality: 'I have gained many brothers.

I have a biological brother, many cousins, and now an incredible number of brothers in the literal sense of the word. That is why the words *pobratym* [побратим / brother-in-arms] and *posestra* [посестра / sister-in-arms] are perfectly true to reality.'

Belonging is also epistemic trust: the right to be believed in one's task and limits. Iryna Kleimenova notes that candid talk is possible only with those who have seen the same things: 'One can speak openly only with those who have seen what I have seen.' This is a precise description of how war experience creates interpretive communities. Such interpretive communities also contribute to postcoloniality by questioning persistent structures of domination and epistemic visibility within military institutions and public narratives of war. This formulation captures the emergence of interpretive communities bound by lived experience: testimony becomes credible only within networks that have themselves witnessed violence. War, in this sense, generates localised hermeneutical resources, allowing participants to make sense of what would otherwise remain socially unintelligible. Such relational epistemology shifts the focus from the individual experience of war to collective intelligibility. Knowing is here a distributed process grounded in mutual recognition. Through trust, shared labour, and affective endurance, women transform the abstract ideal of comradeship into a specific epistemic infrastructure sustaining military effectiveness and psychological survival alike. Taken together, these narratives demonstrate that belonging is not the aftermath of recognition but its condition of possibility. It is through belonging that women acquire the authority to speak, act, and remember. In Fricker's terms, such communities help overcome hermeneutical injustice, providing shared interpretive resources through which women's war experiences become intelligible.

Mission and agency

Across the sample, mission as epistemic agency under constraint emerges as a self-defined structure of agency grounded in conscious choice (свідомий вибір / *svidomyi vybir*), moral debt (борг / *borh*), professionalism, and love as an ethics of action. As Olena Ryzh formulates it: '*After February 24, I realised that I had lived in a vacuum, not seeing the war that had been going on since 2014. I began to feel that I owed something to the country.*' These words resonate with Kateryna Petrenko: 'I have no right to be a civilian.'

For Khrystyna 'Curly', professionalism itself becomes a moral discipline and mission: '*No one can do my job better than I can. I want to hand over Ukraine in a better condition than I received it from my parents.*' Combat medic Marta Demianchuk expresses this orientation towards practical ethics: '*I focus on saving people.*' Expertise here becomes the language of moral authority, where professional dedication transforms into moral practice, reinforcing the idea of epistemic parity through competence.

Finally, love emerges as a mode of action that bridges emotion and civic agency. *'I want to end this war with victory for the sake of my daughter and my mother... I hope that our work, the service of my brothers and sisters in arms, will make sure that she doesn't have to take up arms'*, explains Veronika 'Palyanytsia', translating this ethics into an obligation of future-oriented responsibility. Similarly, Yaryna Chornohuz asserts: *'I would not call it revenge. I would call it love. I do not hate Russians. I simply protect those I love.'* Taken together, these testimonies construct a framework of moral reasoning grounded in conscious mission, inserting individual agency, obligation, professionalism, and love as disciplined action. In Fricker's (2007) terms, this represents a form of epistemic repair, the reclamation of interpretive authority through acts that redefine women's war participation as a site of moral and cognitive agency.

Memory and continuity

Within the testimonial sample, memory and continuity operate as epistemic dimensions through which women transform participation into narration and narration into collective knowledge. Their statements situate individual experience within broader temporal and moral horizons, where acting, witnessing, and remembering converge as interdependent forms of agency. Remembrance is not perceived here as retrospective commemoration, because these narratives enact it as an ongoing epistemic practice, a means of inscribing meaning into the present (Esposito 2002) for it not to be forgotten, and transmitting it forward. In this sense, women's wartime testimonies contribute to postcoloniality by overcoming unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation in the digital realm and memory construction.

Olena Totel articulates transition from understandable fear to action: *'What pushed me was that I didn't want to be in an occupation and without a weapon. For me, being a civilian when occupiers might walk down my street – that's the greatest fear.'* Her notions redefine fear as an epistemic threshold: to act is to reclaim authorship over one's own vulnerability, to refuse the interpretive position of passive victimhood. Testimonies of this kind exemplify epistemic counteraction in Fricker's terms (2007), the production of knowledge through acts that resist both material and hermeneutical marginalisation.

Kateryna, active in Special Operations Forces, extends this logic to the contemplation of mortality: *'I don't want to die from a Shahed drone⁵ in an apartment building. If I am to die – and that's entirely possible – I want to take several enemies with me.'* Here, death is reframed as intentional agency rather than passive fate. The speaker

⁵ Shahed drones are drones based on Iranian technology and they have been used massively by Russia to attack Ukrainian military and civil objects.

transforms exposure into authorship, positioning herself as an active subject even at the limit of existence. Such utterances mark the emergence of living archives: embodied sites of knowledge where the act of speaking is inseparable from the act of living and enduring.

Continuity, in turn, unfolds as an intergenerational horizon. Valentyna Zhelezko ('Valkyriia') declares: 'We are writing the history of our country now. I want to leave a worthy trace. Someday I will tell my grandchildren: "your grandmother, Valkyriia, helped to fight the enemy".' Valentyna's voice situates women's military participation within a lineage of civic transmission, turning remembrance into a pedagogical and ethical inheritance, to remember through doing.

Taken together, these testimonies illustrate how marginalised participants of war produce knowledge that counters hermeneutical marginalisation (Fricker 2007) and delineate a feminist mode of historiography grounded in epistemic agency while gaining subjectivity: knowledge that is lived, enacted, and continuously reproduced and first-hand told through women's participation in the ongoing history of war.

Discussion and conclusions

The analysed testimonies reveal the *woman at war* not simply as a social role or biographical category, but as a discursive site where epistemic repair is actively enacted. Within the digital counter-archives, women reconstitute themselves as epistemic agents through self-representation, professional competence, and interpretive authority. Speaking from within the war, they destabilise the testimonial asymmetry embedded in military and media discourses, reclaiming credibility that has historically been denied. Their narratives perform epistemic repair by transforming absence into articulated presence, and silence into situated skilled-based and experience-based knowledge. The voice of women thus becomes both testimony and theory: a visible critique of androcentric epistemologies that have defined whose experiences are historically intelligible.

The digital testimonies analysed in this study, twenty-five publicly available narratives of Ukrainian women serving in the military forces, exemplify how self-representation in the media functions as a site of epistemic and symbolic transformation. Although most of these testimonies were not originally produced within structured feminist initiatives, they nonetheless participate in the wider ecosystem of Ukraine's digital memory, intersecting with activist, journalistic, and artistic forms of public history. In this sense, they represent spontaneous, decentralised extensions of feminist counter-archival logic rather than institutionalised archives.

Through first-person storytelling, women construct epistemic agency in a communicative field long defined by masculine authority. Their testimonies have two

functions: reclaiming credibility in militarised discourse and producing new interpretive resources for understanding women's war experience. By publicly articulating competence, decision-making, and belonging, these narrators counter testimonial injustice (Fricker 2007) and reconfigure the gendered economy of trust. Each narrative becomes an act of epistemic repair, transforming invisibility into recognition and redefining what counts as legitimate wartime knowledge. At the same time, the collective resonance of these testimonies signals the emergence of distributed memory practices. When women narrate combat, evacuation, or active duty, they generate interpretive communities grounded in shared endurance and mutual validation. The idioms of *pobratym* and *posestra* transform affective ties into epistemic infrastructure: belonging functions not as sentiment but as the condition of credibility. Through repetition, circulation, and citation across digital media, these stories form a living corpus of feminist witnessing that diffuses across journalistic and public spaces.

Importantly, the uncoordinated character of these testimonies underscores the democratising potential of the digital sphere (Zaagsma 2023). Visibility here is not granted by curators or institutions but produced through mediated self-articulation. This decentralisation of commemoration reveals how ordinary acts of speech can accumulate into a collective counter-memory. These dispersed narratives illustrate how digital media enable grassroots remembrance that operates outside institutional frameworks while still contributing to epistemic justice. From the postcolonial and postsocialist perspective, the testimonies of Ukrainian women in combat reconfigure both the geography and epistemology of feminist memory. These digital counter-archives emerge from a postsocialist terrain historically subjected to imperial epistemic hierarchies, where knowledge, legitimacy, and even grief were mediated through dominant Soviet (Russian) colonial frameworks. Within this context, speaking from the frontline becomes a decolonial act: an assertion of interpretive sovereignty and a refusal to remain an object of history written elsewhere – that is, decolonised gendered subjects at war for freedom and self-determination. In this sense, these testimonies engage with the coloniality of knowledge not only as a 'modern syndrome' (Tlostanova 2024), but also as a historical one, where gendered history is created in the moment of narration.

By narrating war from within, these women occupy a border epistemology, a standpoint situated between global modernity and local experience, where subaltern subjects reclaim their right to theorise their own condition. Their testimonies resist both the exoticisation of Ukrainian suffering and the paternalistic framing of women as humanitarian subjects rather than political actors. Through self-representation, they transform testimonial space into a locus of epistemic autonomy, producing knowledge from lived positionality. Women's wartime testimonies also contribute to rethinking gender roles in wartime Ukraine by situating women's narratives at the intersection

of memory construction, everyday military practices, and digital performativity. In this sense, Ukrainian women's voices at war challenge the epistemic coloniality that has historically confined Eastern Europe to the semi-peripheral role of the *imitator* rather than the producer of theory. Their accounts demonstrate that the decolonisation of knowledge in the region cannot rely solely on Western feminist paradigms; it must primarily emerge from within the embodied, affective, and linguistic realities of post-Soviet subjectivities. This becomes possible when women articulate fear, duty, and love as structured forms of agency and disobedience to the epistemic injustice.

References

- Adair, C., L. Nakamura. 2017. The Digital Afterlives of *This Bridge Called My Back*: Woman of Color Feminism, Digital Labor, and Networked Pedagogy. *American Literature* 89 (2): 255–278, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00029831-3861505>.
- Alexievich, S. 2018. *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in World War II*. New York: Random House Publishing Group.
- Bhabha, H. K. 2007 [1994]. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Bignall, S. 2010. *Postcolonial Agency: Critique and Constructivism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Billson, J. M., C. Fluehr-Lobban (eds.). 2005. *Female Well-Being: Toward a Global Theory of Social Change*. London & New York: Zed Books.
- Birks, M., K. Hoare, J. Mills. 2019. Grounded Theory: The FAQs. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 18: 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919882535>
- Bogachenko, T., O. Oleinikova. 2023. The Ghosts of 'Internal Colonisation': Anthropogenic Impacts of Russian Imperial Ambitions in Ukraine. *Ethnicities* 24 (4), <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687968231219774>.
- Bohachevsky-Chomiak, M. 1995. *Білим по білому: Жінки в громадському житті України, 1884–1939* (White on white: women in the public life of Ukraine, 1884–1939). Kyiv: Lybid.
- Charmaz, K. 2014. *Constructing Grounded Theory*. 2nd ed. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Charmaz, K. 2017. The Power of Constructivist Grounded Theory for Critical Inquiry. *Qualitative Inquiry* 23 (1): 34–45, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800416657105>.
- Corbin, J., A. Strauss. 1990. Grounded Theory Research: Procedures, Canons and Evaluative Criteria. *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 19 (6): 418–427.
- Corbin, J. M., A. L. Strauss. 2015. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. 4th ed. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Elias, N. 1988. *Über die Zeit* (About time). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Esposito, E. 2002. *Soziales Vergessen: Formen und Medien des Gedächtnisses der Gesellschaft* (Social forgetting: forms and media of social memory). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.
- Esposito, E. 2017. Artificial Communication? The Production of Contingency by Algorithms. *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 46 (4): 249–265, <https://doi.org/10.1515/zfsoz-2017-1014>.

- Fricker, M. 2007. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gender Culture Centre. 2025. Beading the Womantory (Жіноча історія у бісері / Women's history in beadwork). Retrieved 17/1/2025 (<https://www.genderculturecentre.org/proekt-zhinocha-istoriya-u-biseri-beading-the-womantory/>).
- Gender Museum. 2024. Incredible – Women Figures in the History of Ukraine (НЕЙМОВІРНІ – жіночі постаті в історії України). Retrieved 12/2/2025 (<https://gendermuseum.com/2024/04/nejmovirni/>).
- Gender Museum. 2025. Herstory of the War. Retrieved 1/5/2025 (<https://gendermuseum.com/herstory-of-the-war/>).
- Glaser, B. G., A. Strauss. 2006 [1967]. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction.
- Hagengruber, R. E. 2020. The Stolen History – Retrieving the History of Women Philosophers and its Methodical Implications. Pp. 43–64 in S. Thorgeirsdottir, R. E. Hagengruber (eds.). *Methodological Reflections on Women's Contribution and Influence in the History of Philosophy*. Cham: Springer.
- Havlin, T. 2015. Shift in Social Orders – Shift in Gender Roles: Migration Experience and Gender Roles. *Current Issues in Personality Psychology* 3 (3): 185–191, <https://doi.org/10.5114/cipp.2015.53229>.
- Havlin, T. 2019. Geschlechterrepräsentationen in der Alltagskultur Deutschlands: Zwischen Tradition und Gegenwart (Gender representations in everyday culture in Germany: between tradition and the present). *Scientific Herald of Izmail State University of Humanities* 43. Retrieved 24/7/2026 (http://idgu.edu.ua/naukoviy_visnik).
- Havlin, T. 2026. *The Dynamics of Immigrant Agency: Identity Formation, Translanguaging and Purposeful Actions of Post-Soviet Migrants in West Germany*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hrytsak, Y. 2004. On Sails and Gales, and Ships Sailing in Various Directions: Post-Soviet Ukraine. *Ab Imperio* 2004 (1): 229–254, <https://doi.org/10.1353/imp.2004.0033>.
- Hundorova, T. 2024. Transgenerational Trauma and Maternal Criticism in a Decolonial Perspective. Pp. 115–130 in A. Artwińska, Á. Calderón, J. Welge (eds.). *Family Constellations in Contemporary Ibero-American and Slavic Literatures*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Invisible Battalion. 2025. Невидимий батальйон. Адвокаційний проєкт (Invisible Battalion: The Global Advocacy Project). Retrieved 12/2/2025 (<https://invisiblebattalion.org/en/home-2/>).
- Koobak, R., M. Tlostanova, S. Thapar-Björkert (eds.). 2021. *Postcolonial and Postsocialist Dialogues: Intersections, Opacities, Challenges in Feminist Theorizing and Practice*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Kopytko, V. 2024. How the Legend of the Ghost of Kyiv Appeared and Who Was 'Hiding' Behind the Heroic Image. *RBC-Ukraine*, October 1. Retrieved 31/8/2026, <https://www.rbc.ua/rus/news/k-z-yavilas-legenda-privida-kieva-i-hto-hovavsy-1727777992.html>
- Kristeva, J. 2002. *The Portable Kristeva*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Khromeychuk, O. 2018. Experiences of Women at War: Servicewomen during WWII and in the Ukrainian Armed Forces in the Conflict in Donbas. *Baltic Worlds* 4: 58–70. <http://balticworlds.com/experiences-of-women-at-war/>

- Martsenyuk, T. 2023. Women and Gender Equality in the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Pp. 208–224 in C. Wanner (ed.). *Dispossession: Anthropological Perspectives on Russia's War Against Ukraine*. New York: Routledge, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003382607-13>
- Mbembe, A. 2003. Necropolitics. *Public Culture* 15 (1): 11–40.
- Melman, B. 1993. Gender, History and Memory: The Invention of Women's Past in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries. *History and Memory* 5 (1): 5–41.
- Noiret, S. 2018. Digital Public History. Pp. 111–124 in D. Dean (ed.). *A Companion to Public History*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley–Blackwell.
- Pain, E. 2016. The Imperial Syndrome and Its Influence on Russian Nationalism. Pp. 46–74 in P. Kolstø, H. Blakkisrud (eds.). *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism 2000–15*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Petkova, K. 2025. Digital Mobility as an Opportunity for Social Inclusion: Forms of Participation and Social Perspectives among Roma Youth. *SCIENCE International Journal* 4 (2): 101–107, <https://doi.org/10.35120/sciencej0402101p>.
- Ponzanesi, S. 2020. Digital Diasporas: Postcoloniality, Media and Affect. *Interventions* 22 (8): 977–993, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2020.1718537>.
- Radio Svoboda. 2025. Ministry of Defence: More than 70,000 Women Serve in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, More than 5,500 on the Frontline. *Radio Svoboda*, March 8. <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-minoborony-zhinky-armia/33340821.html>
- Robinson, N. 2018. Digitizing Women's and Gender History. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 14 (2): 213–216, <https://doi.org/10.1215/15525864-6680244>.
- Sánchez Hernández, N., D. Martos García, A. López Navajas. 2017. Las mujeres en los materiales curriculares: el caso de dos libros de texto de educación física (Women in curricular materials: the case of two physical education textbooks). *Retos* 32: 140–145, <https://doi.org/10.47197/retos.v0i32.49344>.
- Sestry. 2025. Sestry — Human Stories (Sestry — Шлях додом: Історії / Sestry — the way home: stories). Retrieved 12/6/2025 (<https://www.sestry.eu/kategoriyi/rozpovidi>).
- Shcherbina, M. 2020. Beading the Womantory: Art Project as a Way to Tell about Women's History. *Cultural Studies and Art Criticism: Things in Common and Development Prospects*: 18–22, <https://doi.org/10.30525/978-9934-26-004-9-72>.
- Shcherbyna, M. 2020. Beading the Womantory [Жіноча історія у бісері / Women's History in Beadwork]. Retrieved 21/8/2025 (<https://www.genderculturecentre.org/proekt-zhinocha-istoriya-u-biseri-beading-the-womantory/>).
- Shcherbyna, M. 2025. Beauty Practices and Ukrainian Women Refugees in the Context of Russia-Ukraine War: Another Double Bind. Pp. 109–126 in J. Muller (ed.). *Women and Their Body: A Cultural and Historical Struggle Against Tradition*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Shcherbyna, M., T. Havlin. 2025. Intersectional Trap of (in)Visible Identities and Belongings: Between Engagement and Entrapment of Displaced Ukrainian Women Scientists. *Gender Studies* 24 (1): 23–51, <https://doi.org/10.2478/genst-2025-0002>.
- Strelnyk, O., M. Shcherbyna. 2023. Wissenschaft, Gender und erzwungene Migration: Ein auto-ethnografischer Blick zweier ukrainischer Wissenschaftlerinnen (Science, gender and forced migration: an auto-ethnographic perspective of two Ukrainian scholars). Retrieved 1/2/2024 (<https://geschichtedergegenwart.ch/wissenschaft->

gender-und-erzwungene-migration-ein-auto-ethnografischer-blick-zweier-ukrainischer-wissenschaftlerinnen/).

Tlostanova, M. 2015. Can the Post-Soviet Think? On Coloniality of Knowledge, External Imperial and Double Colonial Difference. *Intersections: East European Journal of Society and Politics* 1 (2): 38–58.

Tlostanova, M. 2024. The Deadlocks of Memory and the (no Longer) Post-Soviet Coloniality, or Can Memory be Decolonized? *Södertörn Academic Studies* 17 (4): 57–66.

Tlostanova, M. V., W. Mignolo. 2012. *Learning to Unlearn: Decolonial Reflections from Eurasia and the Americas*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press.

Zaagsma, G. 2023. Digital History and the Politics of Digitization. *Digital Scholarship in the Hum* <https://doi.org/10.1215/15525864-6680244> anities 38 (2): 830–851, <https://doi.org/10.1093/llc/fqac050>.

Zhukovska, N. 2025. 'Буду розповідати онукам, як їхня бабуся Валькірія боронила небо' (I will tell my grandchildren how their grandmother Valkyria defended the sky). Retrieved 15/5/2025 (<https://www.sestry.eu/stati/budu-rozpovidati-onukam-yak-yihnya-babusya-valkiriya-boroniла-nebo>).

© BY-NC Mariya Shcherbyna, Tetiana Havlin 2026.

Mariya Shcherbyna (Maria Shcherbina), PhD, is a JTWIA research fellow in the Department of Management and Production Engineering, Politecnico di Torino, and a former associate professor at V. Dahl's East Ukrainian National University, as well as being a gender and anti-discrimination expert. She served on the Anti-Discrimination Commission for Ukraine's Ministry of Education and is a lecturer at the Gendermuseum in Kharkiv, Ukraine. She wrote and coordinated the international project *Beading the Womantory* for the Gendermuseum. Her research focuses on gender studies, the STEMM gap, HerStory, and war-induced changes in women's practices and identities, myths, and stereotypes. She participated in the 'Ideal STEM Academic Model' project which was supported by a Women and Science Chair grant from the Université Paris Dauphine-PSL, and she co-created the 'Le Prime' project and exhibition aimed at identifying pioneering STEM women in PoliTo within the broader HerStory of global women's rights and accomplishments. ORCID: 0000-0003-4467-5184. Contact e-mail: mariya.shcherbyna@polito.it.

Dr. habil. Tetiana Havlin is a sociologist, a visiting professor, and the Chair of Intercultural Studies at the Brandenburg University of Technology Cottbus–Senftenberg, Germany. She previously worked as a research associate in the DFG Research Unit 5183 Transborder Mobility and Institutional Dynamics at the University of Siegen, where she completed her postdoctoral degree (habilitation). Her recent publications include the book *The Dynamics of Immigrant Agency* (open access, Palgrave, 2026) and the article 'War-induced (Im) mobilities and Immobilizing Effects' (Mobilities, 2025). Her key research areas include migration, transnationalism, multilingualism, and translanguaging, as well as gender and intersectionality studies. ORCID: 0000-0001-6137-8769. Contact e-mail: havlin@b-tu.de.

Appendix

Table 1. A study sample of women’s testimonies in combat

Nº	Source	Name, callsign	Position in the Army	Additional Information
1	https://24tv.ua/mobilizatsiya-zhinok-droni-pro-rishennya-yti-armiyu-intervyu_n2853644	Daria ‘Anaconda’	Drone operator, aerial reconnaissance specialist	21 years old, the only female pilot in the battalion of unmanned systems
2	https://suspilne.media/cherkasy/897421-divcina-v-armii-akstavlatsa-do-zinok-zahisnic-na-vijskovij-sluzbi/	Anastasii Bobkova	Lieutenant in the Ukrainian Border Guard Service	
3	https://suspilne.media/odesa/538563-ak-ce-buti-zinkou-v-armii-intervu-z-feldserkou-veronikou-palaniceu/	Veronika ‘Palianytsia’	Combat medic and psychologist, 122nd Territorial Defence Brigade	She was the youngest city council member (26 years old) and worked at a children’s rehabilitation centre. Although she had the opportunity to leave the country, she received a military summons and joined the Armed Forces of Ukraine
4	https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/articles/c8dmv934dvvo	Kateryna (name changed)	Soldier, service member of the 3rd Regiment of the Special Operations Forces	Mother
5	https://blog.eva.ua/zhinky-na-bojovyh-posadah-v-armiyi-interv-yu-e-rozmova-z-olenoyu-ryzh	Olena ‘Ryzh’	Soldier, field medic, infantrywoman, 47th Brigade	Before the full-scale invasion: a trainer in the HoReCa sector
6	https://blog.eva.ua/e-rozmova-interv-yu-zi-starshoyu-lejtenantkoyu-ngu-hrystynoyu-kudryavoyu/	Khrystyna ‘Curly’	Senior lieutenant in the National Guard of Ukraine, deputy commander of a mortar battery	Has served for 10 years
7	https://rozmova.wordpress.com/2025/03/18/kateryna-halushka-3/	Kateryna Halushka	Combat medic and strategic communications officer	In 2019, Kateryna joined the volunteer foundation Come Back Alive, where she told the stories of those defending the country
8	https://www.sestry.eu/statti/koli-povertaieshsya-dodomu-staie-vazhko	Marta Demianchuk	Combat medic, journalist	She holds a degree in journalism and joined the Armed Forces of Ukraine in 2020, after serving in a volunteer battalion since 2014
9	https://www.sestry.eu/statti/boyova-medikinya-oleksandra-chorna-kolichas-ide-na-sekundi-yane-vidchuvayu-bolyu	Oleksandra Chorna ‘Swallow’	Combat medic, member of an evacuation crew, 39th Separate Coastal Defence Brigade	52 years old, volunteer, accountant, daughter and wife of militarians; mother of three, grandmother
10	https://www.sestry.eu/statti/budu-rozpovidati-onukam-yak-yihnya-babusya-valkiriya-boronila-nebo	Valentyna Zhelezko ‘Valkyria’	Bucha Witches — Mobile Fire Group (drone interception unit)	Before the full-scale invasion: veterinarian, 52 years old; mother of three
11	https://www.sestry.eu/statti/olena-totel-u-sportzali-trenerka-zapitala-shcho-kachaiemo-popu-ta-nikazhu-budemo-robiti-z-mene-mashinu	Olena Totel	FPV drone pilot, 13th Brigade of the National Guard of Ukraine ‘Khartia’	Before the full-scale invasion: editor-in-chief at a TV channel in Dnipro
12	https://behindthenews.ua/spetsproiekti/po-toy-bik-genderu/yarina-chornoguz-jinka-v-armiyi-zaznae-viprobuvan-chi-gotova-priynyati-svoyu-rol-u-patriarhalnomu-sensi-345/	Yaryna Chornoguz ‘Yara’	Paramedic and reconnaissance officer, 140th Marine Battalion	Poet, listed among the 100 most influential women in Ukraine. She completed training with the Hospitaliers Battalion and went on her first rotation in 2019 – one of four she served with in the medical battalion; mother of a daughter
13	https://dou.ua/lenta/interviews/military-recruiter-about-women-mobilization/14-травня, 10:00 9542	Daria Marusyk	Recruiter, 412th Unmanned Systems Regiment ‘Nemesis’	Before the full-scale invasion: PR lead at Appflame; mother of a 9-year-old son, daughter of a militarian
14	https://elle.ua/ludi/interview/zhinki-na-fronti-10-zapitan-oficerici-zsu-viktorii-kravchenko/	Viktoriia Kravchenko	Major, military psychologist.	14 years of service in the Armed Forces of Ukraine; mother
15	https://femwork.org/blog/feministky-pro-wiunu-6/	Anna Ivantsyk	Servicewoman of the 24th Separate Mechanized Brigade named after King Danylo, combat medic	Civic activist; mother
16	https://mezha.net.ua/mysli/interviu-z-zhinkoiu-viiskovosluzhbovytseiudyskryminatsiia-pohrozy-vid-viiskovykh-rf-i-arestovykh/	Karina Huseinova	Deputy Commander of the 1st Tank Company for the Moral and Psychological Support of the Tank Battalion, 72nd Separate Mechanised Brigade named after the Black Zaporizhians – Senior Lieutenant	26 years old, professional servicewoman; her father is a military officer. She received a military education and has served in the Armed Forces of Ukraine since 2018
17	https://ukrainky.com.ua/yuliya-mykytenko-ukrayinka-yaka-stvoryla-pershyy-zhinochyy-vzvod/	Yuliia Mykytenko	Platoon commander of a reconnaissance company in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, serving since 2016	Has served in the Armed Forces of Ukraine since 2016. A former translator, professional soldier, and activist who advanced from a clerk to a UAV platoon commander. Contributed significantly to changing attitudes toward women in the military She founded Ukraine’s first all-women military platoon.
18	https://ukrainky.com.ua/zhinky-u-vijni-liubov-plaksiuk-persha-zhinka-yaka-ocholyla-artpidrozdil-zsu/	Liubov Plaksiuk	The first woman to head an artillery unit in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, Commander of a self-propelled artillery battery of the 26th Artillery Brigade named after General Roman Dashkevych	A former translator, professional soldier, and activist who advanced from a clerk to a UAV platoon commander. Contributed significantly to changing attitudes toward women in the military She founded Ukraine’s first all-women military platoon.
19	https://ukrainky.com.ua/znaj-nashu-yevgeniya-bakaj-persha-v-istoriyi-vms-zsu-shturmanka-flotu/	Yevheniia Bakai	The first female naval navigator in the history of the Ukrainian Navy	By profession, a history teacher; serving in the Armed Forces of Ukraine since 2016
20	https://ukrainky.com.ua/anastasii-czianid-skrypalka-shho-stalabojoyovuy-medkyneyu/	Anastasii ‘Cyanide’	Combat medic instructor in medical training at the Educational Centre of the Territorial Defence Forces Command of the Armed Forces of Ukraine	Before the full-scale invasion: a violinist
21	https://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2022/08/02/7361430/	Valeriia ‘Wasp’	Assault trooper of the 128th Brigade	25 years old, _ , she was awarded the Order ‘For Courage’, 3rd Class, and the state medal ‘To a Defender of the Fatherland’; mother, her husband is also a militarian
22	https://ukrainky.com.ua/ya-mala-kvytky-ufrancziyu-ale-poyihalana-spivbesidu-v-borovu-istoriya-zhurnalistky-kateryny-petrenko-yaka-dobrovilnopryyednalasya-do-zsu/	Kateryna Petrenko	Journalist serving in the Public Relations Service of the 148th Separate Artillery Brigade of the Ukrainian Air Assault Forces	Journalist
23	https://ukrainky.com.ua/zhinka-saper-yak-zhytomyryanka-ilona-kulykivska-rozminovuye-ukrayinu/	Ilona Kulykivska	Combat engineer and explosives technician	Police officer with 15 years of service, holding the rank of Captain; mother of 2 adult daughters
24	https://ukrainky.com.ua/zhinky-u-vijni-iryna-kleimenova-psyhologynya-yaka-pishla-u-zsu-i-voyuye-na-peredovij/	Iryna Kleimenova	Frontline service member and combat psychologist	Volunteered since 2014, joined the military in 2022; mother of 2
25	https://ukrainky.com.ua/zhinky-u-vijni-olesya-vorotnyuk-baleryna-yaka-pishla-na-vijnu/	Olesia Vorotniuk	Serving in the Territorial Defence Forces	Before the full-scale invasion: a ballerina

Source: Authors.