

Research Article

Culture and Religion Meaning-Making Coping Strategies in Wartime: Insights from a Qualitative Study on the Coping Experiences of Ukrainians

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Article history

Received: 19-08-2025

Revised: 09-09-2025

Accepted: 24-01-2026

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Abstract: This study explores how Ukrainians use religious and spiritual meaning-making coping strategies during the ongoing war, shaped by cultural traditions, historical experiences, and personal circumstances. Its aim is to deepen understanding of culturally relevant resilience mechanisms in extreme adversity. Using a qualitative design, 67 semi-structured interviews were conducted across diverse Ukrainian regions between January 2024 and June 2025. Participants varied widely in religious affiliation, culture, and socio-demographics. Interviews focused on personal coping, spiritual and religious practices, and the role of cultural narratives in resilience. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis and interpretative phenomenological analysis, guided by resilience theory and socio-cultural coping models. Findings revealed diverse coping strategies, including traditional religious practices (prayer, services, scripture), personalized spirituality (individual rituals, meditation), and cultural-ancestral traditions (commemorations, symbolic acts linked to history). Hybrid approaches combining faith and psychological techniques were common. Many participants drew strength from patriotic narratives and national identity, gaining emotional relief, coherence, moral strength, and hope amid traumata. The study highlights religious and spiritual meaning-making as a vital psychological and cultural resource in wartime. Effective mental health support must recognize these culturally embedded practices, moving beyond symptom-focused models to holistic approaches that integrate spirituality, culture, and history in fostering resilience.

Keywords: Coping Strategies, Coping With War-Related Stress, Religious Coping, Russian-Ukrainian War, War Anxiety

Introduction

War is one of the most profound crises a society can face, disrupting lives, displacing populations, and creating immense psychological and emotional strain. Individuals exposed to war often experience anxiety, depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and existential distress as they grapple with loss, uncertainty, and profound changes to their way of life. Studies have consistently reported high rates of mental health issues among individuals exposed to war.

Researchers from the University of Southampton conducted a large survey to assess the impact of the ongoing war on the mental health of Ukrainians forced to flee their homes. Published research findings indicate high levels of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and generalized anxiety among both refugees and internally displaced people. Over 8,000 people, including refugees and internally displaced persons, were surveyed between April and July 2022. Almost 80% of those who remained in Ukraine and a majority of refugees reported that the explosions had affected

their morale. Almost 70% of all survey participants reported increased anxiety, with those who remained in Ukraine experiencing higher levels of anxiety and more frequent distressing memories. In addition, internally displaced people face more serious mental health consequences, likely due to the impact of the ongoing war (Brackstone et al., 2024). Another study by Wang et al. (2024) has shown that adults living in Ukraine, 14.4% had probable Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), another 8.9% had Complex PTSD (CPTSD), 44.2% had probable depressive disorder, 23.1% had anxiety disorder and 38.6% showed significant loneliness. The main causes of stress and depression for respondents in Ukraine continue to be Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (increasing to 78% in the fourth wave) and financial difficulties (52%). The share of those concerned about the socio-political situation in the country has also increased significantly from 29% in the first wave to 47% in the fourth (National Mental Health Program, 2025).

In such extreme circumstances, coping strategies become essential for psychological resilience and emotional survival. While traditional psychological interventions focus on trauma therapy and mental health support, coping through meaning-making remains an equally vital yet often underexplored dimension of wartime adaptation.

The ongoing war in Ukraine has heightened the urgency of understanding how individuals and communities cope with the psychological impacts of armed conflict, and how cultural factors influence these coping mechanisms. Gaining such insight is essential for providing effective and culturally appropriate support to those affected. According to Ukrainian scientist from National Academy of Culture and Arts Management, Zhanna Denisjuk "...there is a relationship between Ukrainian cultural identity and national resilience; cultural heritage, national identity, and collective memory have served as psychological anchors, fostering resilience through shared traditions, historical narratives of survival, and communal solidarity. This outlines possible ways to strengthen Ukraine's cultural potential in the face of modern challenges". The results of the study revealed that the impact of war on the processes of national consolidation is carried out through culture, language, traditions, symbolism, etc. (Denysiuk, 2025).

Various coping strategies have played a significant role in offering emotional and spiritual support and in providing a sense of meaning in life for those affected by the recent war. Beyond formal religious institutions, spirituality in its broader sense, manifested in personal beliefs, existential reflections, and alternative spiritual practices, can provide individuals with a means to find hope, inner peace, and meaning amidst destruction and loss. There are also secular coping methods that may help individuals deal with the consequences of war.

Literature Overview

The Russia-Ukraine war has provoked and generated an urgent need to understand the psychological impact on affected populations and the coping mechanisms that help foster resilience. Numerous studies conducted since the war began in 2022 have documented mental health symptoms and coping strategies among Ukrainians both within the country and in displacement. The recent findings and investigations present a complex interplay of distress, adaptive coping, and community resilience, but also reveal several notable research gaps. In cooperation with Ukrainian colleagues, Iuliia Pavlova and Petro Petrytsa, Wen Xu, Xi Chen, Lorenz Graf-Vlachy and others conducted one of the earliest quantitative surveys following the onset of the war, analyzing psychological distress, anxiety, depression, and insomnia among 801 Ukrainian adults. The study found alarmingly high prevalence rates of mental health symptoms and established correlations with demographic risk factors. Productive coping strategies such as instrumental support and planning were associated with reduced symptomatology. This study highlights the critical need for mental health services but lacks longitudinal follow-up and deeper exploration of cultural coping norms (Xu et al., 2023). Another investigation, provided by Kundii et al. (2024) focusing on medical students in Poltava, identified low to marginal stress resistance levels in over 80% of respondents. The maladaptive coping behaviors identified in this study, particularly among those with low resilience, indicate a population at high risk for long-term psychological consequences. However, the study's limited geographic and demographic scope restricts its generalizability. Italian scientist, Oviedo et al. (2022) together with also Ukrainian and Poland, Spanish colleagues, provided qualitative insights into coping and resilience strategies among Ukrainian war refugees, emphasizing the role of social connection, religious practice, and interpersonal support. Communication with loved ones and accompaniment by hosts were found to be key resilience factors. The study introduces the concept of religious practice as psychological capital but is limited by the subjective nature of qualitative analysis and challenges in replicability.

Kimhi et al. (2023) adopted a comparative regional lens, contrasting coping and resilience across Ukraine and five neighboring countries. Ukrainian respondents reported the highest levels of community and societal resilience and distress. Hope emerged as the most consistent predictor of resilience across all countries. This study brings attention to collective resilience but lacks detail on individual-level coping processes.

Ukrainian scientist, Kovalenko (2024), provided a comprehensive quantitative assessment of coping

strategies and resilience among Ukrainians aged 18–76. Positive strategies such as active coping, planning, and positive reinterpretation were widely used, while maladaptive responses like denial and substance use were minimal. Self-efficacy and emotional regulation were central to perceived resilience. Although rigorous in method, the study would benefit from integrating qualitative perspectives to explore the motivations behind coping preferences.

In a study by Lotzin et al. (2025) among 851 Ukrainian students in Ukraine, it was found that although resilient coping was directly associated with a reduction in PTSD symptoms and personality disorganization, it did not moderate the relationship between the intensity of war trauma and posttraumatic manifestations. This means that resilience does not act as a buffer, but as an independent factor in reducing PTSD symptoms. Therefore, strengthening individual resilience through psychosocial interventions has a direct preventive effect, but does not compensate for the damage from the accumulated traumatic experience.

In contrast, a study by Długosz (2023), which included 737 Ukrainian refugees in Poland (mostly women with children), emphasizes the importance of coping strategies in the context of forced displacement. The results indicate a high prevalence of depression, anxiety disorders and PTSD among refugees (up to 73%), especially among those who do not speak Polish and have a lower level of social integration. Problem-oriented strategies (e.g., active problem-solving) were more effective than emotion-oriented strategies (prayers, avoidance, use of sedatives), which were associated with higher levels of psychological disorders. The highest levels of distress were observed in respondents who demonstrated strategic “resignation”.

The body of contemporary empirical research on the psychological impact of the full-scale war in Ukraine and coping strategies paints a complex picture of individual and collective responses to an extremely traumatic situation. The general findings suggest that despite high levels of distress (Xu et al., 2023; Kimhi et al., 2023), Ukrainians demonstrate adaptive potential through a combination of personal resources (self-efficacy, emotional regulation, planning) and social environment (Oviedo et al., 2022; Lotzin et al., 2025).

Active coping, positive reappraisal, instrumental support, religious practice, and interpersonal connections appear to be effective coping strategies that reduce symptoms of PTSD, depression, and anxiety (Kovalenko, 2024; Lotzin et al., 2025). At the same time, the risks of low stress tolerance (Kundii et al., 2024) and a tendency towards maladaptive behavioral reactions (Długosz, 2023) are particularly pronounced in young people and displaced persons. A significant role is also attributed to collective resilience - at the community and societal level

(Kimhi et al., 2023), which is formed through support, hope and shared meanings.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged to contextualize the findings. First, the reliance on online qualitative interviews may have constrained the depth of interaction with participants, particularly when discussing sensitive topics such as wartime spiritual and religious coping. While qualitative methods provide rich, contextual insights into personal experiences, they do not allow for statistical generalization, limiting the broader applicability of the results.

Second, the sample comprised 67 participants, with a higher proportion of middle-aged women, which may not fully represent the coping strategies of men, younger adults, or individuals from all regions of Ukraine. The geographical and demographic composition of the sample may therefore affect the diversity of experiences captured.

Third, the study focused primarily on religious and spiritual coping strategies. Although secular, social, and nature-based mechanisms were considered separately, the emphasis on spiritual coping may have limited the comprehensiveness of the findings and overlooked other important forms of meaning-making during wartime.

Fourth, the study’s findings are situated within the unique sociocultural and historical context of Ukraine during active conflict. This context may influence both the availability of coping resources and participants’ willingness to share experiences, and it may limit the transferability of results to other populations or conflict settings.

Finally, thematic analysis, while systematic, inherently involves subjective interpretation by the researcher. Despite efforts to enhance reliability and reflexivity, potential bias in coding and categorization cannot be entirely ruled out.

Future research could address these limitations by expanding the sample to include more diverse demographic groups, employing mixed-methods approaches to allow for broader generalization, and conducting comparative studies in other conflict-affected contexts. Such efforts would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of culturally embedded coping strategies and their role in fostering psychological resilience during crises.

While previous research has provided crucial insights into psychological distress, coping mechanisms, and resilience among Ukrainians during wartime, our study addresses several gaps left by previous work. This study uses a qualitative, in-depth approach based on sensemaking theory to explore how Ukrainians interpret and construct personal and collective meaning in response to war-related trauma. In contrast to previous research that has focused primarily on symptomatology or standard taxonomies of coping, we seek to uncover cultural,

existential, and spiritual dimensions of coping that are deeply rooted in the lived experiences of Ukrainians.

The study also seeks to explore the intricate ways in which Ukrainians engage in diverse meaning-making coping strategies from a cultural perspective during wartime. By employing a qualitative research approach, the study analyses responses from semi-structured interviews to address the following questions:

What existential meaning-making coping methods are used by informants in Ukraine?

Which cultural characteristics of Ukrainian society can be linked to the informants' choice of existential meaning-making coping strategies?

In this article, we have limited our focus to the results related to religious and spiritual coping. In a separate text, we will present the findings related to secular existential coping methods. Given the volume and depth of the qualitative data collected, a scientifically sound decision was made to divide the research findings into two separate publications in order to ensure analytical depth, conceptual integrity, and clarity of presentation. This article focuses exclusively on religious and spiritual coping mechanisms, which have proven to be significant, albeit complex, mechanisms of psychological and existential support in times of war. Given their cultural, theological, and identity-based richness, these aspects require separate theoretical consideration. The next article will present findings related to secular existential coping strategies in particular, nature-based approaches, humanistic and philosophical approaches, artistic practices, and the search for meaning outside formalized religious structures.

This thematic distinction allows for deeper theoretical analysis within each of the strands (spiritual-religious and secular-existential), promotes methodological transparency, and prevents content overloaded in a single manuscript. In addition, this structure facilitates a more focused contribution to scholarly discussions in both the psychology of religion and existential resilience research, which require different epistemological approaches.

Theoretical Framework

Culture and Coping. Culture is an essential component of national identity and serves as a symbol of resilience in times of crisis. In the context of war, culture functions as both a preserver of tradition and an adaptive force, adjusting to new realities through artistic expression, digital media, and civic engagement. In Ukraine, cultural production during wartime such as cinema, literature, music, and online platforms has been instrumental in boosting morale and reinforcing collective unity.

This phenomenon must be understood against the backdrop of Ukraine's complex historical trajectory, marked by socio-political upheavals and cultural repression. Events such as the Holodomor, Soviet-era

totalitarianism, and contemporary military conflict have deeply influenced national identity and social structures (Tancher, 2019). These traumas have forged a resilient cultural consciousness that underpins contemporary coping responses (Korolchuk, 2020).

Ahmadi's research (Ahmadi and Ahmadi, 2018) has demonstrated that meaning-making coping is deeply embedded in cultural systems. Coping mechanisms are not isolated individual choices, but culturally informed practices rooted in shared worldviews and value systems. Her cross-cultural studies show that while some societies draw on formal religious rituals, others lean on secular or nature-based strategies, reflecting culturally specific frameworks for making sense of adversity.

Particularly relevant to post-Soviet societies like Ukraine is Ahmadi's distinction between institutional religion, individualized spirituality and secular existentialism. Following the collapse of Soviet ideology, many Ukrainians have developed pluralistic or ambivalent belief systems, combining ancestral practices with modern worldviews (Masenko, 2020). This cultural fluidity shapes how individuals approach suffering, resilience, and healing in times of war (Sapozhnik, 2019).

Meaning-Making Coping

Meaning-making coping refers to individuals' efforts to interpret crises in ways that restore coherence and purpose in life. Rather than avoiding distress, people engage actively with existential questions, drawing on spiritual, philosophical, or cultural frameworks to process disruption (Ahmadi and Ahmadi, 2018). This process reduces the dissonance between situational crises such as war and one's broader worldview, fostering psychological adjustment and potentially leading to post-traumatic growth (Galia et al., 2022; Vynnytska et al., 2025).

This article builds upon the international Meaning-Making Coping Project- The Ukrainian case adds a distinctive layer by highlighting the role of historical trauma, national identity, and religious heritage in shaping wartime resilience.

Religion and Spirituality as Meaning-Making Coping

In wartime, religion and spirituality often serve as essential resources for individuals striving to find coherence, purpose, and inner strength. In Ukraine, Orthodox Christianity remains a dominant religious tradition, offering not only rituals and theological frameworks but also emotional stability and moral orientation. For many, faith provides a way of understanding suffering, processing loss, and maintaining a sense of order amid chaos. Religious institutions and clergy have also played active roles in humanitarian aid,

chaplaincy, and community support, functioning as both spiritual and social anchors. However, religious coping in Ukraine is not monolithic. Engagement with religion varies significantly among individuals and is often shaped as much by cultural identity and collective memory as by doctrinal belief (Kaneff, 2018). In some cases, spirituality is expressed outside of institutional structures through personal beliefs, meditation, reflection, and symbolic practices rooted in national traditions. This broader understanding of spirituality allows for a more inclusive analysis of how Ukrainians make meaning of their wartime experiences (Wanner, 2022).

Ukrainian spirituality often intersects with patriotic sentiment. The struggle for national survival is imbued with moral significance, with participants viewing their endurance as part of a larger historical and ethical narrative. While for some individuals, religion offers comfort through divine guidance, others rely on spirituality as a personalized, philosophical practice centered on introspection, resilience, and connection to shared cultural values (Burkovska, 2024; Kostruba and Fishchuk, 2023).

This multiplicity underscores the importance of distinguishing between institutional religion and individual spirituality. While the former may provide community, structure, and collective rituals, the latter offers autonomy, flexibility, and personal resonance. Both forms contribute meaningfully to psychological survival and moral coherence under conditions of extreme uncertainty (Kostruba and Fishchuk, 2023).

Resilience Theory

Resilience theory, particularly as articulated by Masten (2014), provides a critical framework for understanding how individuals and communities adapt to and recover from adversity. Masten's concept of "ordinary magic" refers to the human capacity to cope and thrive despite challenges, facilitated by internal strengths, social support, and cultural continuity.

In the Ukrainian context, resilience is deeply connected to historical narratives of survival and the collective memory of overcoming oppression, from tsarist and Soviet domination to the ongoing war with Russia (Melnyk, 2022). This historical consciousness fosters a sense of national purpose, identity, and solidarity, all of which contribute to psychological endurance. According to Hirschberger (2018), collective trauma can catalyze the formation of shared meaning, helping individuals make sense of suffering through a cultural lens.

Resilience in wartime Ukraine is manifested in multiple ways: Volunteerism, civic activism, mutual aid networks, and expressions of patriotism all serve as psychosocial buffers. Cultural production, poetry, music, visual art, provides emotional outlets and affirms collective identity. These expressions are not merely aesthetic or therapeutic; they form part of a broader

cultural repertoire that enables meaning-making and supports moral cohesion in times of crisis (Stepanenko and Stewart, 2025).

Moreover, Ukraine's experience with cumulative historical trauma, including events such as the Holodomor, the Great Terror, World War II, and the Chernobyl disaster, has shaped a resilient national psyche. These legacies provide a reservoir of cultural symbols and narratives that individuals can draw upon to frame current suffering as part of a larger continuum of endurance and resistance (Hornostai, 2024).

Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretivist paradigm to examine how Ukrainians engage in religious, spiritual, and secular coping strategies during wartime. Given the subjective and context-dependent nature of coping, we applied Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach enabled the identification of patterned meanings across accounts, while an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)-informed sensibility was maintained to capture individual lived experiences and personal meaning-making processes. The analysis was further guided by socio-cultural perspectives on spirituality and secular worldviews (Bekh, 2018; Shpektorenko, 2024) and by Masten (2014) resilience framework, which conceptualizes coping as the dynamic interplay between individual agency and contextual resources.

Sampling

A purposive maximum-variation sampling strategy was adopted to ensure heterogeneity across age, gender, region, religious affiliation, and socio-political orientation. Eligibility criteria included:

- a) Adults aged 18 or older
- b) Residence in Ukraine during the ongoing war
- c) Direct or indirect exposure to its effects. Exclusion criteria included inability to provide informed consent or high current distress at screening

Participants were recruited through university mailing lists, professional and community networks, non-governmental organizations, and targeted social media announcements. Limited snowball sampling was applied to reach under-represented groups, including internally displaced persons and religious minorities. Recruitment proceeded iteratively until thematic sufficiency was reached: After approximately 60 interviews, no substantially new codes were identified, but data collection continued to 67 participants to test negative cases and ensure representativeness.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to ensure diversity across variables such as age, gender, geographic location, religious affiliation, and socio-political orientation. Participants were adults (aged 18 and over) who had lived in Ukraine during the war and experienced its effects either directly or indirectly. The sample included university faculty, students, administrative staff, public sector employees, private business workers, and retail staff from cities such as Kyiv, Mykolaiv, Uman, Sumy, Cherkasy, Odesa, Zhytomyr and the Rivne region. The study included individuals from various religious backgrounds – Orthodox Christianity, Greek Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, Judaism – as well as those identifying as spiritual but not religious, and those with secular or atheist worldviews. In total, 67 semi-structured interviews were conducted (Table 1).

According to Table 1. The total amount of respondents were 67 individuals, with a notable gender imbalance: 72% were female (n = 48) and 28% were male (n = 19). This distribution may reflect the general overrepresentation of women in fields related to education, healthcare, and social care sectors heavily impacted by the war and often central to qualitative research on coping and resilience. As for the age distribution, the majority of respondents (64.2%) are in the 35–50 years age group. This suggests that the findings may largely reflect the experiences and perspectives of middle-aged individuals, who are often balancing professional responsibilities and family obligations, and may have specific coping patterns shaped by these roles. The young adult group (25–34 years) comprises 16.4%, indicating a smaller but still significant representation of early-career individuals who may differ in resilience strategies and outlook. The older group (50+ years) makes up 19.4%, highlighting that nearly one-fifth of the sample consists of mature participants who may draw on life experience, accumulated beliefs, or established support systems during crises. This suggests that the study primarily represents individuals with significant life and professional experience, potentially influencing their coping strategies and spiritual outlooks during crisis. The study sample (N = 67) comprises participants from diverse geographical regions across Ukraine, distributed as follows: Central Ukraine (40%, n = 27), Western Ukraine (24%, n = 16), Eastern Ukraine (16%, n = 11), Southern Ukraine (12%, n = 8), and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) (8%, n = 5).

Concerning to notable religious diversity, reflecting Ukraine’s complex spiritual landscape amid ongoing societal challenges. The breakdown is as follows: Orthodox Christians affiliated with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) or Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) constitute the largest group at 44% (n = 30),

followed by Greek Catholics at 12% (n = 8), Protestants at 8% (n = 5), and other Christian traditions at 4% (n = 3). Additionally, non-religious or secular respondents account for 24% (n = 16), while those identifying as spiritual but not religious represent 8% (n = 5). This regional stratification reflects a purposeful sampling approach aimed at capturing heterogeneity in experiences related to war-induced trauma and coping mechanisms. The geographical diversity and professional heterogeneity of this sample provide a robust basis for exploring the complex relationships between war exposure, spirituality, and coping strategies in Ukraine. It provides a comprehensive and contextual understanding of psychological resilience both nationally and in specific subgroups during the war period.

Table 1: Demographic data

Variable	Category	Number of respondents	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	48	71.6%
	Male	19	28.4%
Age group	25–34 years	11	16.4%
	35–50 years	43	64.2%
	50+ years	13	19.4%
Region of residence	Central Ukraine	27	40.3%
	Western Ukraine	16	23.9%
	Eastern Ukraine	11	16.4%
	Southern Ukraine	8	11.9%
	Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)	5	7.5%
	Religious affiliation	Orthodox (UOC/OCU)	30
	Greek Catholic	8	11.9%
	Protestant	5	7.5%
	Other Christian	3	4.5%
	Non-religious / Secular	16	23.9%
	Spiritual but not religious	5	7.5%

Data Collection and Ethics

The data for this study were collected between January 2024 and June 2025 through a web-based Survey administered via the Sunet Survey platform at the University of Gävle. The questionnaire, developed in Ukrainian and translated into English as well, consisted of both closed and open-ended items and was based on validated instruments adapted to ensure cultural relevance (see Appendix A). Participation in the study was entirely

voluntary, and anonymity was rigorously safeguarded throughout the data collection and analysis processes. All members of the research team are experienced in working with vulnerable populations and are committed to maintaining the highest ethical standards, particularly when handling sensitive personal information.

Data collection were approved by a two-stage approach. First, an online intake survey (Sunet Survey, University of Gävle) gathered informed consent, demographic information, and several open-ended prompts (see Appendix A). These responses contextualized the interviews but were not the primary data source. Second, semi-structured interviews served as the core dataset.

Interviews were conducted online via Zoom, Google Meet, depending on participant preference and connectivity. They were held primarily in Ukrainian, with very occasional use of Russian when preferred by participants. Interviews lasted 45–90 minutes (median ≈ 65 minutes) and followed a guide piloted with five respondents. With informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English for reporting. Translations were cross-checked by bilingual researchers to ensure conceptual accuracy. Pseudonyms replaced all identifiers.

Researcher Reflexivity

The research team comprised Ukrainian and Swedish scholars with backgrounds in psychology, sociology, and religious studies. Reflexive memos were kept throughout

data collection and analysis to document assumptions, positionalities, and decision-making processes. Peer debriefing was employed to challenge potential biases and strengthen the credibility of interpretations.

Ethical Considerations

The project received ethical approval from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Reference number 2015/126) and the Ethics Committee at the University of Gävle. It adhered to core ethical principles, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the responsible use of data. Since part of the study was conducted in Ukraine, ethical approval was obtained on 25 March 2024 from the Department of Foreign Languages and Translation, Acting Dean, Faculty of Psychology, Communications and Translation, State University "Kyiv Aviation Institute," Kyiv, Ukraine (approval number: 12/71).

Participation was voluntary, with the right to withdraw at any stage. Written or digital informed consent was obtained from all participants. Support resources were provided for participants reporting distress. Data were stored on encrypted servers, with identifiers kept separately from transcripts.

Data Management

We believe that presenting the information in Table 2 offers a clear, concise, and detailed view of the methodology, making it easier for readers and researchers to navigate and track the data.

Table 2: Data management

Component	Description
Data management	- All transcripts were transcribed verbatim and imported into NVivo 14 (QSR International) for coding and analysis.- A project log, evolving codebook, and <i>audit trail</i> were maintained to systematically record analytic decisions.- Data were securely stored on encrypted drives with restricted access, ensuring confidentiality.
Data analysis	Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke’s six-phase <i>Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA)</i> framework: 1. <i>Familiarization</i> – repeated reading of transcripts and initial memoing. 2. <i>Initial coding</i> – line-by-line coding in NVivo; included both inductive codes (emerging from data) and deductive codes (theory-informed, e.g., institutional religion vs. personalized spirituality, secular meaning-making, resilience resources). 3. <i>Generation of candidate themes</i> – clustering codes into higher-order categories. 4. <i>Reviewing themes</i> – iterative comparison with extracts and full dataset, including <i>negative case analysis</i> . 5. <i>Defining and naming themes</i> – articulating scope and boundaries, linking to socio-cultural and resilience frameworks. 6. <i>Producing the report</i> – integrating thick, illustrative quotations into thematic narrative. To ensure analytic rigor, multiple strategies were applied: - <i>analyst triangulation</i> : two researchers independently coded 25% of transcripts; discrepancies were discussed to refine the codebook.
Trustworthiness	- <i>audit trail & reflexive memos</i> documented the analytic process and positionality. - <i>member reflections</i> : 10 participants reviewed preliminary thematic summaries, leading to clarifications. - <i>data triangulation</i> : findings checked across demographic groups and compared with survey data. - <i>translation integrity</i> : secured through bilingual validation (Ukrainian-English). Quote (female, 38, Central Ukraine): “Коли плету сітки, молюся по-своєму... не словами, а руками.” (<i>When I weave nets, I pray in my own way... not with words, but with my hands.</i>)
Example of analytic process	Code: embodied prayer; craft as devotion Category: civic volunteering as spiritual practice Theme: secular–spiritual weaving of care and protection Appendix B (example of Table 4: Codebook snapshot and illustrative Quotes)

Analytical Approach and Procedure

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phase framework:

- 1) Familiarization with the data
- 2) Generation of initial codes
- 3) Identification of themes
- 4) Review of themes
- 5) Definition and naming of themes
- 6) Production of the final report

While thematic analysis served as the primary method, the study was also informed by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which enriched the interpretation of complex, lived experiences by attending to personal meaning-making processes (Smith et al., 2009). Additionally, the interpretation of spirituality and resilience was grounded in socio-cultural theories developed by Bekh (2018); Shpektorenko (2024), which distinguish between institutional religion, personalized spirituality, and culturally embedded secular worldviews.

The resilience framework developed by Masten (2014) provided a complementary lens for understanding the dynamic interplay between personal agency and contextual resources in sustaining psychological well-being. These combined approaches allowed for a multidimensional analysis of how coping strategies are shaped by individual belief systems, cultural values, and socio-historical context. Chat GPT is used for grammar, spelling, and formatting.

Analytical Procedure

The interview transcripts were analyzed using Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis. The process began with repeated close reading of the transcripts to ensure familiarity with the data. Initial codes were generated inductively, capturing both explicit and latent meanings in participants' accounts. Coding was performed independently by two researchers (Ahmadi and Melnyk), and discrepancies were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached.

The codes were then collated into broader categories that reflected recurrent patterns of meaning. These categories were iteratively refined into themes and subthemes through constant comparison across interviews. For example, excerpts related to prayer, confession, and scriptural reading were initially coded as "ritual practice" and later grouped under the subtheme "Traditional Religious Practices." In contrast, accounts that described meditation or mindfulness alongside belief in divine support were coded as "hybrid strategies," which subsequently informed the subtheme "Hybrid Spiritual-Psychological Approaches."

Themes were reviewed in relation to both the coded extracts and the entire dataset to ensure coherence and distinctiveness. To enhance trustworthiness, the analytic process followed criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was supported through independent coding and iterative discussion among the research team. Transferability was pursued by providing thick description of participants' experiences. Dependability and confirmability were ensured by maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions and thematic development.

Through this iterative process, five overarching domains of meaning-making coping were identified. The present article focuses on one of these domains – Religion and Spirituality as coping resources – and explores its subthemes in detail.

Results

The thematic analysis identified five major forms of meaning-making coping, with this article focusing exclusively on the category of Religion and Spirituality as Coping Resources. It is important to note that this category is not mutually exclusive, several participants reported drawing on multiple coping strategies simultaneously. Table 3 presents the main theme and corresponding subthemes related to the diverse religious and spiritual coping strategies identified in the study.

Table 3: The results of thematic analysis of coping resources

Theme	Subthemes
Religion and spirituality as coping resources	Traditional Religious Practices Hybrid Spiritual-Psychological Approaches Personalized and Non-Institutional Spirituality Cultural and Ancestral Spirituality Everyday Spiritual Practices Private and Nature-Based Spirituality Spiritual Discontent and Crisis of Faith Rejection or Ambivalence Toward Religion Symbolic and Cultural Resonance of Belief

Religion and Spirituality as Coping Resources

Interview data reveal that religion and spirituality served as important, though highly diverse coping strategies for many participants. These ranged from conventional religious practice to deeply personal and non-institutional spiritual approaches, and even included critical or ambivalent stances toward religion. Interview data reveal that religion and spirituality functioned as significant, though highly diverse, coping mechanisms for Ukrainians during the war. Participants' narratives displayed a wide spectrum of engagement, ranging from

traditional Orthodox Christian practices to highly individualized spiritual beliefs and even critical or ambivalent stances toward institutional religion. This diversity underscores the complexity of religious and spiritual coping in a context marked by national crisis, moral disruption, and existential uncertainty.

Some respondents relied on conventional religious practices such as prayer, church attendance, confession, and scriptural reading. For instance, a 43-year-old unmarried man with an academic background (ID 17) described a comprehensive religious coping process:

“I coped through prayer, reading scripture, going to confession, and working outdoors. Solitude gave me space to reflect.”

He also occasionally sought guidance from clergy and noted how his faith enabled a “thoughtful and introspective” response to the war.

Others combined religious beliefs with therapeutic or meditative practices, using hybrid spiritual-psychological approaches, combined religious beliefs with therapeutic or meditative practices. A 50-year-old married woman with psychological training (ID 22) stated: “Trusting in God’s will give me strength,” and described how this trust in a higher power was complemented by self-regulatory practices such as meditation, mindful breathing, and nature walks. This integration of spiritual and psychological strategies appeared particularly common among professionals with training in mental health, education, or social work. Some participants expressed spirituality outside of formal religious institutions. For example, 42-year-old associate professor (ID 48) defined spirituality as “a form of human consciousness,” explaining that it involved “trusting both myself and something greater.” Similarly, a 46-year-old Orthodox woman (ID 59) said, “I never stopped communicating with God,” despite feeling abandoned at times. Her experience illustrated a deeply personal spirituality disconnected from ritual or clergy. Several participants emphasized a private, self-defined spirituality rather than adherence to formal religious doctrines or institutions. A 47-year-old retired teacher (ID 6) shared:

“I’m not religious in the traditional sense, but I speak to God in my own way. I light a candle at home, not necessarily in a church. I believe in something greater, and that helps.”

This kind of individualized belief system often involved syncretic elements, such as combining Christian symbols with new-age practices or ancestral rituals.

Some participants emphasized spirituality grounded in cultural and ancestral identity. In several cases, faith was not tied to religious institutions but expressed through inner conviction and cultural inheritance. A 71-year-old former teacher and editor (ID 41) turned to prayer, folk healing, and farming practices:

“I find deep strength in the values of Orthodox Christianity and the cultural traditions I grew up with.”

Although she distrusted formal religious leadership, her spirituality was deeply embedded in ancestral and national identity.

Another respondent (ID 2), a 47-year-old divorced woman, emphasized volunteerism, prayer, and spiritual mentorship.

“My coping process is deeply rooted in my religious and spiritual worldview. I see myself as part of a divine natural order, and that belief continues to give me direction and strength.”

Here, spiritual engagement was action-oriented and ethically grounded, not merely contemplative. Respondents such as ID 14 and ID 16 illustrated how religion was seamlessly integrated into everyday life, even in the absence of institutional engagement. A 42-year-old teacher from Kyiv (ID 16) noted, “I pray regularly, attend church, and read psalms... My faith works hand in hand with my own efforts.” A 40-year-old woman (ID 14) similarly emphasized prayer, yoga, and self-reflection as daily coping mechanisms rooted in “active faith and divine guidance.”

Other participants, like ID 6 (a 45-year-old retired teacher), emphasized belief in a divine presence while relying on affirmations and physical routines:

“I don’t feel a strong spiritual connection but I believe that life is energy from God and that His presence is constant.”

These accounts reflect a spiritualized worldview even when emotional or ritual engagement with religion is minimal. Even among those who were not overtly religious, spiritual beliefs appeared to offer subtle forms of coherence. A 60-year-old woman (ID 23) reflected,

“Although I didn’t seek help from religious leaders, I did have personal spiritual experiences and often felt my life was part of something greater.”

Such experiences, often described in non-doctrinal language, supported coping through existential continuity rather than institutional affiliation. Others described their spirituality as private, inward, or tied to nature and energy rather than to doctrinal belief and use the private and nature-based spirituality. Nature emerged as a key setting for spiritual reflection and renewal for them. Several participants described walking in forests or tending gardens as a sacred or healing experience. A 39-year-old woman (ID 13) explained:

“When I’m in the woods, I feel connected to something bigger. It’s where I cry, breathe, pray. The trees don’t judge.”

These experiences were often described as spiritual but not religious, marked by a sense of transcendence, connection, and inner peace. The theme of spiritual discontent also emerged. Some respondents expressed anger or disappointment with God. A 59-year-old Orthodox

lecturer (ID 56) stated: “There were times when I felt angry at God because of the injustice I witnessed, but I never lost my faith.” Similarly, a 46-year-old Orthodox woman (ID 59) recounted moments of feeling spiritually abandoned yet continued to rely on prayer. Some participants rejected both religion and spirituality entirely as coping strategy (we will in another article concerning the secular existential meaning-making coping will discuss the coping strategies av these participants).

Across all these narratives, religion and spirituality provided not only comfort but also a framework for ethical reflection, emotional regulation, and personal transformation. These practices were often interwoven with secular and psychological coping strategies, illustrating the fluid and personalized nature of wartime resilience. Thus, the results of the study revealed a wide range of spiritual and meaning-making strategies used by Ukrainians to overcome psychological stress in war conditions. There is both a turn to conventional religious practices and the formation of individualized forms of spirituality, often with elements of cultural heritage and personal experience. At the same time, some respondents demonstrate a crisis of faith or a conscious departure from religious forms of coping, which indicates the heterogeneity of spiritual experience. The revealed variety of spiritual and meaning-making coping strategies testifies to the complex and multi-level nature of psychological adaptation in war conditions. In the following section of the article, these results will be analyzed in the context of modern approaches to understanding spiritual resilience, cultural coping, and post-traumatic growth.

Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate the diverse and multifaceted ways in which Ukrainians have used religious and spiritual resources to cope with the psychological and existential disruptions caused by war. These meaning-making strategies, though varied in form and emphasis, collectively aimed to restore coherence, dignity, and inner strength amidst profound uncertainty.

Religious and spiritual coping emerged as key frameworks, yet the expression of faith was rarely doctrinaire. Consistent with Ahmadi and Ahmadi (2018); Ahmadi (2006) theoretical distinction between institutional religion and personal spirituality, many participants engaged with belief on their own terms. While some adhered to Orthodox Christian practices, others formulated individualized spiritualities drawing on ancestral memory, philosophical reflection, or intuitive ethics.

Spirituality often served as a dual function: On the one hand, it provided comfort, hope, and a sense of divine or

moral order; on the other, it facilitated agency, self-care, and action. For many, faith was experienced less as passive trust and more as a source of inner strength and ethical responsibility. These findings align with broader research showing that spirituality, even when detached from institutional religion, can support existential meaning and psychological resilience (Park, 2010).

At the same time, the data reveal moments of faith in crisis, spiritual doubt, ambivalence, or anger at God. These experiences echo existential psychological theories (Frankl, 2006), which emphasize that meaning is not always found immediately or painlessly. The struggle to sustain or redefine belief under extreme duress is itself part of the meaning-making process.

The tendency to personalize spiritual experience, often distancing it from clergy or ritual, reflects wider post-Soviet trends toward spiritual individualism and mistrust of institutional religion. Yet even among non-believers, traces of symbolic meaning, cultural memory, and moral reflection were present, demonstrating the resilience of cultural resources even in secular contexts.

These findings highlight the need for trauma support systems that recognize the spiritual and existential dimensions of coping, not solely its clinical or behavioural components. Whether through prayer, solitude, volunteerism, or philosophical reflection, participants used culturally embedded frameworks to reinterpret suffering, sustain hope, and retain moral coherence.

Conclusion

This section is not mandatory but can be added to the manuscript if the discussion is unusually long or complex. This study has explored how Ukrainians affected by war engage in religious and spiritual meaning-making coping. It demonstrates that coping is not solely a psychological or individual process but a deeply cultural and existential one. Participants employed a wide range of strategies, from traditional religious rituals to highly individualised spiritual practices, each shaped by their unique beliefs, histories, and cultural context. The pluralism of responses points to a flexible and dynamic coping process. Many individuals moved fluidly between practices, combining prayer, meditation, solitude, or volunteer work as their needs evolved. For some, faith in God provided direction and moral certainty. For others, spirituality was an inward journey of reflection and self-trust, or even an implicit belief in human dignity, ancestral strength, or natural order.

This mosaic of coping responses illustrates the richness of Ukraine’s cultural and spiritual heritage, especially when tested by war. It also underscores the importance of designing psychosocial interventions that are integrative, culturally sensitive, and attuned to

individuals' existential frameworks. Ultimately, Ukrainians' ability to make meaning in the midst of destruction reflects a broader ethos of resilience, shaped not only by personal strength but also by history, memory, and moral imagination. In their diversity of responses, participants demonstrated that even in conditions of profound uncertainty, the human search for meaning endures and remains essential to survival and recovery.

Significance of this Study

Beyond its academic contributions, this study holds practical significance for mental health professionals, humanitarian organizations, and policymakers engaged in post-war recovery and psychosocial support. By examining how culture, religion, and spirituality shape coping mechanisms, the findings offer a foundation for developing more holistic and context-sensitive mental health interventions. These interventions must be attuned not only to clinical symptoms but also to the existential, symbolic, and cultural resources that individuals draw upon during times of crisis. The study highlights the importance of recognizing religious and spiritual meaning-making as integral components of resilience. It also points to potential gaps in existing support systems –especially in how they address existential distress, spiritual crisis, or culturally embedded coping behaviors. Mental health frameworks in conflict zones must go beyond universalist approaches and instead account for the diversity of beliefs, identities, and traditions within affected populations.

Additionally, the findings provide actionable insights for religious and cultural institutions. These organizations can play a more deliberate role in fostering emotional recovery, community solidarity, and ethical engagement through culturally resonant practices and support systems. In times of national trauma, such institutions often serve as trusted intermediaries between individuals and broader social structures, offering both moral guidance and practical assistance. By documenting the wide range of religious and spiritual coping strategies used by Ukrainians during the war, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of human resilience. It underscores the importance of integrative, multidimensional approaches to coping – ones that acknowledge the central role of meaning, identity, and belief in psychological recovery.

Ultimately, this research affirms that while war severely threatens individual and collective well-being, the continuity of cultural traditions, the strength of spiritual conviction, and the search for meaning provide critical pathways to endurance and renewal. As Ukraine continues to confront existential threat and societal transformation, meaning-making remains a vital

psychological and cultural resource one that deserves greater attention in both research and practice.

Acknowledgment

The authors would like to express their gratitude to the University of Gävle for providing organizational and academic support, and to the Faculty of Psychology, Communications and Translation at the National Aviation Institute for cooperation. We are also deeply thankful to all the participants in Ukraine who generously shared their time and experiences, making this research possible.

During the preparation of this manuscript/study, the author(s) used ChatGPT is used for grammar, spelling, and formatting. The authors have thoroughly reviewed and edited the output and take full responsibility for the content of this publication.

Funding Information

This research received no external funding.

Authors Contributions

All authors contributed equally to this study.

Ethics

The survey conducted by Melnyk Nataliia (Doctor of Social Sciences, Professor of the Department of Foreign Languages and Translation, Acting Dean of the Faculty of Psychology, Communications and Translation of the State University "Kyiv Aviation University") and Fereshteh Ahmadi (Doctor of Social Sciences, Professor of the Department of Sciences on Support of Vulnerable Populations and Sociology, University of Gävle (Gävle), Sweden) within the framework of cooperation between the mentioned universities and aimed at studying "culture, religion and spirituality in overcoming difficulties in wartime" and the results of which will be published articles complies with the provisions on the "Policy of Open Science of NAU" (https://nau.edu.ua/site/variables/docs/docsmenu/nauk/normatyvne_zapezpechennia/Polityka_vidkrytoi_nauky_NAU.pdf), approved by 10/23/2024 and the "Plan for Achieving Gender Equality at NAU for 2024-2025" (https://nau.edu.ua/site/variables/docs/docsmenu/nauk/normatyvne_zapezpechennia/PDGR_NAU.pdf) dated 10/23/2024 and complies with the norms of the "Code of Ethics of a Scientist of Ukraine", dated 04/15/2009 (<https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/rada/show/v0002550-09#Text>).

Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Reference number 2015/126) and the Faculty of Health and Occupational Studies, University of Gävle, for research involving human participants. In Sweden, the ethical review process operates at two levels. First, researchers must submit an application containing all relevant details, which the committee reviews to decide whether the project should proceed. After a thorough examination of the project, the ethical committee concluded that a formal ethical review and approval were not necessary. This decision was based on the fact that the data collection process was conducted in a manner that did not pose any risk of harm or have any negative impact on the informants. Since part of the study was conducted in Ukraine, ethical approval was obtained on 25 March 2024 from the Department of Foreign Languages and Translation, Acting Dean, Faculty of Psychology, Communications and Translation, State University "Kyiv Aviation Institute," Kyiv, Ukraine (approval number: 12/71).

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. Written informed consent has been obtained from the participants to publish this paper.

Data Availability Statement

The data for this study were gathered using a web-based Survey administered via the Sunet Survey platform at the University of Gävle. The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors on request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire “Coping and War”

The question of life's meaning are very important, especially during crises like war and conflicts. However, we know very little about how people facing a crisis cope both during and after such events. Does spirituality or religion, or other ideologies play a role in this context?

Are there differences in coping mechanisms between religious and non-religious individuals? How do people from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds find meaning to help them deal with crises?

To address these questions, researchers from the Faculty of Health and Occupational Studies at the University of Gävle in Sweden are conducting a voluntary study. By participating in this study as part of our international research team, you will contribute significantly to broadening our understanding of how individuals cope with crises.

Our study, initiated in 2013, includes professors, associate professors, and researchers from Sweden along with 23 researchers from around the world. We investigate coping strategies used by individuals affected by crises, gathering information through interviews and surveys targeting individuals aged 18 and older. We have published several books and ten peer-reviewed articles in international scientific journals.

In studying individuals affected by ongoing conflict and war in Ukraine, from diverse ethnic backgrounds, we conduct online interviews. In the following, you will find some open-ended questions, and we encourage you to answer in your own words, ensuring full confidentiality. Ethical considerations are central to our study; we have received approval from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Reference number 2015/126) and follow principles including providing information, obtaining consent, ensuring confidentiality, and specifying usage. You will receive all necessary information before deciding to participate. Your involvement in this study is entirely voluntary. We ensure that participating will not cause you any harm. -All information you provide will be kept confidential. Your identity will not be linked to your responses. We will only collect information directly related to the study.

Your participation is incredibly valuable, regardless of your religious beliefs. Your decision to participate greatly enhances the scientific value of the study.

Thank you for your valuable participation.

Department of Social Work, Criminology, and Public Health

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Interview Questions

Country:

Number of Responses:

Background Factors:

Age:

Gender:

Education:

Profession (before retirement):

Marital Status/Children:

Environment the respondent grew up in (big city, small town):

Religious Affiliation:

Religious Background:

Did you grow up in a religious family? If so, what religion?

Do you believe in the existence of God?

Have your spiritual beliefs and religious practices changed after encountering a crisis?

Do you believe in life after death?

Coping Strategies:

How did you cope with the difficulties related to your crisis? What specific methods or support mechanisms were helpful to you? Please provide details.

Did religion or spirituality play an important role in your coping strategies? This may include practices such as prayer, communication with a higher power, or participation in religious events. If so, please specify.

To what extent has nature become a valuable resource in coping with your crisis? If possible, share specific examples or experiences.

Has spending time alone for reflection on your life and its meaning been helpful during the crisis? If so, please share your thoughts.

Did you include any aspects of holistic health, meditation, or visualization in your approach to overcoming the crisis? If so, do you consider it an alternative or additional method alongside traditional therapy? Please specify.

Do you think you have done everything possible and now must surrender to the will of God, or are you trying to cope with the situation independently without the help of God/spiritual being or any higher values? Please specify.

Have you ever felt a strong connection with God or a spiritual being, or had any spiritual experiences that helped you overcome the crisis? If so, please provide details.

Have you ever thought that your life is part of a higher power (from God), such as nature or the universe? If so, please specify.

Have you ever felt that God has abandoned you, or angered because God/spiritual being was not with you? If so, please specify.

Do you turn to a religious leader for spiritual support? If so, please provide details.

Do you think your religious background has influenced how you cope with the crisis? (Please consider religious and cultural aspects in your answer.)

Thank you for your participation! We appreciate your responses to the survey!

Appendix B

Table 4: Codebook Snapshot and Illustrative Quotes

Theme	Subtheme	Code (with definition)	Example Quote (translated)
1. Religious Coping in Wartime	Rituals of protection	<i>Use of prayers, icons, sacraments as shields against danger.</i>	“Every time the sirens start, I take the icon from my grandmother and hold it until the shelling ends. It calms me and protects me.” (Male, 42, Odesa, Orthodox)
	Doubt and crisis of faith	<i>Moments of questioning God’s presence, anger, or loss of trust in institutions.</i>	“I don’t understand how God can allow this suffering. I pray less now, but I still light a candle when I go to church.” (Female, 55, Sumy, Greek Catholic)
2. Spiritual but not Religious	Nature as a source of strength	<i>Seeking energy, balance, or transcendence in contact with natural surroundings.</i>	“When I walk in the forest, I feel that nature absorbs my fear and gives me peace. It is my meditation.” (Female, 29, Kyiv, SBNR)
	Personal rituals	<i>Individualized practices of meditation, visualization, or symbolic acts.</i>	“I write my fears on paper and then burn it—it feels like releasing the pain.” (Male, 34, Uman, SBNR)
3. Secular Coping and Civic Resilience	Volunteering as meaning-making	<i>Helping others (e.g., weaving nets, distributing aid) interpreted as a spiritual or moral act.</i>	“When I weave camouflage nets, I pray in my own way... not with words, but with my hands.” (Female, 38, Central Ukraine, secular)
	Humor and irony	<i>Use of jokes, memes, and laughter to maintain psychological distance from trauma.</i>	“We make memes about the blackouts—it helps us not to drown in despair.” (Male, 25, Mykolaiv, secular)
4. Collective and Cultural Coping	Historical memory as resilience	<i>Invoking national history, ancestors, or cultural archetypes as sources of strength.</i>	“My grandfather fought in WWII; I believe we carry their resilience in our blood. This gives me courage.” (Female, 47, Rivne, Orthodox)