

The Witches of Bucha: Women Defending Family, Community, And Country

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Abstract

War as a gendered phenomenon is well documented. Studies analysing the impact of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia demonstrate an increase in intimate partner violence, sexual violence executed by Russian troops, forced displacement, and associated socio-economic harms. Studies that portray Ukrainian women as empowered are sparse. This paper focuses on the Witches of Bucha, a territorial air defence unit. By day, members, mostly women, many with young children, are employed as teachers, doctors, office and shop workers, or accountants. At night they volunteer to shoot down Russian drones that persistently threaten the skies of Bucha and surrounding areas of Kyiv. Drawing on secondary data this narrative inquiry reveals the lived experiences of several of the unit's members. Before the invasion, the women perceived themselves as leading traditional 'ordinary' lives.

Having survived the occupation of Bucha, they have come to view themselves as empowered defenders of their families, their communities, and their country. Their stories illustrate how gender identities can be transformed in a war-torn environment. Embracing an adaption of the witch archetype rooted in Slavic folklore (a woman of great strength and spiritual power), the Bucha witches exemplify a phenomenon that Judith Butler calls performative. Performative gender identities are solidified through repetition. Such a fluid portrayal of gender identity is spurned by an increasing number of nation-states, including Russia. In a period of global pushback on women's equality and women's rights the study highlights the importance of Ukrainian women being able to continue their performative journeys of empowerment.

Keywords: empowerment; folklore; gender; identity; performative